

Dreams of Secularization

We have not the right to close the doors of [the Socialist Party] to a man who is infected with religious belief; but we are obliged to do all that depends on us in order to destroy that faith in him.

— George Plekhanov,
“Notes to Engels’ *Ludwig Feuerbach*,” 1892

Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Marxists imagined a world without religion. What they pictured was a society free from the negative influences of religious institutions that had become the lapdogs of the European power elite. Before the Russian Revolution, Russian Marxists saw the Russian Orthodox Church as defending and blessing a tyrannical political leadership and supporting a morally unjustified war effort. Revolutionaries viewed religious institutions as the source of the twisted moral ideology that defended an inherently immoral social and political system. Their dreams of secularization were premised on a desire to rid the world of all that was harmful to the struggling and exploited masses of humanity.

By the end of the Russian Revolution, Bolshevik leaders had achieved something astonishing. For the first time in history, Marxist theorists gained control over millions of people and found themselves finally able to implement their dreams. Karl Marx had initially raised the battle cry for a new brand of social activism, urging intellectuals to turn their thoughts into action. Radical members of the Russian intelligentsia fervently took up the cause, and after decades of fomenting rebellion, formerly marginal, exiled, and basement-dwelling revolutionaries took charge of one of the largest countries on earth. Their plans were vast, and with the collapse of the czarist regime, Bolsheviks fortified their utopian dream to alter every aspect of society. They now debated about how they would eliminate private property, restructure the economy, and produce a Communist culture with a new set of values, beliefs, and identities.

The importance of the cultural aspect of the Soviet project cannot be

overestimated. As Khrushchev reaffirmed nearly four decades after the revolution, “It is the function of all ideological work of our Party and State to develop new traits in Soviet people, to train them in collectivism and love of work, in proletarian internationalism and patriotism, in lofty ethical principles of the new society, Marxism-Leninism.”¹ Central to this utopian goal of the new Soviet culture was the elimination of former ideological and religious loyalties. Religion proved one of the most challenging rivals because it existed at every level of society, from nationwide church hierarchies to local clerics with personal ties to their congregations, and from nationally celebrated religious festivals to daily rituals performed in the privacy of one’s home. The complete secularization of society was a daunting task, but Bolshevik leaders were confident that they would succeed.

According to the early Marxist-Leninist secularization dream, religion was a castle made of sand. As the waves of social and political change washed across its base, Bolsheviks believed that religion would collapse under its own weight and be washed away without a trace. But this secularization dream was much more ambitious than most scholarly conceptions of secularization stipulate. Secularization, in contemporary social science literature, normally refers to a number of distinct events relating to a general weakening of religious institutions. David Martin, in his work *A General Theory of Secularization*, indicates that secularization tendencies include (1) the deterioration of religious institutions, (2) the decline of religious practices, (3) the erosion of stable religious communities, and (4) the differentiation of churches from other institutional spheres.² Clearly, the tendencies toward secularization make no direct reference to religious faith, but Marxist-Leninists assumed that religious belief would naturally disappear with the process of institutional secularization. And this general assumption continues to confound contemporary debates about secularization, in which some scholars point to the decline of religious organizations as confirmation of religious decline while others note the persistence of religious belief as evidence to the contrary.³

But as the Soviet Union systematically enacted new religious policies, Communist Party leaders discovered that the banning of religious activities along with the forced destruction of religious institutions could actually inspire religious belief through opposition to a perceived injustice. Consequently, the deterioration of religious institutions, the decline of religious practices, the erosion of religious communities, and the differentiation of religious and secular spheres did *not* produce widespread religious disbelief. As Yaroslavsky, head of the League of Militant Atheists, noted to Stalin in the early 1930s, “Religion is like a nail, the harder you

hit it the deeper it goes.”⁴ Yaroslavsky’s quip advanced the idea that religion was not merely a collection of institutions or rituals but instead an ideological conviction embedded within a larger culture.

The creation of the League of Militant Atheists, a churchlike atheist propaganda organization, marked the beginning of an emerging Soviet theory of religion. Communist Party theorists, especially Yaroslavsky, argued that religion constituted a worldview or set of moral beliefs that lie in the hearts of individuals but are propagated by religious institutions and instilled through religious practices. From this perspective, secularization was nothing less than the eradication of religious faith. In the 1920s and 1930s, Yaroslavsky was given the daunting task of secularizing all of Soviet culture. And because Yaroslavsky and his colleagues were committed Marxist-Leninists, they were careful to lay out the philosophical assertions that guided their plans.

Even though the theories of Yaroslavsky and the atheist propagandists who would follow him were broad in their scope and certainly single-minded in their intent, much of their content reflects hypotheses that are still popular in the social sciences today. Consequently, the secularization strategies of the Soviet era produced a rich laboratory full of data from which to test a wide range of pertinent sociological hypotheses. Overall, the Soviet Secularization Experiment employed and tested six key theoretical assertions concerning the substance and persistence of religion. Not all of these assertions are logically derived from the ideology of Marxist-Leninism, but, nonetheless, Soviet policies addressed their validity.

In sum, the Secularization Experiment tested the extent to which religious vitality or decline are a product of ignorance, ritual activity, social institutions, social rewards, salvation incentives, and church-state relationships. The following chapter investigates the substance of these six assertions in greater depth.

SECULARIZATION ASSERTIONS

Assertion 1

Religion is but the false sun which revolves around man while he is not yet fully self-aware.

— Karl Marx

In 1549, Lelio Sozzini wrote to John Calvin that “most of my friends are so well educated they can scarcely believe God exists.”⁵ The idea that

enlightened minds are naturally adverse to religious belief is not a new one. Antireligious intellectual movements have a lengthy history that most clearly dates back to ancient Greek philosophers, who questioned the existence of the gods. In the fifth century, Xenophanes, as translated by George Henry Lewes, concluded, “God, the infinite, could not be infinite, neither could He be finite.”⁶ Sharing his discovery, Xenophanes toured cities and the countryside explaining to spectators how logic proves that the supernatural is meaningless.

Although skeptics throughout the ages certainly applied logic, science, and common sense to question the tenets of religious belief, progress in science and the rise of liberal thought in the modern era did little to bolster empirical claims for atheism. For instance, Newton’s theory of gravity was initially understood as support for the existence of an active God because “it involved the rejection of all purely mechanical explanations of the movement of the heavens.”⁷ And even though many modern revolutionaries proclaimed an active tension between liberalism and religious faith, Rousseau, the intellectual guru of the French Revolution, was an active theist and in fact believed that social change required the assistance of God. Intellectual traditions that posited that science and liberalism are at war with religion have always existed alongside scientists and revolutionaries who were religious. Therefore, the empowerment of antireligious ideology requires a sociological explanation because it was by no means a philosophically necessary outcome of modern worldviews.

The sociologist Auguste Comte believed that religion would slowly erode as technology and modern thinking penetrated popular culture; in fact, he argued that sociology would replace religion as a way to not only understand society but to also determine common moral attitudes concerning behavior and the social order.⁸ Although contemporary sociologists of religion no longer make this claim, the argument that the process of modernization itself diminishes religion remains. But what is it about modernization that is so incompatible with religion?

The history of Western Europe indicates that modernizing countries are more likely to develop distinct religious and secular spheres—in other words, they become societies in which the church is formally separated from the state. Both Max Weber and Emile Durkheim believed this was the result of a natural division of labor as societies got more complex and bureaucratic. Nevertheless, if modernization erodes religious belief, aspects of modernization such as urbanization, industrialization and scientific advancement must also undermine religious views of the world.

The separation of church and state by itself does not logically lead to non-belief. Therefore, modernization can only affect religious faith if modern political and scientific worldviews are inherently antireligious or atheistic.

Following Marx, early Communist Party leaders subscribed to this belief and assumed that modernizing the regions of the Soviet Union and educating the population in the basic tenets of science would speed up the inevitable process of secularization. From their perspective, technology and science were wholly incompatible with beliefs in the supernatural—Marxist-Leninists assumed that individuals would have to choose one in the final analysis. And as the advantages of modernization and the logic of science became apparent, they supposed that all rational individuals would abandon religion.

Industrial and urban growth followed quickly from the implementation of Soviet economic plans. And after World War II, the space and arms races between the United States and the Soviet Union demonstrated that the Soviet system enjoyed a high level of technological advancement and industrial might. In addition, Soviet officials successfully put into practice a massive educational effort that brought schools, books, and educational materials to tens of millions of children for the first time. As a professor from Moscow State University explained, “Soviet education aims at creating human beings, grounded in a scientific, materialistic outlook, people who endeavor to make life happy in this world rather than in some world to come.”⁹ This educational program explicitly communicated that technological and scientific advancements disproved religious systems of belief. A curriculum of “scientific atheism” became central in the education of youth, scientists, and scholars. Soviet citizens learned that religious belief was tantamount to scientific ignorance. If the Soviet people were to enter a modern age of Communism, they were told that they needed to abandon their antiquated ideas. With the weapons of modern science, technology, and industrialization, early Communist Party leaders fully expected to eliminate all traces of religious belief from society.

The Secularization Experiment represents the first time in history that the belief that science and modernity undermine religion became official state ideology. As such, Soviet policy tested Marx’s assertion that education and self-awareness will ultimately extinguish the false sun of religion. Subsequent chapters will uncover the extent to which Soviet citizens were persuaded to discard their religious sentiments as antireligious philosophy came to dominate their intellectual, academic, and professional lives.

Assertion 2

There are rites without gods, and indeed rites from which gods derive.

— Emile Durkheim,
The Elementary Forms of Religious Life

Emile Durkheim maintained, “Religious beliefs rest upon a specific experience whose demonstrative value is, in one sense, not one bit inferior to that of scientific experiments, though different from them.”¹⁰ The experience to which Durkheim refers is the feeling of “collective effervescence,” an intense emotional response to ritualistic interaction. Through participation in ritual, individuals feed off the fervor of other participants to create a general enthusiasm that an individual could not attain in isolation. The intensity of this collectively generated emotion can produce a wide range of thoughts and perceptions, from strident senses of nationalism and group solidarity to, in the case of religious rituals, firm convictions of religious devotion. For Durkheim, ritual activities produce religious faith as individuals elicit from one another powerful feelings that later get ascribed to some external force. In sum, Durkheim believed that social ecstasy is misperceived by the individual as mystical experience.

Communist Party officials became increasingly concerned with religious ritual activity as religious practices persisted, even as many religious organizations dissolved. While Soviet elites were certainly not Durkheimian in their philosophical worldview, they began to view ritual as a key aspect of religious perseverance and concluded that public and private religious rituals must be ended. Nonetheless, Communist Party leaders sensed that ritualistic activity was a necessary and potentially productive aspect of human expression. So instead of attempting to eliminate all ritual activity, they sought to replace religious rituals with Soviet ones.

In their blatant attempt to manufacture new rituals, Soviet officials revealed certain Durkheimian assumptions concerning the substance of rituals. Durkheim supposed that the beliefs that explain the meaning and purpose of rituals are secondary. Specifically, religious beliefs are simply an explanatory system that provided a framework from which the individual describes her experience after the fact. William James noted how religious experiences, while physiologically and emotionally very similar, are explained in the language of the individual’s cultural environment. For instance, Muslims will attribute their experience to Allah, while Christians might believe that Jesus spoke to them. If beliefs about a religious experi-

ence were transposed onto a universal feeling of social solidarity, Soviets could retain the social and emotional element of religious practices while replacing the symbolic and ideological elements of the ritual. Individuals would continue to experience the emotional power of religious rituals but reattribute their feelings to the effects of Communism.

Simply put, Communist Party leaders hoped to connect Communist symbols and ideology to experiences of “collective effervescence.” The end result would be a population that no longer worshiped God but instead revered the Soviet system with religiouslike devotion. In actuality, Soviet elites hoped to realize something that Durkheim only believed to be true. Namely, they were going to replace the false object of ritual activity, God, with the true object, Society. In this way, rituals would continue to promote social solidarity but no longer under the guise of a false ideology.

Actual Communist rituals reveal the simplicity of this plan. Soviet officials quite consciously mimicked many aspects of common religious ceremonies and plainly replaced certain phrases and symbols with Communist alternatives. For instance, “God” is replaced by “the proletariat” in texts, and the hammer and sickle stand in for the cross as emblems of the sacred. Soviet weddings, funerals, confirmations, baptisms, festivals, and national holidays were intended to create a new faith — a faith in Soviet Communism. This is why many scholars of the Soviet Union observe that Soviet Communism was its own religion. But in the minds of Communist Party leaders, Soviet rituals were the antithesis of religion because they removed God from the explanatory scheme.

The Secularization Experiment tested Durkheim’s assertion that rituals inspire social solidarity through a collective focus on God but, alternatively, do not require God. Subsequent chapters investigate the extent to which Soviet ritual activities inspired citizens to abandon centuries-old religious rites and traditions.

Assertion 3

Bishops and archbishops enjoy authority merely as deputies of the temporal power.

— Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*

Religious institutions — churches, mosques, temples, synagogues, spiritual organizations, religious schools, and religious courts — provide an organizational structure to perpetuate religious belief and commitment. These institutions strive to attract and retain members and maintain loy-

alty to their religious message and mission. Individuals are committed to religious organizations for a number of reasons. A common view of religious commitment holds that individuals are mainly socialized into a religious community. They learn as children to attend church or participate in an accepted religious practice. Through this socialization, individuals may internalize religious ideas or simply continue religious behavior out of habit. Alternatively, people may also accept religious institutions out of fear of sanctions from religious authorities.

From a Marxist-Leninist perspective, religious institutions ultimately justify current power relations and provide an otherworldly object at which to direct individual problems and personal requests. In return, political structures support and bolster the influence of religious institutions. Marxist-Leninists viewed the institution of religion within this mutually beneficial relationship as merely one propaganda arm of the larger political structure. As such, they expected that religion would die without the continued support and favoritism of the power elite.

In Russia, Marxist-Leninists argued, the Russian Orthodox Church only legitimated czarist rule and offered little material assistance to the population. By destroying the Russian Orthodox Church, Soviet leaders felt they could break the cycle of religious socialization that had survived through official state propagation. Emelian Yaroslavsky, the Soviet minister of antireligious propaganda, explained, "The Party strives for the complete dissolution of the ties between the exploiting classes and the organizations of religious propaganda."¹¹ Marxist-Leninists assumed that without state support, religious institutions would collapse and individuals would naturally drift toward nonbelief. They also assumed that the ideological dominance of Roman Catholicism in Lithuania, Christian Orthodoxy in the territories around Russia, and Islam in Central Asia would fade as the religious institutions in these regions buckled under state regulation.

The campaign to annihilate religious institutions was massive and quite brutal. Within a mere decade, Soviet forces had destroyed or overtaken most of the property holdings and buildings of the dominant religions throughout the Soviet Union. In addition, Soviet officials closed Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and Islamic schools and completely shut down the Islamic court system throughout Central Asia. Before Soviet rule, dominant religious groups in the various regions of the Russian empire enjoyed governmental support and protection. They ran state-funded institutions, oversaw most cultural events, and provided national ceremonies and political legitimation. Consequently, citizens became

accustomed to a society in which religion was a recognized feature of their daily experiences. Soviet rule changed this dramatically. No longer did dominant religious institutions bask in the favoritism of political elites; now, they were forced to fight for their very existence.

According to Trotsky's assertion, bishops and archbishops would lose sway without the continued support of the temporal authority. The Secularization Experiment tested the mettle of religious organizations across the Soviet Union, and, as we will see, some proved more resilient than others.

Assertion 4

Religious or magical behavior or thinking must not be set apart from the range of everyday purposive conduct, particularly since even the ends of the religious and magical actions are predominantly economic.

—Max Weber, *Economy and Society*

In contrast to theories of religious persistence that stress the cultural, ritual, and institutional socialization of individuals toward a religious worldview, contemporary social theorists have explored the role of rational calculations in religious decision making. While individuals are certainly socialized into particular beliefs and worldviews, they may also ponder ideas presented to them, weighing explanations of the world against personal experiences and desires. Individuals may alter their political opinions and religious beliefs as they learn more about the world or develop different social ties through interaction with new friends, neighbors, and coworkers. Within the boundaries of our cultural environment, we are exploratory beings. As such, Max Weber, along with more contemporary economic and social theorists, posited that individuals will make decisions in their own interests; this is often referred to as the assumption of rational choice. For instance, a person is unlikely to espouse a belief system that condemns an activity in which she is repeatedly engaged. While the instance of an individual directly undermining her own goals is not impossible, it is certainly an anomaly and more suitably the topic of abnormal psychology. Therefore, rational choice theorists expect individuals, en masse, to behave and state beliefs in ways that are personally advantageous.

From this perspective, individuals openly ponder the advantages to religious behavior and belief. In cost-benefit terms, social rewards are a

clear and common advantage to religious participation. As an active member of a religious community, one reaps a number of valuable social rewards — companionship, access to social networks, and social status, to name a few. Churchgoers often find spouses, employment, and sources of important information through their church community, have support from other church members if they fall ill or find themselves in need of assistance, and are generally perceived as respectable members of society. Therefore, religious participation can be quite rewarding socially and economically.

While social rewards might explain why individuals participate in religious organizations, they say little about religious belief. Namely, one can participate and reap rewards without actually believing in religious ideas. These types of religious participants are referred to as *free riders* — like bus riders who have not bought a ticket and attempt to ride for free — because they seek the social rewards of religious participation while shirking true commitment to the group and the belief system. In times of need or when religious membership becomes detrimental, free riders will abandon their group because they have no deep investment in the ideas or members of the group. Before Soviet rule, it is difficult to know how many fervent religious believers existed in the regions that would make up the Soviet Union. Most individuals were affiliated with a certain religious tradition, but because state-supported religions were culturally ubiquitous in Russia and the surrounding areas, it is unclear whether religious identities were simply ethnic and national labels or indicative of a deep devotion to religious concepts. In the nineteenth century, Russian intellectuals debated the extent to which the Russian people were comprised mainly of religious free riders or faithful believers who would fight and die for their convictions. In one heated debate, the author Nikolai Gogol asserted that the Russian population was deeply spiritual while the literary critic Vissarion Belinsky objected. Belinsky wrote Gogol, “In your opinion, the Russian people are the most religious in the world. This is a lie! The basis of religiousness is pietism, reverence, fear of God. But the Russian pronounces the name of God while scratching. . . . Look closer and you will see that it is by nature a profoundly atheist people.”¹² According to Belinsky, Russian religiosity was a meaningless facade that would fall away when religious habits became social liabilities. Community Party elites would test this idea.

The Secularization Experiment radically altered the social rewards of religious participation. In a complete reversal of past expectations, religious believers could be denied career promotion, could be harassed at

work or school, and, in the most extreme cases, could be imprisoned in labor camps or psychiatric wards and sometimes executed for their faith. Under these circumstances, religious free riders would be expected to jump ship because religious organizations could no longer offer any benefits for membership and social expectations would no longer urge religious participation. Antireligious repression, at the very least, rid religious groups of free riders. Anyone who remained openly religious in the Soviet system demonstrated that their commitment to their faith did not depend on social rewards. Soviets expected that few religious adherents would turn out to be true believers once social incentives no longer existed.

To augment the harsh costs of religious commitment, Soviet society offered social incentives to adopt the official ideology of the Soviet state and become atheist. For this reason, individuals had many reasons to falsify their religious beliefs and fake commitment to the Communist project: to avoid discrimination, to seek favoritism, and to protect their well-being. Ironically, while Soviet rule rid society of religious free riders, it may have produced a population of Communist free riders. And in the end, free riders will rob any system or group of vitality because they always attempt to take more than they give.

Subsequent chapters probe the extent to which expressions of pre-Soviet-era religiosity were mere facades and to which atheist identities were embraced by social and political opportunists.

Assertion 5

Religion is concerned with the supernatural; everything else is secondary.

—Rodney Stark and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith*

Because religious communities rely heavily on the active contribution of members, they are extremely vulnerable to individuals who exploit group resources. Religious organizations tend to solve this free rider problem by placing high costs on religious membership.¹³ Costs can include tithing requirements, expectations of time commitment, and behavioral restrictions that may increase social stigma and social isolation from the larger society. These kinds of costs insure that individuals are not simply exploiting a group for personal gain; their personal sacrifices become evidence of their good faith. Nevertheless, many outside observers of strict religious groups feel that the costs of religious participation far outweigh the benefits and question whether the faithful closely consider the costs

involved in their religion. Why would someone give away their earthly belongings, deny themselves certain pleasures in life, or risk their lives for a religious group if they are calculating their self-interest? Religious believers do these things because they *believe* that they are commanded by some higher power.

Sociologists Rodney Stark and Roger Finke argue that belief should be considered an integral part of an individual's calculations in making any decision. If one believes she will go to hell if she does not give away her possessions, then the idea of hell becomes a perceived cost of religious inaction.¹⁴ Certainly, the eternal pleasures of heaven are worth the temporary pains of worldly deprivation. For this reason, Stark and Finke indicate that compensations of the afterlife, or *otherworldly rewards*, are perhaps more important than social rewards in making religious decisions. Belief in otherworldly rewards often explains action that appears wholly irrational; suicide bombers and religious martyrs are not necessarily depressed or hopeless but are instead idealists who expect to receive compensation in the afterlife for their earthly sacrifice. Within this mindset, death does not appear final but is instead a doorway into a preferable existence. In the final analysis, true religious faith profoundly influences decision making and can lead to astonishing actions.

Soviet officials certainly understood the power of religious belief to motivate extraordinary behavior. Yaroslavsky warned Stalin that Soviet policy should "carefully avoid giving offense to the religious sentiments of believers, which only leads to the strengthening of religious fanaticism."¹⁵ Even though they would offend religious believers all over the world, Soviet officials remained conscious of the need to convert individuals from their religious faith and win the population's ideological loyalty.

Consequently, Communist Party leaders created a massive missionary effort intended to spread the gospel of atheism. The League of Militant Atheists, a propaganda arm of the Communist Party, served as a kind of a church of Communism in the 1920s and 1930s, with atheist proselytizers and atheist meetinghouses standing in for clerics and churches. The league distributed atheist newspapers, gave atheist lectures, and preached the message of scientific atheism to anyone who would listen (many of whom were compelled to do so). They hoped to transfer people's faith in God to a belief in historical materialism and scientific atheism. Soviet officials felt that atheist conversion was the only way individuals would abandon fanatical behavior aimed at improving one's standing in a nonexistent afterlife. In the language of Stark and Finke,

atheist propagandists wanted to convince the Soviet population that otherworldly rewards were illusory.

The way to replace religion was clear. Soviet rituals mimicked religious rites, Soviet theoretical texts were treated like sacred scripture, and Soviet leaders were hailed as saintlike and deserving of holy reverence. Did Soviet leaders also attempt to offer individuals a Communist alternative to otherworldly rewards? Perhaps the promise of Communism was itself an otherworldly reward. A society devoid of injustice, inequality, or alienation sounds similar to many descriptions of heaven. The doctrine of historical materialism explained that this earthly paradise was inevitable but could only be achieved with the eradication of all religion. Therefore, a high cost of the Communist dream was the relinquishing of heavenly dreams — trading one otherworldly reward for another.

But heavenly dreams offer something that Communism could not: Religious believers were to experience heaven for themselves, while faithful Communists could only revel in the *thought* that their dreams would be attained by some future generation. Soviet leaders attempted to resolve this obvious problem in two ways. First, they promised that the Communist ideal was within reach and therefore a likely reward in the near future. This strategy was empirically problematic because Soviet citizens continued to encounter social problems that were, in theory, nearing their end. Second, Soviet officials maintained that future generations would always remember the pioneers in the struggle against oppression; in this way, the faithful would live forever in the collective memory of humanity at the “end of history.” In tandem with this effort was a bizarre reconceptualization of time in which linear conceptions of time were eschewed in favor of a more “sacred” or “charismatic,” to quote the political theorist Stephen Hanson, sense of Soviet time.¹⁶ But promises of remembrance and new conceptions of earthly time fall short of an eternal life in heaven surrounded by one’s friends and loved ones. Nevertheless, an attempt was made to convince Soviet citizens that their personal sacrifices would not go unrewarded. And in many instances, committed Communists laid down their lives for the dream of a Soviet utopia.

The importance of otherworldly rewards becomes central to understanding the inability of Soviet officials to convert individuals to scientific atheism. One wonders what might draw individuals to hold atheist beliefs. The idea that the supernatural is a sham appears to offer no comfort or delight. But by tying atheism to historical materialism and scientific progress, Soviet rulers hoped to demonstrate that atheism had its own benefits. In the end, they argued that atheism was about liberation

from false belief and salvation from earthly oppression. The attractiveness of “this-worldly” salvation reveals much about the primary importance of the supernatural in religion.

The desire for salvation is difficult to measure. Nevertheless, the Secularization Experiment pitted religious and Communist salvation against one another, and the following chapters investigate the extent to which the Soviet population favored one over the other.

Assertion 6

Market forces constrain churches just as they constrain secular firms.

—Adam Smith, *An Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*

As a result of their strategies to secularize society, Soviet leaders dramatically altered the composition of religious markets across the Soviet Union. *Religious market* is a phrase used to describe all the religious activity going on in any society comprised mainly of one or more organizations seeking to attract or maintain adherents.¹⁷ The market analogy is applied to religion because it is expected that religious groups will compete for members. Few religious groups want members to divide their time and commitment between multiple groups; therefore, groups tend to stress exclusive commitment. Because there are a finite number of people, religious groups must contend for adherents just like sellers of wares compete for buyers in a market setting. The winners are religious groups that can attract and sustain members.

Religious markets, like economic markets, are greatly influenced by how much the state controls them. The Soviet economy was a state-controlled economy; likewise, Soviet religious culture was state controlled. When the Bolsheviks initially took power, they dramatically altered the control of existing religious markets. Before the Russian Revolution, Russians were mostly Orthodox, Lithuanians were mostly Roman Catholic, and Uzbeks were mostly Muslim. When a population is overwhelmingly affiliated with one religious tradition, this group has a *religious monopoly*: they have successfully cornered the religious market. While large numbers of Jews, Old Believers, and Sufis populated the various regions of the Soviet empire, the Russian Orthodox Church, the Lithuanian Catholic Church, and Islam all held monopoly control of their respective republics.

Social theorists posit that religious monopolies can only exist when a religious group is favored by the state. In other words, the government must actively suppress religious groups that hope to compete with a favored religion for that religion to maintain its dominance. Studies of religious deregulation in Europe, Latin America, and the United States show that reductions in state regulatory policies will lead to the introduction of new religious doctrines and the growth of minority religions.¹⁸ Without religious regulation or in circumstances of complete religious freedom, a religious market will be more pluralistic because it allows for the promotion of multiple religious doctrines.¹⁹

Up until the Secularization Experiment, there was no test of what happens to monopoly religions that encounter antireligious policies. One prediction is that strong opposition to atheism would appear in regions with a historically dominant majority religion. Wouldn't members of a dominant church rally in large numbers to either secure some religious freedom or at least successfully withstand religious repression once the state enacted antireligious policies? This actually seems unlikely when one considers that religious monopolies require the support of a state to sustain their dominance. In fact, while the majority of the population may be affiliated with a monopoly religion, they tend to rarely participate in religious activities.²⁰ This means that although monopoly churches enjoy high membership rates, members tend to have low levels of commitment. Therefore, uncommitted members of a dominant church may easily acquiesce to atheistic policies because they are unwilling to risk personal harm for a religion that they very rarely practice. In other words, most members of a religious monopoly should turn out to be free riders.

Nevertheless, individuals may still retain a religious perspective of the world, even if they are attached halfheartedly to the dominant religious tradition of their region. Namely, it is one thing to be a "Christmas Catholic" — someone who only attends church on special occasions — and quite another to be a convinced atheist. Therefore, Soviet leaders wanted to do more than just drive individuals away from their religious traditions; they wanted to drive the population *toward* something. Their systematic attempts to convert individuals to atheism introduced something unique into the religious market: an atheist competitor!

Atheism has probably existed as long as there have been religious worldviews. But never before had atheism been promoted so systematically and on such a large scale. Practically overnight, formerly accepted, mainstream religious perspectives became viewed officially as radical and

antiestablishment. With state support, institutional promotion, the full force of the media, and atheist proselytizers, the doctrine of scientific atheism became the new ideological monopoly. While Soviets criticized the religious monopolies of the past, they actually replicated czarist attempts to establish devotion and loyalty from the top down.

Soviets understood conversion in terms consistent with the story of Russia's Christianization in 988. Legend has it that Prince Vladimir sent envoys out to investigate the world's religions. After carefully considering their reports, Vladimir chose Greek Orthodoxy as the state religion, and his decree marked the conversion of Russia to Christianity. Nearly one thousand years later, Soviet leaders would decree atheism the state ideology to mark the secularization of society.

In actuality, Christian ideas mixed with indigenous pagan beliefs over many centuries to result in the Russian Orthodox tradition we know today. While Vladimir certainly played a key role in altering the religious landscape of his kingdom by creating a state-supported religion, the Christianization of Russia was a slow and arduous process that ultimately depended on the success of thousands of Christian messengers over hundreds of years. Scientific atheists attempted to absorb and alter many Christian rituals in ways similar to how early Christians infused pagan practices with Christian messages. Nevertheless, it remained to be seen if scientific atheism could inspire a popular movement that would ultimately spread the faith of Communism. Perhaps Soviets would require a thousand years to secularize the population. But Soviet leaders had high expectations and, in the end, mistakenly believed that if Vladimir could Christianize Russia overnight, they could secularize in similar fashion.

Soviet officials assumed the success of the Secularization Experiment depended on the elimination of religious monopolies. Ironically, this goal was celebrated by religious sects throughout the Soviet Union. These groups had previously suffered intense religious repression under policies that favored dominant religious monopolies. Therefore, many religious sects viewed the Soviet assault on the Russian Orthodox Church and other dominant groups as an overdue comeuppance. In fact, as Soviet leaders concentrated their antireligious policies on dominant religions, many of these formerly marginalized religious groups formed new bonds with the Soviet population. As a result, some small religious groups actually increased in size under Communism. In the end, the Secularization Experiment would have a lasting impact on levels of religious pluralism.

Religious pluralism's effect on religious vitality is a much-debated

topic in the social sciences.²¹ The market model of religion holds that religious pluralism increases religiosity because, as in any market, competition is good for business. The fall of the Soviet Union provides a perfect test case for this idea. Before Soviet rule, dominant religious groups enjoyed state favoritism, and during the Soviet era, scientific atheism became the new ideological monopoly. The collapse of Soviet Communism left a religious market with no clear monopoly.

Which religious groups succeeded and which failed in the post-Communist world reveals much about the role of religious competition and the importance of state regulation in the composition and vitality of religious markets. Using the market analogy, the Secularization Experiment offers something rarely observed — a marginal philosophical tradition that achieved massive state support almost overnight and subsequently lost its political and social advantages just as quickly. The effects of this bizarre phenomenon greatly inform our understanding of how changing church-state relationships alters beliefs in a relatively short span of time.

MAKING DREAMS A REALITY

Early Bolsheviks certainly had their work cut out for them. Not only were their revolutionary dreams big, they had no prior examples of successful Communist revolutions from which to model their plans. Consequently, early revolutionaries relied on theory. Unlike natural scientists, it is rare that a social theorist gets the opportunity to implement his or her hypotheses to test how they will work in the environment studied. I expect this is a welcome blessing for most of the population. But in the Soviet Union's case, a social experiment was conducted on the most massive scale imaginable. The religious arm of this experiment was guided by a series of distinct hypotheses concerning the function, structure, and purpose of religion and also by some innovative responses to changing events.

Borrowing from the language of the economics, the multiple theoretical assertions tested by the Secularization Experiment can be loosely grouped into *demand-side* and *supply-side hypotheses*. Demand-side hypotheses of religious growth and decline focus on how the elements of religion that are attractive to people change over time. For instance, if one hypothesizes that individuals seek out religious meaning and explanation in times of personal crisis, she would expect that natural disasters and social upheavals would send large portions of the population run-

ning to seek guidance from religious organizations. In contrast, supply-side hypotheses of religious growth and decline focus on how the supply of religious goods changes over time. A popular supply-side assertion is the controversial religious pluralism hypothesis developed by Stark and Finke that states, “To the degree that religious economies are unregulated and competitive, overall levels of religious commitment will be high.”²² This hypothesis indicates that religiosity changes to the extent that churches are allowed to and attempt to actively recruit new members. In simple terms, demand-side explanations analyze why individuals seek out religion, and supply-side explanations study how churches seek out members.

Contemporary theorists of religion tend to pit these two explanatory perspectives against one another. But Soviet officials experimented with both supply-side and demand-side models of religious change. At first, the Soviet regime assumed that religiosity was wholly a product of religious supply. Their altering of church-state relationships and attempts to shut down religious institutions represent tactics to cut off religious supply. The successes and failures of this supply-side strategy are investigated in chapter 4, “Shutting Off Religious Supply.”

But Soviet theorists also hypothesized that the demand for religion was the product of economic woes, simple ignorance, and an innate need for ritual expression. The campaign to modernize and reeducate the Soviet population and provide them with atheist rituals was a demand-side strategy to redirect what theorists posited were the sources of religious need. The successes and failures of this strategy are investigated in chapter 5, “Hunting for Religious Demand.”

Finally, chapter 7 revisits the six assertions presented above to clarify how findings from the Soviet Secularization Experiment support or undermine these basic theoretical perspectives. Ultimately, the secularization dreams of the early Bolsheviks never became a reality, but their attempts to make their dreams real drastically altered the religious lives of Soviet citizens and have a lasting influence across the post-Soviet regions of Eastern Europe and Central Asia. And their application of social theories of religion still have much to teach theorists and researchers today.