**Secularism in late socialist societies**

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The question of secularism in late socialist societies will in this paper be approached from an intellectual historical perspective, asking the question not by asking, for example, how many attended Mass but how the debate or discourse on ‘secularism’ was conducted. This debate might help us to understand the thoughts on secularism and how, or indeed *if*, they changed. There are different ways of tackling this question, and the results will vary depending on which approach you choose. My approach has been focused on the intellectual discourse. The relevance of ‘1989’ for this paper is that it marks the fall of the Berlin Wall, and with it maybe even a certain worldview. Some further questions that will be asked are: What was the debate on secularism like in late socialist states? Are there different types of secularism? How tolerated was religious dissent?

**Method**

Before we can approach the specific arguments of thinkers in the pre-1989 we should try to understand the debate more broadly. What does it mean to be secular? This will be examined further throughout this paper, where hopefully we will see if there is a change in the debate before the fall of the Berlin wall. ‘Secularization’ has been defined as “a term used to describe a decline of the prestige and power of religious belief, practice, and institutions.”[[1]](#endnote-2) This will be our starting point, although we will be focusing on how different thinkers have used the term. It may however be useful to have a general definition to fall back on.

The method that has been chosen for this paper is to try to reconstruct the debate on secularism in late socialist societies. This will be done by looking into the writing of a few influential writers, and the topic is approached with a neutral Swedish-Lutheran background. The influence of these thinkers should not be overstated, but they were active in the period we wish to study, and only a few voices will make it into this analysis due to a lack of space. The relevance of this paper is threefold; 1) we are this year celebrating the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin wall, 2) it is a very recent event of history and therefore there is still much research to be done, and finally 3) the concept of secularism is still relevant given the fact we might be living in what some scholars have referred to as a “post-secular” age. The idea of secularism also flows into concepts such as freedom of religion and dissent, through the religious oppositions experienced in late socialist societies, and in many ways still today. The material for this paper consists primarily of articles or books by relevant thinkers, such as Kolakowski, Marx, and Walter Benjamin. Secondary literature has been used as reference and occasionally a few anecdotes may appear taken from literature previously encountered in the module *Rewriting Europe: 1989 and the End of Communism*, at Queen Mary University of London.

**Socialism, Religion, and the Pre-1989 Debate**

What did it mean to be religious in a late socialist society? Was it tolerated? How was the debate on secularism conducted? Were late socialist societies intolerant or even hostile towards religion? These questions come to mind when thinking of the pre-1989 states, but before we get to the actual debate a few words should be said about the predecessors, and in fact the fathers, of the secular left – Engels and Marx. We may remember Marx’s famous remark about religion as an “opiate of the masses”, but this is only a very minor peace of the Marxist theory. The Marxist theory in itself is, of course, not the first example of secularism. The history of secularism can be said to go as far back as to the Bible itself, through the words of Jesus about giving back to Caesar what is rightfully his.[[2]](#endnote-3) It could also be argued that the 19th century itself through positivism marked the birth of the modern secular society. For our purposes we will start with Marx since the topic we are interested in for the moment is late socialist secularism.

Marx inherited a materialistic philosophy from Ludwig Feuerbach, who in turn inherited ideas from Hegel, although he turned them around saying that not only is man God, but God is man. In short, he went from philosophical idealism to materialism. Here is where Marx enters the picture, taking over the concept of materialism and states that religion alienates man, since “human beings throw themselves into politics at the present time; because they recognize that Christianity is the religion which deprives man of his political energy.”[[3]](#endnote-4) Arthur McGovern explains in an essay titled *Is Atheism Essential to Marxism?* that Marx regarded atheism as essential to a socialist state. Although Marx may never *explicitly* have stated that he was advocating an atheistic state, it may be taken as the logical conclusion of his arguments of religion as standing in the way of human self-affirmation. In addition to this, Marx seemed to believe that man must choose either humanity or God.[[4]](#endnote-5)

The discussion we have had until now bids the question if socialism, in various forms, is in fact compatible with Christianity? According to Joseph M. de Torre, in his study of Marxism and Christianity, Marxism is irreconcilable with Christianity, since Marxism builds so heavily on the idea of materialism, and leaves central ideas of Christian thought out – such as the “freedom and immortality of the human soul”. Another writer we refer to is Reverend Martin D’Arcy S.J. who in his book *Communism and Christianity, An Examination of the Christian and Communist Philosophies in their views of Human Life and Happiness*, remarks in the conclusion that Christianity and Communism may in fact not be rival *religions*, but instead rival *faiths*. He further remarks that the “Communist thinks of nothing but the new and perfect society” whereas the “Christian does not wager all on this earthly society.”[[5]](#endnote-6)

The compatibility of Socialism and Christianity is also interesting to see through the eyes of influential Church figures, the main denominations in Europe being Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant. Joseph Ratzinger, later Pope Benedict XVI, writes in his *Introduction to Christianity* that

On the other hand, although atheism disputes the recognition of the unity of all being through the idea of God, this does not mean at all that for the atheist the unity of being itself is abolished. Indeed, the most influential form of atheism, namely Marxism, asserts in the strictest form this unity of being in all that is by declaring all being to be matter; in this view, granted, the one thing that is being itself becomes, as matter, completely separated from the earlier concept of the absolute, which is linked to the idea of God, but it simultaneously acquires features that make its absoluteness clear and thus once again recall the idea of God.[[6]](#endnote-7)

The then Cardinal Ratzinger clearly states that atheism is a part of Marxism, but that it is hard to get away completely from the idea of God. Father Josemaría Escrivá mentioned in a get-together in Venezuela in 1975 that behind the Iron Curtain it was like a prison, and he was not talking politically, but that he was talking about religion and freedom, and to practice religion we need freedom.[[7]](#endnote-8) In fact, the Vatican has since the 19th century opposed Socialism, for example through *The Syllabus of Errors* (1864), a Papal Encyclical issued by Pope Pius IX, and the catechism still rejects the ”totalitarian and atheistic ideologies associated in modem times with "communism" or "socialism.” One paper claims that the West saw Protestants, in particular Baptists and Pentecostals, as potential allies against the Soviet Union during the Cold War era.[[8]](#endnote-9) This may say something about the Church and its view on Socialism in Europe, but a general conclusion should not be drawn from this. In South America for example the “Liberation Theology” movement is also referred to as “Christianized Marxism.” The relationship between this movement and the Church, however, is more complicated than there is time to discuss here, but Cardinal Ratzinger whom we have mentioned has been critical of this movement.

McGovern, in his essay on atheism and Marxism, distinguishes four different types of atheism: 1) Humanistic atheism, 2) Ideological atheism, 3) Scientific atheism, and 4) Militant atheism.[[9]](#endnote-10) The first one is a humanistic vision of man as free, and that human self-affirmation is a supreme value. The second is the question of how religion is used for political aims. The third concerns aligning science with atheism, something McGovern claims Engels in particular was interested in. And finally the fourth is a militant effort to impose atheism in society. We know that Marxist states such as the Soviet Union did away with a lot of religious institutions, but McGovern asks us if the relationship between Marxism and religion would have been different had the German Social Democrats carried the flame of Marxism, instead of Lenin and Stalin.

Now we have established that there is a strand of atheism in Marxism. But was this the view of all the Marxists in late socialist societies? It would certainly not seem to be the case with Leszek Kolakowski, a polish philosopher and historian of ideas, who broke with the Stalinist version of Marxism and later said in an interview “Religion is a paramount aspect of human culture (1991).” He was concerned with ideas on religion already earlier in life having published the book *Religion: If God Does not Exist*, the under title being a reference to Dostoevsky’s saying that all is permissible if there is no God.

Kolakowski’s vision of religion as an essential part of society is however refuted by early Marxist writings, such as N. I Bukharin and E. Preobrazhensky’s *The ABC of Communism*, published seventy years before the fall of the Berlin wall, where they use an entire chapter to assert the claim *Why religion and communism are incompatible*. This section is concluded with these remarks:

The struggle with religion has two sides, and every communist must distinguish clearly between them. On the one hand we have the struggle with the church, as a special organization existing for religious propaganda, materially interested in the maintenance of popular ignorance and religious enslavement. On the other hand we have the struggle with the widely diffused and deeply ingrained prejudices of the majority of the working population.[[10]](#endnote-11)

Furthermore, the influential Marxist writer Michel Foucault holds a similar position to Marx himself in the fact that he sees religion primarily “as a set of discourses and practices that govern subjects and do not allow them to govern themselves,”[[11]](#endnote-12) according to Corey McCall in *Autonomy, Religion and Revolt in Foucault*. Foucault is also important for his role as a symbolic figure for the 1968 left wing, postmodern movement. Dr John Coffey from Cambridge University characterises Foucault as a sort of ”atheistic mystic” who had fallen for Nietzsche’s claim of Gods death, but who retains in his writings unmistakable ”theological dimensions,” and that ”his frenzied quest for transcendence, can be seen as a search for God in the wrong places.”[[12]](#endnote-13) I would agree with this assessment of Foucault, and it is interesting how Marx’s claim of religion as standing in the way of self-affirmation, which we encountered earlier, is echoed in Foucault who has influenced the Marxist movement ever since the sixties.

Another reading of socialist interpretations of religion can be seen found in the short text by Walter Benjamin, *Capitalism as Religion*, in which he states that capitalism has in itself become as a religion, and thus it is a critique of capitalism. It does not state that capitalism is a religion, but how capitalism is used *as* religion. It is, he says, the “celebration of the cult” and the historical enormity of capitalism means, “religion is no longer the reform of being, but rather its obliteration.”[[13]](#endnote-14)

We can now turn to the question of how religion was tolerated, after having shown that the dominant opinion in the socialist *states* (not socialism *per se*) had a clear strand of atheism. This will also lead us into to the question of dissent, where we know for example Slovakia and Poland had a dissident movement lead by the underground Church, and no less influentially symbolized by the then polish born Pope John Paul II.

An extract from *Voices from Chernobyl* can serve to illustrate the view of subjects in the late socialist states:

There’s no television. No movies. There’s one thing to do – look out the window. Well, and to pray, of course. There used to be Communism instead of God, but now there’s just God. So we pray.”

Notice the dichotomy the person presents us with. “Communism *instead* of God” as if they were intrinsically opposed. We can also find accounts of Fathers forced underground, and religious institutions pushed aside. The English philosopher Roger Scruton recently wrote a semi-autobiographical fiction book named *Notes from Underground*, in which we get to know a Czech Catholic priest who celebrates Mass in secret with a few attendants. This is an event enforced by the fact that Catholic bishops were arrested at this time.[[14]](#endnote-15) Freedom of religion was in other words close to non-existent, but this begs the further question if it was a consequence of the system as holding a certain view of atheism, or if the bond between communism and atheism makes religion impossible to practice?

As earlier stated McGovern makes a distinction between four types of atheism. It would seem that the Leninist, and certainly Stalinist societies which claimed to be influenced by the teachings of Marx, professed a militant atheism. There are, however, a fair amount of Marxists who claim to be Christian at the same time. Marx, according to McGovern, saw religion as standing in the way of human self-affirmation. In this particular question Kolakowski might not agree, as he was a so-called Marxist Humanist, a movement that based itself on the early Marx, and they emphasised human subjectivity and agency.[[15]](#endnote-16) Walter Benjamin is concentrated in the work above mentioned with ideological atheism, and tries to show how capitalism is used as a religion to push a political cause.

It would not be entirely controversial to claim that being religious in late socialist societies was not easy, but it was definitely an improvement from the Stalinist rule. In some societies, such as Poland, the Church always stuck together and presented an alternative to the socialist state. The same may be said of Slovakia, whereas intellectuals such as Václav Havel and Jan Patocka led the dissident movement in the Czech part of Czechoslovakia.

**Conclusion**

Being religious in late socialist societies was not easy, but it was an improvement, at least among intellectuals, which has been our primary focus, compared to the Stalinist rule. During Khrushchev’s era the religious persecutions were toned down. The main difference is where the secularism is coming from. Is it imposed by the state, or does it spring from intellectuals or the people themselves? In the Stalinist era, the ideas of intellectuals were distorted and used to impose an order; and this may answer our question on freedom of religion in communist states – it is non-existent if the state chooses to take the view of religion as an enemy of the communist goal.

Finally, if we take the initial definition of secularism, as the decline of prestige and power of religion, can the late socialist societies really be termed as secular? Throughout this paper it has been suggested that the debate on secularism arising from Marx and developed by Marxist and Socialist thinkers has been critical of religion and its role in society, and that when the state implemented these ideas religious life was hard. Indeed, the ideology *became* the new religion and the way of self-affirmation.

1. **Endnotes**

   Jan Palmowski, Oxford Dictionary of Twentieth Century World History, page 546. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
2. See for example *Christianity for the Twenty-First Century, The Life and Work of Alexander Men,* edited by Elizabeth Roberts and Ann Shukman, pages 119-123. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
3. Joseph M, de Torre, *Marxism, Socialism and Christianity*, (Manila: Sinag-Tala Publishers, Inc., second edition, 1983), pp. 12-14. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
4. Arthur McGovern, *Is Atheism Essential to Marxism?*, in *The Sheed and Ward Anthology of Catholic Philosophy, edited by James C. Swindal and Harry J. Gensler, S. J. (USA: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2005),* p. 458. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
5. Martin D’Arcy, *Communism and Christianity*, (Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1956), pp. 175-178 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
6. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, *Introduction to Christianity*, (San Francisco: Ignatius, First Published 1968, this edition published 2004), p. 108. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
7. St Josemaria Escriva Answers questions in Caracas, Venezuela (Part 2 of 4), upploaded 10 July 2010 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_VF2oQjmbY>, minutes 03:00-04:00. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
8. Dr. Miriam Dobson, *Protestants Behind the Iron Curtain, Religious Belief, Identity and Narrative in Russia and Ukraine since 1945*, abvailable at: <http://www.sheffield.ac.uk/history/research/projects/protestants-behind-the-iron-curtain> [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
9. McGovern, pp. 457-463 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
10. N.I. Bukharin and E. Preobrazhensky, *The ABC of Communism*, Chapter 11: Communism and Religion, § 89. Why religion and communism are incompatible. Available at: <http://www.marxists.org/archive/bukharin/works/1920/abc/11.htm> [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
11. Corey McCall, *Autonomy, Religion, and Revolt in Foucault*, available at: <http://www.philosophyandscripture.org/Issue2-1/Corey_McCall/corey_mccall.html> [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
12. John Coffey, *Michel Foucault and Postmodern Atheism after the Death of God*, available at: <http://www.jubilee-centre.org/michel-foucalt-and-postmodern-atheism-life-after-the-death-of-god-by-john-coffey/> [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
13. Walter Benjamin, *Capitalism as Religion*, (1921), Available at: <http://www.rae.com.pt/Caderno_wb_2010/Benjamin%20Capitalism-as-Religion.pdf> [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
14. M. K. Dziewanowski, *Russia in the twentieth century*. (Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Pearson Education, Inc., 2003) p. 302. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
15. *Marxist Humanism and the ”New Left”*, Marxist Internet Archive. <http://www.marxists.org/subject/humanism/>

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