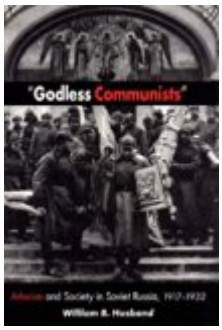
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

William B. Husband. *"Godless Communists." Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932.* De Kalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000. xvii + 241 pp. $36.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-87580-257-2.



Reviewed by Amy Nelson

Published on H-Russia (September, 2000)

Between Religion and Materialism: Orthodoxy, Atheism and the "New Soviet Man"

This slim, elegantly written volume examines the early Soviet experience through the lens of the Bolsheviks' efforts to eradicate religion. Based on archival and published sources, as well as the work of early Soviet ethnographers, *Godless Communists* frames the promotion of atheism in terms of the broader revolutionary commitment to creating the "new Soviet man." While many scholars have interpreted Soviet-church relations primarily in terms of state oppression or church resistance, Husband emphasizes the gaps and contradictions between the Bolsheviks' conception of religious policy and its implementation, as well as the complexities of individual and group responses to various strategies intended to dilute or eliminate religion. Moving past the strident confrontations between activist believers and militant atheists, he convincingly argues that most citizens "integrated their feelings toward religion and atheism with other, nonspiritual concerns" and suggests that the priorities of many individuals "proved to be conditional, even situational" (p. xv). Complementing recent studies of the League of the Militant Godless by Dan Peris and of rural religious activism by Glennys Young [1], Husband's work shows how "competing cultural perceptions and aspirations in Russian society played an instrumental role in shaping the aftermath of the revolution" (p. xv).

Chapter One outlines the historical roots of atheism in Russia and Western Europe. A brief discussion of Western Europe stresses the relatively recent advent of non-belief in the supernatural. The interest in individual interpretations of scripture that fueled the Reformation in the sixteenth century combined with advances in science and technology to yield new knowledge of the material world that was increasingly difficult to reconcile with religious faith. While Russia's experience with atheism paralleled that of the West in some respects, the peculiarities of Russian Orthodoxy and the distinction between official and popular religious practice made Russia unique. From the time of Russia's conversion in the tenth century, popular religion reflected a number of diverse influences, many of them rooted in a pre-

Christian, pagan past. When the church hierarchy aligned itself with the emerging princes of Moscow in the fourteenth century, the influence of Orthodoxy extended to virtually every aspect of Russian life, from the underwriting of political ideology to constructions of gender and social identity.

In contrast to Western Christianity, Russian Orthodoxy displayed a "persistent propensity to ground spiritual life far more strongly in symbols and rituals than in texts, and to derive religious meaning principally from popular practice" (p. 23). Husband also emphasizes the diversity and nuances of orthodox preachment and practice, noting the church's contradictory position on sexuality and its toleration of behavior (drinking and brawling) it could not eradicate. Although the Petrine reforms diminished the institutional authority of the church, Orthodoxy remained a powerful influence in Russian society throughout the Imperial period. The intelligentsia's embrace of materialism and rationalism was important to the development of Marxism-Leninism, but had little effect on the fundamental beliefs of the masses. Indeed efforts to infuse the revolutionary movement with "religious passion" marked the activities of many social democrats, even as they came to oppose religion politically. Atheism did not occupy an important position in the Bolsheviks' prerevolutionary program. The revolutionaries regarded religious belief as one of many artifacts of "backwardness," and assumed that the acquisition of consciousness (through education and enlightenment) would naturally erode popular attraction to religion.

Chapter Two outlines the evolution of official policy toward religion after the October revolution. From the outset, the Bolsheviks were divided among themselves over religious policy. They adopted an administrative approach that was riddled with contradictions and offered ineffective guidance to local activists. Measures taken during the Civil War sought to marginalize religion and the institutional authority of the church rather than to impose atheism by force. Legislation separating church and state in 1918 targeted the church's involvement in public ceremonies as well as its property, but did not mandate the persecution of believers or prohibit public worship. Ongoing disputes about the use and efficacy of draconian methods prompted a reconsideration of official policy in 1922-23. From the mid-twenties on, atheistic work focused less on repression and more on organized agitation through the press and the activities of associations such as the League of the Militant Godless. The advent of the Cultural Revolution in 1928-29 brought a return to aggressive tactics, as churches were closed and desecrated and clergy subject to arrest and execution. New legislation further restricted religious freedoms and eroded much of the earlier commitment to freedom of conscience.

From this discussion of policy toward the church as an institution, Husband turns to the heart of his subject, the Bolsheviks' efforts to create the "new Soviet man" by instilling new values informed by a secular, materialist worldview, and the diverse ways Russians responded to these programs. Convinced that economic hardship, ignorance, and religiosity were self-perpetuating and inextricably joined, the party intended to defeat religion by education and by demonstrating the benefits of science and technology. The campaign to eradicate religion was thus an integral part of a multi-faceted struggle for a new way of life.

Chapter Three examines reforms in primary schooling and the promotion of new secular holidays and rites of passage. Since the party expected schooling to play a central role in building socialism, its educational objectives were especially ambitious, and included compulsory free schooling, eliminating illiteracy, training an "army" of new teachers, as well as curricular reforms that promoted a "scientific" worldview and eliminated instruction in religion. Although official policy cautioned against overt anti-religious propaganda in the classroom, popular opposition to schools

"where there is no law of God" was considerable, as was the reluctance of workers and peasants to giving up the many Orthodox holidays that had traditionally been labor free days of feasting and drinking. The party's minimal success in these areas derived partly from the persistent gaps between the inspiration and execution of cultural enlightenment programs, as well as people's reluctance to abandon the old for the new, especially when the new offered less in the way of "fun" or social security. Furthermore, the success of these programs depended in large part on having a receptive audience. "Soviet power perpetually found itself in the untenable position of trying simultaneously to create the prerequisites for its programs and implement the programs themselves" (p. 98).

In Chapter Four Husband probes an even more fundamental obstacle to the party's efforts to change personal values, both within its ranks and among the general populace. For although party leaders often displayed a sophisticated understanding of social and cultural issues, on the ground, Bolshevik tactics were dominated by simplistic, ideologically derived dualisms (old-new, consciousness-backwardness, science-church, workers-peasants, men-women, etc.). This put the party at a tremendous disadvantage in trying to reconfigure beliefs as intensely personal as constructions of gender, generational biases, religion in the party, and non-religious appeals to the supernatural.

In a fascinating discussion of the persistence of religion and "superstition" in factories during NEP, and an equally engrossing section on party members who "hedged their cosmological bets" by accepting the general Bolshevik line while retaining some religious attachments, Husband describes the process of cultural syncretism, in which citizens metabolized old and new influences, just as Orthodoxy had synthesized pagan and Christian elements in pre-revolutionary society. He asserts that individuals' ability to blend traditional and revolutionary values enabled them to cope with unforeseen circumstances and pressures for change. These coping strategies "accounted for the presence of religious believers in the party, faith healers in the factories, [...] and peasants who contradicted cultural stereotypes." They also underpinned social realities that "ran roughshod over the party's bifurcated presuppositions about human experience" (p. 129).

The final chapter provides chronological as well as analytical completion to the book, as Husband provides further exposition of the ways in which individuals accommodated and resisted new influences against the backdrop of the excesses of the Cultural Revolution. After years of relying more on persuasion than coercion in the realm of religion, the party again endorsed militant tactics with the launching of the collectivization and industrialization drives in 1928. Closing churches and arresting priests joined the liquidation of kulaks and the vanquishing of counter-revolutionary elements as part of the broader agenda of implementing collectivization. While this concerted assault on religion was what many militants had long argued for, the campaign against religion was quickly subsumed under broader party objectives (p. 137).

In an irony familiar to students of other early Soviet radicals, the mobilization of the Komsomol, army and other state organizations to implement church closures, the seizure of icons, and persecution of believers meant that the League of the Militant Godless lost its position of authority on religion, even as it continued to take most of the blame for failures. Orthodox believers countered violence on the part of the state with insubordination and force that strengthened the link between religion and anti-Soviet behavior in minds of the authorities (p. 140). Yet circumvention remained even more common than confrontation, and clergy and activist laity proved particularly adept at subverting revolutionary legality with petitions

and appeals to higher authorities, even during the turbulent years of 1928-32.

In the end, however, Husband suggests that we appreciate the importance of accommodation as the main strategy by which Russians adapted to a period when they faced opposing pressures from both church and state, not just on the religious question, but on the future of society itself. Following Clifford Geertz's assessment of the mutual importance of an "intellectually reasonable" ethos and an "emotionally convincing" worldview in determining religious belief and practice, Husband posits that for most Russians "what was intellectually reasonable and emotionally convincing [....] stopped short of overt risks and might change in response to shifting circumstances" (p. 153). Given the absence of widespread support for Bolshevik goals, the success of the social revolution hinged on the degree to which individuals and groups were willing to practice a more nuanced form of accommodation: preemptive obedience without direct coercion (p. 154). This synthesis of acceptance and passivity, in which people tolerated the elimination of the old without fully embracing the new, became an important mode of behavior in Soviet society. The conflict between religion and atheism thus produced no clear victor, but it was instrumental in conditioning the behavior of the "new Soviet man."

Husband has attained the difficult and ever more necessary balance of speaking to specialists as well as a broader audience. Scholars of the early Soviet period will find this a sophisticated, unjaundiced treatment of Orthodoxy after 1917 -- one that presents the twenties as a time when many options were still open and outcomes often uncertain. The author's exploration of the contradictions and inconsistencies in the party's approach to religion, and emphasis on the ways in which the Bolsheviks responded to events as much as they shaped them, presents a convincing counterpoint to the gathering tide of neo-Totalitarian interpretations of the Soviet experience. At the same time, Husband's careful examination of the promotion of atheism in terms of the broader context of the economic and social dimensions of NEP and the evolution of the Stalinist dictatorship make the major themes of the book accessible to cultural and social historians of many persuasions and appropriate for advanced undergraduates.

Notes.

[1]. Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless*, Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1998; Glennys Young, *Power and the Sacred in Revolutionary Russia. Religious Activists in the Village*, University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997.

Citation: Amy Nelson. Review of Husband, William B. *"Godless Communists." Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932.* H-Russia, H-Net Reviews. September, 2000.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=4512