



**EXPLAINING
ATHEISM**

CÉSOR

Centre d'études
en sciences sociales
du religieux

International Conference

“Communist Perspectives on Atheism in the 20th Century”

13th-14th November 2023, Aubervilliers

PROGRAMME AND ABSTRACTS

International Conference

“Communist Perspectives on Atheism in the 20th Century”

13th-14th November 2023, Aubervilliers

Centre de colloques – Campus Condorcet
Room 100 (13th November) and Room 50 (14th November)
Place du Front populaire, 93300 Aubervilliers,
Métro 12 “Front populaire”

To join the conference online:

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Academic committee

Pierre Antoine Fabre, Directeur d'études at EHESS, Deputy
Director of Césor

Eva Guigo-Patzelt, Associate member of Césor

Dr. Jonathan Lanman, Queen's University Belfast, Project Lead
Explaining Atheism

Lois Lee, Senior Lecturer at University of Kent

Contact: eva.patzelt@sciencespo.fr

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FOREWORD

In recent years, scholars in historical and secular studies have become increasingly interested in communist attitudes towards religion, communist regimes' efforts to uproot religion (Smolkin 2018), and interactions between Marxists and Christians (most recently Ramšak/Mithans/Režek 2023) (Burchardt/Wohlrab-Sahr/Middell 2015). Sponsored by the Explaining Atheism programme, this conference will explore transnational communist perspectives on atheism in the twentieth century and Marxist-inspired attempts to explain and influence the evolution of atheism. Building on work on “scientific atheism” (Thrower 1983, Kääriäinen 1989 and 1993, Guigo-Patzelt 2021), “atheist establishments” (Smolkin 2018) and “thought collectives” (Tesař 2019), the conference explores differences and commonalities within the Soviet bloc – within which scholarly debates on atheism took place in what might be called a limited international scientific community.

The conference explores three broad themes:

- 1) It examines actors' diverse understandings of atheism and investigates how communists conceptualised different kinds of non-belief in general and Marxist-Leninist atheism in particular; how they sought to create and spread a “positive” atheist vision; and how they tried to explain atheism and its causes at individual and societal levels and in specific national and religious contexts.
- 2) While the efficacy of initiatives such as the Soviet League of the Militant Godless has been called into question (Peris 1998, Gleixner 2022), the conference addresses significant outstanding questions about the role of formal and organised initiatives in processes of atheisation in communist states, including the impact of antireligious education, atheist rituals, and mass media.
- 3) The conference will examine the effects of non-belief, atheism and agnosticism on individuals and societies under communist rule, to provide new insight into the history of these countries as well as general mechanisms of worldview change.

Philosophical questions about the place of atheism within Marxism, while interesting in themselves, are beyond the scope of this conference.

Contributions deal with various communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union, and communist movements outside communist ruled countries (see Pettinaroli 2021).

This conference was made possible through the support of Grant 61928 from the John Templeton Foundation managed by The Queen's University of Belfast. The opinions expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the John Templeton Foundation or The Queen's University of Belfast.

Many thanks to the CÉSor research centre for hosting the conference.

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On the Explaining Atheism Programme, see: <https://www.explainingatheism.org/>

PROGRAMME

Monday 13th November 2023

9h Registration, coffee (Faculty Club in Maison des Chercheurs – Campus Condorcet, 3 Cour des Humanités, ground floor)

9h30 **Introduction** by Eva Guigo-Patzelt (CéSor, EHESS/CNSR, Paris)

10h-11h45 **Panel 1: Struggles in the interwar era**

Chair: Pierre Antoine Fabre (CéSor, EHESS/CNRS, Paris)

Laura Pettinaroli (École française de Rome):

The International of proletarian freethinkers and the communist movement: uncompleted attractions (1925-1936)

Kostas Paloukis (International University of Greece, Thessaloniki):

Greek Communists against Religion and Church during the interwar period

David Nash (Oxford Brookes University):

The Blasphemy of Communist Godlessness – responses to Communist Atheism in Britain 1936-1938

12h-13h30 Lunch break

13h30-15h15 **Panel 2: Enforcing atheism in Eastern Europe**

Chair: Lois Lee (University of Kent)

Artan R. Hoxha (Academy of Albanian Studies, Tirana):

The Red and the Black: Atheism, Religion, and Modernity in Communist Albania

Johannes Gleixner (Collegium Carolinum, Munich):

Empirical origins of Soviet atheism: Engaging believers, managing expectations

Kristina Kovalskaya (École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris):

Soviet Research on Religion and Unbelief after Stalin: Modernise and Moralise with Atheism

15h15-15h45 Coffee break

15h45-17h30 **Panel 3: Eastern European ambivalences in the late 1970s and 1980s**

Chair: Todd Weir (University of Groningen)

Irina Morozova (University of Regensburg):

The duality of anti-religious social campaigns in Soviet Central Asia in the 1980s

Jan Tesař (Josef Gocar School Prague):

The Foundation, existence and demise of Czechoslovakian Museum of Religion

Petar Dragišić (Institute for Recent History of Serbia, Belgrade):

Serbia in the Eighties. Between Religiosity and Atheism

17h30-18h30 **Keynote** by Victoria Smolkin (Wesleyan University):

In the Shadow of Godlessness: Soviet Atheists and the Fate of Secularism in Interwar Europe

Conference dinner for speakers

* * *

Tuesday 14th November 2023

9h30 Coffee

10h-11h45 **Panel 4: Re-interpretations in varying cultural and religious contexts**

Chair: Eva Guigo-Patzelt (CéSor, EHESS/CNRS, Paris)

Lucky Igohosa Ugbudian (Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike, Ebonyi):

Communist Perspectives on Atheism in the 20th Century Nigeria

Raghavan Nair Santhosh (Indian Institute of Technology Madras/University of Sussex) and Dayal Paleri (Indian Institute of Technology Madras):

“Godless” Communists in “God’s Own Country”? The Communist Party and Its Strategic Ambiguity towards Belief and Non-Belief in Kerala, South India

Sayed Hassan Akhlaq (George Washington University, Washington/Coppin State University, Baltimore):

“Muslim Communists”: Afghan Atheism in the 20th Century

12h-13h30 Lunch break

13h30-15h15 **Panel 5: Atheism and Catholicism between condemnation and dialogue**

Chair: Victoria Smolkin (Wesleyan University)

Marie Lucas (Paris 3 Sorbonne Nouvelle) and Mikhail Velizhev (Université Grenoble Alpes):

“Is Marxism necessarily atheistic?” Gustav Wetter, the Holy See and the Condemnation of Communism

Gašper Mithans (Science and Research Centre Koper):

Atheization and individualization of non/religious worldviews: the Catholics in Socialist Yugoslavia

Heléna Tóth (Otto Friedrich University, Bamberg):

Combatting Indifference Together: The Shifting Premises of the Christian-Marxist Dialogue in the 1980s

15h30-16h15 **Conclusions** by Todd Weir (University of Groningen)

ABSTRACTS

The International of proletarian freethinkers and the communist movement: uncompleted attractions (1925-1936)

Laura Pettinaroli

École française de Rome

This presentation focuses on what is often presented as one of the most successful incarnations of the indissoluble link between communism and atheism: the international atheist movement of proletarian free thinkers (IPF), active between 1925 and 1936. The history of this organization leads however to a more nuanced appreciation. On the one hand, this movement, anchored both in social democracy and anarchism, was never totally aligned with communism, whose very conception of atheist combat evolved through the 1920s. On the other hand, the influence of communism within this movement in the 1930s transformed the nature and forms of atheism, opening up paradoxical collaborations with believers which materialized with the popular fronts. Based on the movement's press and Russian archives, this intervention proposes to retrace the complex relations of this movement with the Third International.

Greek Communists against Religion and Church during the interwar period

Kostas Paloukis

International University of Greece, Thessaloniki

The presentation explores the reception of the communist anti-clericalist and atheist discourse in Greece during the interwar period. The emergence of socialism in Greece was not necessarily linked to the rejection of religion. Specifically, until the founding of the Socialist Workers' Party of Greece (SEKE), in 1918, socialist intellectuals combined the social message of socialism with the social message of Christianity. The "Bolshevization" of the SEKE and its renaming to a Communist Party of Greece (KKE) in 1924, but in particular the adoption of the so-called "third period" policy in 1928 led the Communist movement to anti-clericalist positions. Since 1926, Marxist texts on the issue of religion have begun to be published in Communist newspapers. The struggle against religion and in favor of atheism is openly declared, while the state's segregation from the church is propagated. In one of these texts, Lenin declares Communist atheism as a regular choice of communists. In daily newspaper articles, clergymen appear as immoral and often as criminals or as "the parasites" who "suck the blood of the poor villager". In many cases, poor workers or farmers or women appear to rise up against the injustice of clergymen. In general, during the period between 1929 and 1934, communist newspapers were stepping up in protests about several daily problems the farmers and workers were facing in relation to the church which the publication until then was inconceivable. In this way, the latent until then, diffusible, and non-political ordinary peoples anti-clericalism, comes to the surface and becomes publicly visible, politicized, and linked to the communist aspect of ecclesiastical issues. The shift of Communist organizations to further anti-clericalist positions is not only linked by their Bolshevik orientation, but it was also determined by the new political and anti-communist role taken by the Orthodox Greek Church during the interwar period. Correspondingly, the first Greek theoretical anti-religious text will be published and many other articles written by Greek intellectuals against the church, the clergy and the religious followed. In October 1933, two books were released with anti-clericalist content that was seized by order of the Holy Synod of the Church of Greece. However, the Communists were partly

involved in theological conflicts, e.g., for the historicity of the face of Jesus, limiting their criticism against the Church, the clergy, and the religion in general as a social phenomenon. Communist anti-clericalism comes to an end in 1934-1936 when the Communist Party adopted the policy of the popular fronts and adopted many of the national narratives. In any case, the interwar communist organizations gave birth to, for the first time in Greek history, the social and cultural type of atheist within the workers', rural and broader people' layers.

The Blasphemy of Communist Godlessness – responses to Communist Atheism in Britain 1936-1938

David Nash

Oxford Brookes University

This paper investigates the incident around the Godless Congress of 1938. This involved a sustained public and government campaign against a meeting of an international freethought organisation in 1938. This meeting had passed with comment merely a few years before. However the charged international atmosphere made public opinion, the press, the churches and the government fixate upon the nature and activities of communist atheism. This labelled it as a national menace that could unravel the peace and harmony of English society. As such it reaffirmed devotion to institutions that were threatened by the ‘thought crime’ of atheism teamed with communism. Intense investigations by MI5 revealed a web of communist interconnection and speculation about what this meant. Meanwhile members of far right organisations revived discussion of England’s blasphemy laws and their use against communist freethinkers and their activities. Last of all we can see the reactions of domestic Freethinkers dismayed that their ideology had been labelled with communist totalitarianism and its lamentable record.

Drawing on press reports, diaries, Home Office papers (including those produced by MI5) and the records of British freethinkers this paper pieces together the implications of this incident and the impact of communist freethinking ideology upon a distant society.

The Red and the Black: Atheism, Religion, and Modernity in Communist Albania

Artan R. Hoxha

Academy of Albanian Studies, Tirana

This paper ties to my current book project *The Red and the Black: Atheism, Religion, and Modernity in Communist Albania*. In 1967, Albania became the only atheist country in the world, thus offering a fertile ground for exploring this important phenomenon of the communist regimes. Compared to other studies on this theme, mine will give substance to atheism by exploring the interaction between the discursive level with the material, technological, and economic transformations of daily life under communism. Marxist-Leninist ideology as the main drive for suppressing religion cannot explain atheism. We need to pay more attention to the engineering of society, nature, and economy and the intermingling of ideological, economic, and technological dynamics. This approach allows us to understand both atheism and the religious reawakening in the late 20th century – quite often accompanied by fundamentalist, right-wing, and antimodern projects.

Not accidentally, I borrowed the title of this paper and of my future book from Stendhal's famous novel *Le Rouge et le noir*, where the famous French writer inquiries about the clash between religious life and secularism's social engineering. My goal is to demonstrate that for the communist regimes, the ideological policies pursued to forge new subjects and radically alter existing social and economic structures were not separate spheres but rather part of the same modernizing project. I am convinced that we cannot understand subjectivity by detaching it from the socio-economic context. My goal is also to overcome the culture-economy dichotomy that still defines a good part of contemporary historiography.

For this reason, I will analyze not only the role of the Party and its transmission belts but also that of the technocrats in promoting a scientific outlook of the world. On the other end of my study are the peasants, the workers, and the younger generations raised within the communist framework. For this reason, I will place my lens in construction yards, collective farms, and schools, which were the seedbeds of social engineering. In these locales and domains, peasants, ex-peasants, and teenagers were

taught the notions of progress, where they learned new professions and technologies, were introduced to new approaches to nature, new ways of understanding time and transforming the material world. All these activities interlaced propaganda and ideologization with social mobility, which profoundly impacted religious values and traditional social relations embedded in them.

Empirical origins of Soviet atheism: Engaging believers, managing expectations

Johannes Gleixner

Collegium Carolinum, Munich

At the core of most accounts of Soviet atheism, there is a narrative of a linear development, consisting of measures against the state church and its political power as the first, the fight against religion and believers as a second, and the positive atheist reeducation of the general populace as a final step in creating an atheist communist society, culminating in what became known as Scientific Atheism. Many official Soviet sources themselves spoke of such an incremental process of atheisation as early as the 1920ies. However, as I would like to argue in my talk, this should be taken with a grain of salt: If we look at how Bolshevik antireligious activists engaged religion and atheism empirically, we cannot ignore the fact that “atheism” was shaped (and changed) by direct contact with believers and religion from the very beginning.

I would like to point out two sources of such contacts, that helped shape Soviet atheism:

1. Public discussions between atheists and religious activists: Up until 1929 such discussions were widespread and many antireligious activists took notes on their experiences when engaging believers, e.g. how to convince them of atheism or how to counter religious arguments. Furthermore, they realized what the general populace expected atheism to be.
2. Large surveys in Moscow factories during the years 1929/1930: Bolshevik experts on religion and atheism drew up a standardized questionnaire to analyze religious or atheist convictions of workers. These questionnaires were then distributed in Moscow factories and to ensure honest answers, their origin was concealed. Both the genesis of these surveys and their result can be retraced, thus showing not only how experts thought about atheism but also how these questions were perceived by believers and non-believers among the workers.

For both these examples, I draw on published material in the Soviet antireligious press as well as on archival sources from the Communist Academy (komakademii) and the so called Commission for the history of

religion (kommissiia po istorii religii pri Komakademii), where leading Bolshevik experts on religion and atheism tried to conceptualize the essence of religion and atheism.

Interestingly enough, these sources are very open and surprisingly pragmatic about how atheism as a worldview worked or did not work on the ground, for example already in 1930 dismissing atheist rituals such as the “red baptism” (oktiabriny) as ineffective and even counterproductive. They also realized early on that the success of atheism was not bound to philosophical arguments (important as they may be) but to the material success of a socialist way of life. Thus, the positive essence of Soviet atheism, its ideological underpinnings aside, was from the very beginning shaped by its contingent success or failure in engaging its subjects.

Soviet Research on Religion and Unbelief after Stalin: Modernise and Moralise with Atheism

Kristina Kovalskaya

École Pratique des Hautes Études, Paris

After long-term efforts to eradicate religious practices through physical repression of religious leaders and massive atheist propaganda, the Soviet administration faced an astonishing resistance of religious believes among the Soviet population. At the end of 1950s, new methods are introduced to manage the question of religiosity and unbelief, mostly based on the authority of science . The study of religion and atheism itself is institutionalised through the creation of the Institute of Scientific Atheism, as well as numerous departments of atheism at the faculties of Philosophy. Social scientists of religion, newly formed to be able to explain the successes and failures of secularisation, are involved into the sociological field research in the regions. The results of these studies are discussed during closed workshops at the Institute and then partly spread on the pages of its journal *Questions of Scientific Atheism*. At the same time, a popular journal *Science and Religion* is published by the Knowledge Society, an institution for popularisation of science.

The paper questions the activity of the social scientists of religion, reflected in the archival materials of the Institute of Scientific Atheism (the collection 606 at the Russian State Archive of Political History) and discussed in a number of interviews with these researchers collected by the author during her doctoral field research held in 2015-2018. According to the general trend of scientification of social research in the 1950s-1960s, these researchers are supposed to apply the most scientific methods to qualify the resistance of belief in the USSR. During closed workshops at the Institute of Scientific Atheism, they discuss and elaborate typologies and definitions of (un)belief and share their quantitative results. However, this attempt of a scientific study of religion and atheism is challenged by the applied character of these studies, organised and funded by state institutions not only to understand but rather to find ways to eliminate the resistance of religious practices to the forced secularisation. The results of these studies are thus oriented by the idea of atheist modernity as a moral ideal which becomes a measure of their scientific character.

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The duality of anti-religious social campaigns in Soviet Central Asia in the 1980s

Irina Morozova

University of Regensburg

Using archival data and oral testimonies, this research explores the meaning, politics and social cults behind the anti-Islamic decrees and their implementation by local authorities in the Soviet Central Asian republics in the 1980s. The rapprochement of Islamic cultures and Muslim legal codes to the Soviet concept of the nation-state and secular education took place throughout the 20th century. Especially after the WWII, Soviet rule in Central Asia was essentially anything but anti-Islamic: despite atheist rhetoric, the institutional voids allowed for Islamic rituals. By the 1980s, Soviet policymakers had direct and indirect statistical evidence of the growing number of practising Muslim clerics (ulama) and the expansion of the economy of Islamic ritual. Moreover, the discussion of the 'Wahhabi threat' was endorsed in the local mass media. Thus, the article examines how local authorities, often practising Muslims and Communist Party members at the same time, influenced the production of the new decrees on anti-religious propaganda in 1983 and 1986. This research explores the controversial meanings of these decrees.

A clear ideological message was the least of the decrees, and the text of the instruction called for the 'establishment and deepening of socialist cults and rituals'. The decrees were used by the republican and provincial authorities to adapt to the reform: reports on the implementation of the decrees were collected from the bottom up, confusing the central authorities about the number of Muslim clerics and believers and signalling the expansion of the Islamic sphere rather than its narrowing through atheist propaganda. The data on certain localities in the south of Kyrgyzstan (understood by the Soviet authorities as more islamised) show how the implementation of the decrees was linked to the fulfilment of the economic plan. Finally, the article discusses the role of propagandists from the state society "Znanie", which first lectured on atheism in urban and rural areas of Central Asia, but then quickly shifted to propagating 'the positive role of religion' when perestroika and glasnost gained momentum in the late 1980s.

The Foundation, existence and demise of Czechoslovakian Museum of Religion

Jan Tesař

Josef Gocar School Prague

Marxist, or as the historical actors would themselves call it, scientific atheism had many metamorphoses during its time. From the anti-religious propaganda, invention of new rituals to attempts of serious study of religion. All these approaches had one common denominator: Marxist epistemology which served as a starting point of analysis and marked the borders of discourse within the socialist countries. Somewhere in between propaganda and scholarship stood museums of religion which were seen as a useful tool to academics as well as atheist enthusiasts.

The past and present of the most famous museum of religion in the context of socialist countries is fairly well documented. Located in present day St Petersburg, Russia, it began as a display of anti-religious propaganda. However, it withstood the dissolution of the Soviet Union and presents a unique approach to religion until this day, where the atheist epistemology meets with modern approaches of religious studies.

Comparatively little is known about such institutions outside of the Soviet Union. Central archives in Czechoslovakia do not provide any information about the existence of such institution in this country. However, detailed research in regional archives and atheist articles led me to the discovery that such museum indeed existed. Therefore, one of the purposes of this paper is to present the findings of research about the museum and put it back on the map of scientific atheism.

Even though the first anti-religious museum was opened in the interwar Soviet Union, it took a lot of time and effort to create such an institution in the socialist Czechoslovakia. To understand why the foundation of Czechoslovakian equivalent took place almost thirty years after the Czechoslovakian Communist Party came to power is one of the purposes of this paper. The other principal question concerns the expectations which were harboured by scientific atheists who participated as employees in the museum.

Another aspect which will be investigated by the paper is the focus and scope of the museum. In this part it is important to highlight the type of exhibitions, attendance and outreach of the institution in the context of scientific atheist policies pursued by the Communist Party. Furthermore, the final phase of the museum in the context of post-socialist Czechoslovakia will be discussed.

The final part of the paper will try to set coordinates to broader topics of 'musealization' of religion in the late seventies and eighties and tie it to current research.

Serbia in the Eighties. Between Religiosity and Atheism

Petar Dragišić

Institute for Recent History of Serbia, Belgrade

The presentation "Serbia in the Eighties. Between Religiosity and Atheism" focuses on the degree of religiosity and atheism in Serbia during the 1980s. The paper explores the attitude of the citizens of Serbia towards religion as well as results of surveys of this phenomenon, conducted in Serbia (and former Yugoslavia) in the 1980s. In addition, the presentation will focus on dependence of the intensity of atheism in Serbia at that time on age, gender as well as on social and educational status and professional background of the citizens of Serbia. The connection between the phenomenon of atheism and ethnic identity will also be examined. In this regard, a hypothesis was put forward that atheism was more pronounced among ethnic Serbs than among members of other ethnic groups in Serbia in the 1980s. The link between the decline of atheism and national mobilization, the political and economic crisis and inter-ethnic tensions in Serbia during the 1980s will also be examined. Besides, the presentation will focus on the attitudes of the then communist regime in Belgrade towards the level of religiosity of the population of Serbia. The presentation will be based primarily on analysis of statistical data, media coverage on this topic and academic articles that dealt with this issue during the 1980s.

Communist Perspectives on Atheism in the 20th Century Nigeria

Lucky Igohosa Ugbudian

Alex Ekwueme Federal University Ndufu-Alike, Ebonyi

While Nigeria was not a communist country, communist ideas flourished among the educated elites and workers in the twentieth century. This could trace to the fact that it became a weapon among the workers and educated elites that constituted the leadership of the nationalist movements and political parties that agitated for the independence of the country from Britain. Although the communist ideas were robustly detested by the British colonial government, Nigerians especially workers, nationalists and academics continued to propagate and entrench the ideas in Nigerian socio-political and academic landscape. Nigerians are religious and believed in the existence of God, however, the deluge of Christian missions that visited the country antagonised African Traditional Religious describing it as evil and devilish while imposing Christianity on the people. The position of the Christian missions on the Saviour nature of their God soon evaporated in the minds of the educated Nigerians because of the discriminatory and racist policies of the British colonial government thus they began to doubt the Christian faith and finding solace in Communism that offer a path way for them without believing in the existence of God.

This paper intends to analyse the perspective of communist Nigerians that shifted towards atheist. Data for the paper will be generated from archives, newspapers, journals, and books that will be analysed qualitatively using historical and social approaches will reveal that communist ideas flourished in the twentieth campuses of Nigerian universities and among the workers unions that some segments of these groups became atheist. The atheist dimension of a large segments of these Nigerians could be seen in the contradictions in Christianity and the Western government that promoted probative exploitation of the Nigerian people even in post-colonial era. The paper argues that several Nigerian academics including professors from the 1950s became deeply entrenched in communist ideas especially its welfare standpoints to deconstruct the hypocrisy in capitalism and Christianity thereby making them to lose faith in the existence god thus became atheists and demonstrating it through various platforms and forum including media.

“Godless” Communists in “God’s Own Country”? The Communist Party and Its Strategic Ambiguity towards Belief and Non-Belief in Kerala, South India

Raghavan Nair Santhos

Indian Institute of Technology Madras/University of Sussex

Dayal Paleri

Indian Institute of Technology Madras

Kerala, the southernmost state in India, is renowned for its robust communist political presence and impressive human development record. Established in 1939, the Communist party experienced rapid growth in the state and formed the government in 1957, making it one of the first democratically elected communist governments in the world. The origins and growth of the communist movement in Kerala were deeply intertwined with the local dynamics of anti-caste and social reform movements in the context of colonial modernity, while simultaneously being inspired by the international communist movements in the Soviet and Chinese blocs. Although the Communists have lost their support base in most other parts of the country, they remain a prominent political force in Kerala, currently governing the state for a second consecutive term.

This paper explores the approach of the communist party towards atheism and religion in Kerala, and argues that the relationship is characterized by a form of strategic ambiguity. We note this strategic ambiguity has three major features. Firstly, it involves the communists' search for common ground between communist materialist ideals and the existing religious traditions, particularly Hinduism. Secondly, the communists' strategic atheism also entailed an ambiguous relationship with the organized rationalist and atheist movement in the state. While the communist party often collaborated with the rationalist movement in early twentieth-century anti-caste and anti-superstition campaigns, it later critiqued and distanced itself from the "bourgeois atheism" of the recent rationalist movements. Thirdly, the communist party's membership comprises individuals with diverse forms of

belief and while the party does not enforce an atheistic criterion for party membership, it advocates an "ideological struggle" between Marxist-Leninist atheism and the individual's religious belief.

After mapping the ideological transformation of the Communist party in Kerala over the years vis a vis the religious question, the paper examines a series of recent controversies where this vexed question was brought to the fore. The paper argues that this strategic ambiguity arises from the party's attempt to translate and vernacularize communist ideals within a deeply multi-religious and multi-party democratic society. Instead of mechanically following atheistic communist ideals, the party sought to limit the influence of religious reasoning and institutions while simultaneously engaging in critique, negotiation, and occasional compromise with religious belief, primarily due to electoral and political considerations, often leading to conflicts, contradictions, and ambiguities.

“Muslim Communists”: Afghan Atheism in the 20th Century

Sayed Hassan Akhlaq

George Washington University, Washington/Coppin State University,
Baltimore

Unfortunately, the history of atheism in Afghanistan is not well documented, yet there are documents which can aid in new studies. During the 8th and 9th centuries Islam began to dominate the country, but it took several centuries for Islamic theism to completely take over. This didn't obliterate atheism from Afghanistan completely and there are mentions of non-believers in popular literature. For instance, the aboriginal faith was maintained in the Ghur province's more remote mountain locations, famously called 'Kafiristan' or 'Land of the Infidels'. However, modern day collective atheism emerged in 1978 after the PDPA (The People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan) obtained control through the April Revolution of the same year. Soviet interference to uphold said crumbling communist autocracy happened in 1979 in December.

The PDPA had neither a modern, legally based legitimacy, nor a traditional one based upon patrimonial networks, nor a charismatic one based on a leader's personal appeal. With the backing of the Soviet Union and the advice of Mikhail Slinkin and Oleg Kalugin, the party altered its stance on religion from one of mere accommodation to one of integration with its new political platform. The PDPA had formerly tried to create a separate path from that of clerics and mosques, but ultimately broke their original atheist promise. The USSR successfully pulled its troops from Afghanistan in February 1989, allowing Mohammad Najibullah - formerly known as "Najib" and head of the intelligence service - to assume leadership of a religion-friendly communist government. To highlight Islam's significance, he assembled religious scholars on the government's payroll, and made revisions to existing protocols that included religious elements. Ironically, these changes were ineffective in preventing the party's downfall and its original atheist outlook. This investigation explores the reasons behind the unsuccessful promotion of atheism by the Afghan communist movement, with particular attention to two factors. Firstly, the majority of Afghan communists were unfamiliar with the country and its cultural nuances, meaning that they were unable to effectively connect with the populace. Secondly, many Afghan atheists were uninitiated

with atheist doctrines and lacked familiarity with Marxist philosophy. Various materials from the intellectual history of modern Afghanistan, such as the writings of Majrooh and Ghuryani, and Vassily A. Klimentov's analysis of over 17000 pages of documents from the Soviet Union's Telegraph Agency from the period of 1978-1988, were used to advance these suppositions.

“Is Marxism necessarily atheistic?” Gustav Wetter, the Holy See and the Condemnation of Communism

Marie Lucas

Paris 3 Sorbonne Nouvelle

Mikhail Velizhev

Université Grenoble Alpes

“Is Marxism necessarily atheistic? It is difficult to decide. There is no doubt that Marx's own thought was permeated with atheism. As far as 'Marxism' is concerned, it is certain that it is atheistic, if dialectical materialism is considered as an integral part of it. <...> The situation is different, however, if historical materialism alone is taken as the theoretical basis of Marxism. If historical materialism is understood only as a method of historical investigation, it cannot be said to necessarily imply atheism”.

In 1978, Gustav A. Wetter, a Jesuit specialist in Soviet Marxism, expressed his perplexity regarding the Holy See's proposed condemnation of communism. This text from the Wetter Archives (Pontifical Gregorian University) raises the question of the relationship between Marxism, Communism and atheism.

Wetter (1911-1991) entered in 1930 the Russicum, a college founded in Rome to train priests for the apostolate in Soviet Russia. Rector of the Russicum, professor of Russian philosophy and founder of the Centre for Marxist Studies at the Gregorian University in 1970, Wetter became a world-renowned expert in Soviet Marxism. This specialisation, recognised beyond the Catholic world, developed in the context of the Cold War: in 1961, Wetter was a founding member of the 'Bundestinstitut für Sowjetologie', a research center on the Soviet world at the service of the federal government in West Germany. He also corresponded with an impressive number of influential figures such as Helmut Kohl, Georg Lukàcs, Max Horkeimer, Delio Cantimori.

In criticising the proposed condemnation of communism in 1978, Wetter reveals his interest in the different treatment of religion by the various communist governments and engages in a reflection on the relationship

between communism and pluralism. If his anti-communism is not in doubt, his radical rejection of the anti-communist commonplaces, particularly the idea of an essential link between communism and atheism, is surprising.

In the course of this conference, the above “Remarks of Fr. Wetter on the Note on Christians vulnerable to the Marxist seduction” will be placed in the context of Wetter’s intellectual biography and his politico-religious thought, providing a long-term perspective on atheism in the communist world. The talk will be divided into three parts:

- a) the presentation of the “Remarks” of 1978;
- b) Wetter's biography with particular attention to his reflection on atheism;
- c) the interpretation of Wetter's text in the context of the Marxist thought of the period.

With this, we aim to set out a periodisation and geography of communist atheism in light of Wetter’s work and the transnational network of scholars in which he was embedded.

Atheization and individualization of non/religious worldviews: the Catholics in Socialist Yugoslavia

Gašper Mithans

Science and Research Centre Koper

Profound transformations occurred in the religious field in Yugoslavia following the rise of the new socialist regime after World War II. The regime actively promoted atheism and positioned religion as a private matter that would eventually “die out by itself”, consequently diminishing the Catholic Church’s dominant position in the Slovenian and Croatian parts of the country and thus exposing the Church’s supposed irrelevance in the public domain (Mojzes, 1992). These social changes were fueled by the phenomenon of individualization of religious beliefs, observed in Slovenia since the late 19th century, manifesting itself also through religious conversions. Henceforth, the concept of deconversion can in the scope of the processes of regime-propagated atheization help analyze individual decisions to “leave religion” (cf. Borowik et al., 2013).

The Catholic Church’s relationship with the state was particularly contentious in the immediate post-war years. This period witnessed anti-religious and anti-clerical campaigns, culminating in the severing of diplomatic ties between Yugoslavia and the Vatican in 1952. The regime also banned religious education from school premises, subsequently introducing Moral education as a key tool for promoting “scientific atheism” (Režek, 2022). However, Yugoslav Socialist Self-Management gradually fostered a less-restrained relationship with religious communities, emphasizing (a sort of) religious freedom and promoting dialogue between Christianity and Marxism. The signing of an agreement between Yugoslavia and the Holy See in 1966, following the Second Vatican Council, eventually led to the restoration of diplomatic ties in 1970 (Ramšak, 2023).

While de-institutionalization resulted in an increase in the number of non-believers, the absence of religious ceremony attendance did not necessarily indicate a loss of religious beliefs, nor did attendance always signify profound religiosity (cf. Schnell & Keenan, 2011). Interestingly, there was a notable improvement in the situation for religious communities in the late 1970s and early 1980s, with approximately 80% of children attending religious education

in Slovenia (Kerševan, 1989). Despite the notable progress made in the realm of religious rights, the program established by the Yugoslav Communist Party/League of Communists remained the cornerstone of the State's religious policy and legal framework pertaining to the status of religious communities. Additionally, it significantly influenced the everyday experiences of believers who encountered varying degrees of discrimination, especially teachers, professors, and clerks, whose profession was considered incompatible with religious beliefs.

Combatting Indifference Together: The Shifting Premises of the Christian-Marxist Dialogue in the 1980s

Heléna Tóth

Otto Friedrich University, Bamberg

The „non-religious turn“ has transformed historians' thinking about atheism in socialist states. Atheism is no longer viewed as a negation of religion but rather as a construct, a dispositif that non-religious actors aimed to imbue with positive meaning, both as a system of thought and as social practice (eg. socialist celebrations). Moving away from the dichotomy between religion and atheism opened up novel perspectives also on the relationship between the two, ranging from the outright oppression of religion to forms of cooperation and adaptation.

Building on the premises of the “non-religious turn,” the proposed paper analyses one of the most significant meetings of Catholic and Marxist scholars in the 1980s, the symposium on “Society and Ethical Values” in Budapest in 1986. Organized by the Vatican's Secretariat for Nonbelievers and the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the three-days international symposium featured scholars from fifteen countries. The conference fulfilled several purposes: it demonstrated a shared effort to address global problems, ranging from labor ethics to societal coexistence, while showcasing Hungary's liberal version of socialism. Focusing on the symposium, the paper presents two arguments:

1. First, the paper argues that the symposium represented a fundamentally new stage in the Christian-Marxist dialogue. While the conversation between Christians and Marxists had a long history, the dialogue was “institutionalized” in the early 1960s, during a period of intensive exchange that quickly phased out, although it also led to the establishment of the Secretariat for Nonbelievers in 1965. The paper argues that the dialogue's revival in the mid-1980s masked radical change as continuity: albeit the topics under discussion were the familiar, such as the relationship between socialist humanism and religion, the meeting's urgency resulted from the fact that propagators of atheism and the Catholic Church faced a common enemy: indifference. Answering pressing global challenges was therefore not merely a competition

between world views, but rather a joint effort at demonstrating their respective relevance.

2. Building on the first argument, the paper shows that the topic of indifference represented the strongest link also between atheism in knowledge production and social practice. Although communication between “scholars of atheism” and “practitioners of atheism” was fragmented, in the 1980s the two groups found common ground, as they grappled with a decade-long plateau in the societal acceptance and relevance of non-belief. Thus, the scholarly discourse at the 1986 symposium bears a decisive imprint of atheism as a social practice.