

# The Ticket to the Soviet Soul: Science, Religion, and the Spiritual Crisis of Late Soviet Atheism

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On January 18, 1960, at the height of Nikita Khrushchev's antireligious campaign (1958–64), the Znanie Society—the Soviet Union's primary enlightenment organization—convened a conference to take stock of the state's renewed effort to eradicate religious “survivals” (*perezhitki*).<sup>1</sup> The mood was bleak. N. I. Gubanov, a prominent atheist author, painted an especially pessimistic picture of failed antireligious measures. Atheism was not making inroads into the Soviet soul, Gubanov lamented, and propagandists misunderstood and underestimated religion. Religion was not dying out but persisting—sometimes even flourishing—even in the inhospitable conditions of socialist modernity. To illustrate the atheists' predicament, Gubanov reminded his audience of a comic short story by Anton Chekhov:

There were two civil servants, one a little old man, the other a young man. And, at the same time, there was a person who, on all special occasions—weddings

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<sup>1</sup>The All-Union Society for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge was founded in 1947 and in 1963 renamed the All-Union “Znanie” Society. On Znanie see Michael Froggatt, “Renouncing Dogma, Teaching Utopia: Science in Schools under Khrushchev,” in *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era*, ed. Polly Jones (Routledge, 2006), 250–66. On Znanie's work in the 1940s–1960s see Vasilii Nikiforovich Zaichikov, *Akademiia millionov (O rabote Vsesoiuznogo obshchestva “Znanie”)* (Moscow, 1967); and Vladimir Andreevich Mezentsev, *Znanie – narodu (K 25-letiiu Vsesoiuznogo obshchestva “Znanie”)* (Moscow, 1972).

and funerals—would roll out the speeches (*rechi zakatyval*). When the civil servant died, [the orator] was again charged with the speech. But he thought that the civil servant who died was the old man, when in fact it was the young civil servant who had died. So he gave a speech in memory of the old civil servant, who was standing next to him and was very pleased because he got to hear his own eulogy in his lifetime.<sup>2</sup>

Gubanov was mistaken about the details of the story, but he was right about the main point: the “orator” was making a fool of himself. If modernization was not, in fact, burying religion, then Soviet atheists were premature in their eulogizing.

When Soviet atheists set out to overcome religion, with either administrative measures (by closing down churches or denying religious groups legal registration) or scientific enlightenment (with biology lectures or visits to the planetarium), they found that—contrary to the patterns of development predicted by Marxism-Leninism—religion was not disappearing under the pressure of scientific progress and socialist modernization. In fact, customary explanations for the persistence of religion under socialist conditions—economic explanations about continued social inequalities; political explanations about the reactionary nature of religious organizations and the penetration of Soviet borders by foreign ideological influences; theories about the lag between material development and the transformation of consciousness; or the notion that religion was the product of cultural backwardness and that the best way to overcome it was scientific education and political enlightenment—all failed to explain the complex spiritual landscape propagandists encountered on the ground. Believers, it turned out, were not necessarily troubled by the contradictions that science presented to religious cosmologies, and religion as lived experience was not a socially marginal holdover of “sectarians” and old women, but flexible, dynamic, and rooted in Soviet life. But what was perhaps even more troubling, Gubanov noted, was that Soviet people used the leisure time and material welfare created by Khrushchev-era economic progress and populist social policies to attend church, participate in religious rituals, and contribute to their local religious communities. He described a conversation he had with an elderly woman while he was on a lecture tour in the provinces: The woman admitted that her family’s lot had improved in the late 1950s, but when Gubanov followed up by asking how these improvements had changed her attitude toward religion, she told him, “Well, I suppose now I can go to church, and can give more to the priest.”<sup>3</sup> Just as the socialist project mobilized for “building communism,” then, atheist measures were proving inadequate to the task—or, as Gubanov put it, “in our scientific atheist propaganda, we bury the wrong civil servant.”<sup>4</sup>

The Soviet state waged several aggressive antireligious campaigns, but it never managed to “overcome” religion. Indeed, religion and believers preoccupied the Soviet leadership until the end of the Communist era. How, then, did the official position on religion change

<sup>2</sup>Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. A-561, op. 1, d. 399, l. 54. The story is titled “Orator” (not “The Death of a Civil Servant,” as per Gubanov). I am grateful to Susanne Fusso for help locating the story.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., l. 51.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., l. 54.

from the militant atheism of the early Soviet period, and its revival during the Khrushchev-era fervor about building communist modernity, to the party abandoning its commitment to scientific atheism in favor of ideological and religious pluralism and freedom of conscience under Gorbachev?

This article examines debates about Soviet spiritual life that took place on the pages and in the editorial rooms of Znanie's journal, *Nauka i religiia* (*Science and Religion*), the primary Soviet periodical charged with articulating Marxist-Leninist answers to spiritual questions. *Nauka i religiia* played a unique role in the late Soviet ideological landscape. For the political elite, it was a means of communicating with both local cadres and ordinary Soviet believers, the journal's two primary audiences.<sup>5</sup> But it was also a space where questions about religion, atheism, and spiritual life could be debated—and not just by the ideological establishment (party bureaucrats, academics, the militant atheists of the previous generation, and the new generation of Soviet social scientists), but also by the ordinary citizens to whom the journal gave voice. Over the course of its long career (which began in 1959 and continues into the present day) *Nauka i religiia*, as Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer observes, “underwent an ironic metamorphosis, from a pillar of antireligious propaganda emphasizing science to an icon of religious revitalization.”<sup>6</sup> Originally conceived as an atheist weapon, the journal transformed under Brezhnev into an important source of religious and spiritual content and by the Gorbachev era had become one of the most widely read journals in the country.<sup>7</sup> Today, *Nauka i religiia* presents itself as a publication on religious life aimed at a popular audience, and just as the journal's Soviet-era editors sought to reject the militant legacy of early Soviet antireligious periodicals like *Bezbozhnik*, the journal's current editor, Olga Brushlinskaia, actively distances the journal from its Soviet origins, describing it as a space not for ideological polemics but for dialogue and discussion: “The ‘and’ in the title *Nauka i religiia* no longer indicates an opposition.”<sup>8</sup>

Scholarship on religion in the Soviet Union has focused largely on the political repression of religion rather than on how Soviet atheism was imagined as an ideological and spiritual alternative, and much of what we know about atheism comes from studies of the early Soviet period (whereas the post-Stalin era remains largely unexamined).<sup>9</sup> Moreover,

<sup>5</sup>For an account of how the journal's work was influenced by the party see “Dva chlena redkollegii zhurnala byli rabotnikami TsK KPSS”: Beseda Nikolaia Mitrokhina s Ol'gai Timofeevnoi Brushlinskoj,” *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, 2008, no. 3, <http://magazines.russ.ru/nz/2008/3/dv15-pr.html> (last accessed September 22, 2013).

<sup>6</sup>Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer, “Christianity: Orthodoxy and Others,” in *Religion and Politics in Russia: A Reader*, ed. Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer (New York, 2010), 1. See also Kira V. Tsekhanskaia, “The Icon in the Home: The Home Begins with the Icon,” in *Religion and Politics in Russia*, 18–30.

<sup>7</sup>See Mark Smirnov and Pavel Krug, “V zashchitu svobodomyshlia: Ispolnilos' polveka zhurnalu ‘Nauka i religiia,’” *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, October 21, 2009, also available at [http://religion.ng.ru/events/2009-10-21/2\\_magazine.html](http://religion.ng.ru/events/2009-10-21/2_magazine.html) (last accessed September 7, 2010).

<sup>8</sup>Olga Brushlinskaia, interview with author, Moscow, Russia, December 7, 2008.

<sup>9</sup>On the early Soviet period see Daniel Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless* (Ithaca, 1998); William B. Husband, “*Godless Communists*”: *Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917–1932* (DeKalb, 2000). On the Stalin and Khrushchev periods see Mikhail Shkarovskii, *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov' pri Staline i Khrushcheve: Gosudarstvenno-tserkovnye otnosheniia v SSSR v 1939–1964 godakh* (Moscow, 1999); Tatiana A. Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia: Russian Orthodoxy from World War II to the Khrushchev Years*, ed. Edward E. Roslof (Armonk, NY, 2002); Andrew B. Stone, “‘Overcoming Peasant Backwardness’: The Khrushchev Antireligious Campaign and the Rural Soviet Union,” *Russian Review* 67 (April 2008), 296–320; and Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock, “Cosmic Enlightenment: Scientific



FIGS. 1 and 2 Monument to the Conquerors of Space at the All-Russia Exhibition Center (left), plans for which were featured on the inside cover of *Nauka i religiiia*'s first issue in September 1959, and again on the cover of the January 1964 issue. Issue no. 10 of 1991 (right) featured articles on yoga and astrology, as well as Russian religious philosophy and the Bible.

while recently published case studies have added to our understanding of lived religion in the Soviet Union, we still know very little about the lived experience of state atheism.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, even in discussions about political religion and totalitarianism, science, religion, and atheism have rarely been examined together to see how their interactions shaped Soviet

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Atheism and the Soviet Conquest of Space," in *Into the Cosmos: Space Exploration and Soviet Culture in Post-Stalinist Russia*, ed. James T. Andrews and Asif A. Siddiqi (Pittsburgh, 2011), 159–94. Works that extend into the Brezhnev and Gorbachev era include Paul Froese, *The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment* (Berkeley, 2008); Nathaniel Davis, *A Long Walk to Church: A Contemporary History of Russian Orthodoxy* (Boulder, 2003); Dimitry Pospelovsky, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism and Soviet Antireligious Policies* (New York, 1997); Catherine Wanner, *Communities of the Converted: Ukrainians and Global Evangelism* (Ithaca, 2007); Catherine Wanner, ed. *State Secularism and Lived Religion in Soviet Russia and Ukraine* (Oxford, 2012); and Sonja Luehrmann, *Secularism Soviet Style: Teaching Atheism and Religion in a Volga Republic* (Bloomington, IN, 2011). For a synthesis of the possibilities opened up by a focus on lived religion and secularism see Wanner, "Introduction," in *State Secularism and Lived Religion in Soviet Russia and Ukraine*, 1–25. Luehrmann's *Secularism Soviet Style* and Victoria Frede's *Doubt, Atheism, and the Nineteenth-Century Russian Intelligentsia* (Madison, 2011) shift attention to atheism itself.

<sup>10</sup>Existing studies of Soviet secularization have also produced a contradictory picture: on the one hand, the consensus has been that state-led secularization failed despite political support and resources, and that the end of communism brought an inevitable religious revival to post-Soviet life (this is most comprehensively put forward in Paul Froese, "Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43:1 [2004]: 35–50). On the other hand, contemporary religiosity is often portrayed as a marker of national identity rather than an indication of religious conviction.

ideology.<sup>11</sup> That atheism has remained marginal stems from the fact that scholars have only recently shifted attention from ideological discourse to the mechanisms behind propaganda production.<sup>12</sup> To be sure, by the late Soviet period, official ideology appeared ossified and incapable of development, with scientific atheism perhaps the most stagnant dogma of all.<sup>13</sup> Few studies, therefore, examine the debates *within* the bureaucratic apparatus, which usually (though not always) took place behind the scenes. Ideological debates did not always reach the public, and ideologists often lacked the political power to turn their polemics into politics; however, as Caroline Humphrey shows, even within the sclerotic ideological apparatus, there were cadres who were sincere, “creative,” and not without political power.<sup>14</sup> By expanding the definition of discourse to include the social practices of ideological production—the “culture, interactions and subjectivities of officials, rather than the reception of their texts by the general population”—Humphreys argues that the change that erupted during perestroika did not just come from outside pressure but from within the party bureaucracy, when “politically consequential ideas buried in decades of strife ... came to the surface.”<sup>15</sup>

In *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor proposes that, in the modern world, “secularity ... [is] the whole context of understanding in which our moral, spiritual, and religious experience and search takes place.”<sup>16</sup> By opening up the closed world of Soviet state atheism, we can see the processes that shaped the conditions of late Soviet secularity, as *Nauka i religiia*, and Soviet atheism more broadly, reoriented itself from the battle *against* religion towards the battle *for* Soviet spiritual life. If we depart from the premise that Soviet atheism has its own history, connected to—yet distinct from—the history of religion, then we may gain insight into how the political significance of atheism changed over time. Understanding this transformation is essential, because whereas the state’s position on religion was remarkably consistent (from 1918, when the Bolsheviks secularized education and separated

<sup>11</sup>On the relationship between science and ideology under Stalin see Ethan Pollock, *Stalin and the Soviet Science Wars* (Princeton, 2006). For a review of Pollock and Froese, and the literature on science, religion, and ideology see Michael David-Fox, “Religion, Science, and Political Religion in the Soviet Context,” *Modern Intellectual History* 8:2 (2011): 471–84.

<sup>12</sup>Alexei Yurchak’s *Everything Was Forever until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, 2005) is, of course, an exception, but it is worth noting that the focus of this article is not on the consumption but on the production of ideology. David Brandenberger has made a critical contribution to our understanding of how Soviet ideology was produced in the Stalin era, showing the various obstacles the state encountered in mobilizing the population. See his *Propaganda State in Crisis: Soviet Ideology, Indoctrination, and Terror under Stalin, 1927–1941* (New Haven, 2011). On the inner workings of the party bureaucracy, and how these shaped ideological production see also Nikolai Mitrokhin, *Russkaia Partia: Dvizhenie russkikh natsionalistov v SSSR 1953–1985 gg.* (Moscow, 2003).

<sup>13</sup>For an illustration of atheism’s low stature even in comparison with other unpopular ideological disciplines see Mikhail Epshtein, “Ateizm—eto dukhovnoe prizvanie: O Raise Omarovne Gibaidulinoi,” *Zvezda*, 2001, no. 4, also available at <http://magazines.russ.ru/zvezda/2001/4/epsht.html> (last accessed on September 6, 2013).

<sup>14</sup>Caroline Humphrey, “The ‘Creative Bureaucrat’: Conflicts in the Production of Soviet Communist Party Discourse,” *Inner Asia* 10 (2008): 5–35; Nikolai Mitrokhin, “Lichnye sviazi’ v apparate TsK KPSS,” *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, 2012, no. 3:166–85, also available at <http://magazines.russ.ru:81/nz/2012/3/m13.html> (last accessed September 22, 2013).

<sup>15</sup>Humphrey, “Creative Bureaucrat,” 5–9. Humphrey proposes that discourse should include “drafts, unsuccessful working papers, reports sent from below, reactions to local conditions and events, censored passages, oral documents, etc. that consumed most of the officials’ time.”

<sup>16</sup>Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA, 2007), 3.

religion and the state, until the end of the Communist period), the relationship between communism and atheism transformed in critical and consequential ways. Soviet secularity was not just an empty space left behind by the forced marginalization of religion but a complex interaction of competing forces—modernization and scientific-technological revolution, religion and spiritual culture—all taking place in the mercurial political landscape of late socialism. Why did the Soviet state and Communist ideology come to be discussed in explicitly spiritual terms? How did the ideological establishment come to see spiritual fulfillment as one of the state’s obligations to its citizens? What were the stakes of success and the consequences of failure?

### YOU TAKE AWAY OUR FAITH, BUT WHAT DO YOU GIVE US IN RETURN?

On August 31, 1964, Vasilii Nikiforovich Zaichikov, Znanie’s deputy chairman, and Vladimir Andreevich Mezentsev, the newly appointed editor of *Nauka i religiia*, wrote to the Central Committee of the Communist Party requesting permission to overhaul the country’s main atheist periodical by changing its profile, audience, and even its title.<sup>17</sup> The authors noted that, in the five years since it began publication in 1959, the journal had “played its own positive role,” but that the time had come to address shortcomings. *Nauka i religiia* had to move beyond scientific enlightenment and criticism of religion, and turn toward “worldly themes” (*k zhiteiskoi tematike*). Ideological success, the authors argued, depended on transforming the atheist journal into a source of spiritual content.<sup>18</sup>

So that we do not miss the mark, the journal should answer all those questions that arise among the broad masses of Soviet people, including believers—questions to which the church provides its own answers. These are the most diverse issues of contemporary life, issues which extend far beyond the relationship of science and religion: the meaning of life, happiness and solace (*shchast'e i uteshenie*), the moral (*nravstvennoe*) and immoral in human behavior, truth and conscience, good and evil, the upbringing of children, the preservation of traditions, and how to understand contemporary events.<sup>19</sup>

Zaichikov and Mezentsev wrote that it was precisely such “moral-ethical” issues that occupied the contemporary clergy and filled the foreign propaganda infiltrating Soviet borders. To combat such influence and reach the audience on its own terms and with its own message, the journal had to become a “popular philosophical journal of a kind we do not yet have.” For the authors, this meant that the title *Nauka i religiia*, which implied that “science” and “religion” were adversaries, “did not facilitate dissemination among the masses [and] was [no longer] justified.”<sup>20</sup> Rather than underscoring the “negative” components of antireligious propaganda, the journal needed to emphasize atheism’s

<sup>17</sup>GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1371, ll. 60–62. Mezentsev served as the executive editor of *Nauka i religiia* from 1964 to 1968.

<sup>18</sup>GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1371, l. 60.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., l. 60.

<sup>20</sup>Ibid., l. 61.

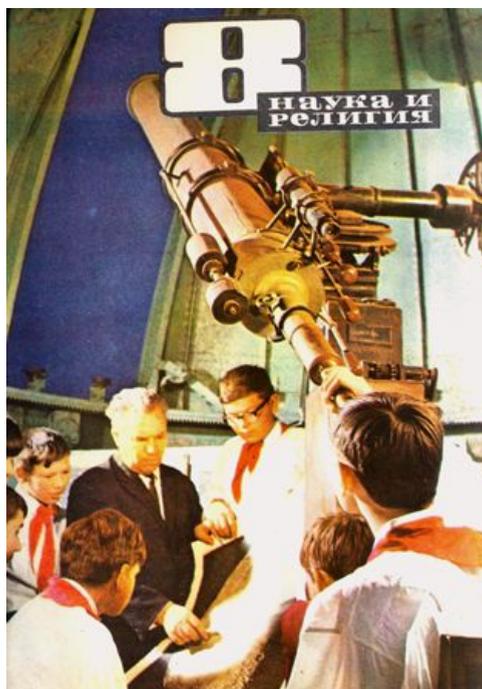


FIG. 3 Young Astronomer's Club at Palace of Culture of I. A. Likhachev Automobile Factory. *Nauka i religiia*, 1972, no. 8.

“positive” elements—to speak to “worldly themes” like morality and appeal to the reader’s emotions and everyday concerns.

Zaichikov’s and Mezentsev’s 1964 note was neither the first nor the last time that *Nauka i religiia* would come to the attention of the Central Committee. Indeed, the journal was a mirror of Soviet atheism: a fertile ground for critical debate that was burdened from inception by a lack enthusiasm, resources, and consensus. *Znanie* had first called for an atheist journal in 1954, on the heels of the “100 Days” antireligious campaign that began with the July 1954 Central Committee decree announcing it, and ended with the November 1954 decree repudiating its administrative “excesses” (*peregiby*). However, like the campaign itself, the proposal for an atheist journal initially went nowhere, and in 1955 *Znanie*’s Presidium decided that it would be sufficient to conduct atheist propaganda through their existing popular scientific monthly, *Nauka i zhizn'* (*Science and Life*).<sup>21</sup> Even as *Znanie* leadership acknowledged that almost no atheist articles had been published since the war, and that, as Michael Froggatt has noted, the number of atheist pamphlets had been declining every year since *Znanie* was founded in 1947, the consensus was that religion was marginal to Soviet life, and that scientific and technological progress would of itself disabuse believers of their religious prejudices.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., d. 1048, l. 68.

<sup>22</sup>Cited in Michael Froggatt, “Science in Propaganda and Popular Culture in the USSR under Khrushchev, 1953–1964” (Ph.D. diss., Oxford University, 2005), 107. Silant'ev to Pospelov, August 3, 1953, GARF, f. 9547, op.1, d. 778a, ll. 171–75.

Before long, however, several developments put these assumptions in question and made atheism politically significant. First, as the Cold War intensified, American propaganda characterized religion as the fundamental marker that separated godly America from godless communism and cast the conflict as a moral crusade of good against evil.<sup>23</sup> In the summer of 1954, as Soviet atheists campaigned against religion, President Eisenhower asserted that the true source of American strength was not “guns and bombs” but faith, and in September, as the antireligious campaign was winding down, Eisenhower appealed to the Soviet Union and its satellites for religious freedom on Voice of America.<sup>24</sup> Another development that worried the Soviet elite was that Christianity, long assumed to be “dying out,” seemed to be going on the offensive—a development that undermined the Marxist platform that religion was inherently retrograde, reactionary, and incapable of modernization.<sup>25</sup> As the creation of the World Council of Churches and the tenor of the Second Vatican Council made evident, religious organizations were not content to stay confined to the private sphere and sought to reclaim a role in public life.<sup>26</sup>

But closer to home, what ultimately brought atheism back into Soviet public life was the volatile ideological landscape produced by Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin at the Twentieth Party Congress (1956).<sup>27</sup> In the shadow of de-Stalinization, the political elite struggled to reinvent faith in communism’s mission, which inevitably brought attention to the substance of ideology. What was left if Stalin was removed from Soviet identity? New efforts were made to ascertain Soviet public opinion (evident, for example, in the revival of sociology as a discipline),<sup>28</sup> and the population responded enthusiastically, flooding state, party, and cultural institutions with their views.<sup>29</sup> However, even for the reformers

<sup>23</sup>See James Gilbert, *Redeeming Culture: American Religion in an Age of Science* (Chicago, 1997); and Jonathan P. Herzog, *The Spiritual-Industrial Complex: America’s Religious Battle against Communism in the Early Cold War* (New York, 2011).

<sup>24</sup>Herzog, *Spiritual-Industrial Complex*, 134.

<sup>25</sup>For example, the reforms undertaken by the Second Vatican Council (1962–65), which the Soviet elite monitored with trepidation, were interpreted as evidence of religious modernization.

<sup>26</sup>On the “de-privatization” of religion see Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago, 1994).

<sup>27</sup>As Stephen Bittner writes, with de-Stalinization, “a universe of meaning was thrown into disarray, a process that was akin to the ‘cosmic reorganization’ that followed the collapse of communism.” Stephen V. Bittner, *The Many Lives of Khrushchev’s Thaw: Experience and Memory in Moscow’s Arbat* (Ithaca, 2008), 12.

<sup>28</sup>On the role of public opinion in the formation of party policy under Khrushchev, and the Third Party Program in particular, see William Taubman, *Khrushchev: The Man and His Era* (New York, 2003), 508–9. On the revival of sociology in the late Soviet period see Vladimir Shlapentokh, *Soviet Public Opinion and Ideology: Mythology and Pragmatism in Interaction* (New York, 1986); idem, *The Politics of Sociology in the Soviet Union* (Boulder, 1987); B. M. Firsov, *Istoriia sovetskoi sotsiologii 1950–1980-kh godov* (St. Petersburg, 2001); and G. S. Batygin and C. F. Yarmoliuk, eds., *Rossiskaia sotsiologiya shestidesiatykh godov v vospominaniakh i dokumentakh* (St. Petersburg, 1999).

<sup>29</sup>Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv noveishei istorii (RGANI), f. 5, op. 30, d. 409, ll. 112–23. The Central Committee’s Ideological Commission reported record numbers of letters on ideological questions in the wake of the Twenty-Second Party Congress, citing 5,950 letters between January and June 1962. However, studies on the participation of the Soviet public in the project of redefining socialism during the Thaw show that the public did not necessarily push for liberalization. On the contradictory trends of the Thaw see George W. Breslauer, “Khrushchev Reconsidered,” in *The Soviet Union since Stalin*, ed. Stephen F. Cohen et al. (Bloomington, IN, 1980); Polly Jones, “From the Secret Speech to the Burial of Stalin: Real and Ideal Responses to De-Stalinization,” Susanne Schattenberg, “‘Democracy’ or ‘Despotism’? How the Secret Speech Was Translated into Everyday Life,” and Juliane Fürst, “The Arrival of Spring? Changes and Continuities in Soviet

within the Communist elite, the relative ideological pluralism of the Thaw was a political problem that required discipline, and to bring ideology back under party control, Khrushchev formed an Ideological Commission and initiated the creation of a new party program, the first revision of the Communist ideological platform since 1919. The Third Party Program, as Alexander Titov notes, was Khrushchev's attempt to put forward a "positive" direction for communism, distinct from the "negative" thrust of de-Stalinization, and the party elite (including Khrushchev personally) devoted five years to articulating the component parts of the transition from socialism to communism.<sup>30</sup> Ultimately, even as de-Stalinization destabilized the foundations of Soviet identity, it also allowed those charged with making sense of communism to ask new questions and to propose new, and sometimes unorthodox, answers.

Whereas the 1954 antireligious campaign was a short-lived revival of early Soviet antireligious crusades, it also turned out to be a trial for the more robust offensive of 1958–64, which had decidedly more profound consequences for the Soviet religious landscape.<sup>31</sup> This was not only because the state closed almost half of the country's Orthodox churches (the number declined from 13,372 to around 7,000 between 1959 and 1965), or because the state effectively brought all aspects of religious life (from monasteries and seminary education to the observance of rites) under stricter government oversight.<sup>32</sup> Rather, the second campaign is notable because its failures tested ideological platitudes and forced atheists to reevaluate religion and reconsider atheism.

Until the mid-1960s, the role of atheism in communism remained poorly defined. This was evident in the revival of religious life after the 1954 antireligious campaign, as well as in Znanie's confusion about what de-Stalinization meant for the direction of atheist work. An internal memo reported that some had interpreted the events of 1956 to mean that religion and atheism were again marginal to public affairs. Znanie's RSFSR branch noted a

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Youth Culture and Policy between Stalin and Khrushchev," all in *The Dilemmas of De-Stalinization: Negotiating Cultural and Social Change in the Khrushchev Era*, ed. Polly Jones (New York, 2006), 41–63, 64–79, and 135–53, respectively; and Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (Berkeley, 1999), 279–302.

<sup>30</sup>While there had been earlier attempts to create a new party program, in the mid-1930s, 1939, and in 1947, none of these had come to fruition. A new commission was formed for the task in 1952, at the Nineteenth Party Congress, but Stalin's death and the subsequent struggle for leadership again left the project without a clear director or direction. After the Twentieth Party Congress, the question was again raised, and a commission formed to undertake the project began work in 1958. See Alexander Titov, "The 1961 Party Program and the Fate of Khrushchev's reforms," in *Soviet State and Society under Nikita Khrushchev*, ed. Melanie Ilic and Jeremy Smith (New York, 2009), 8–25. On Ideological Commissions also see Stephen V. Bittner, "Ideologicheskie komissii TsK KPSS, 1958–1964: Dokumenty (review)," *Kritika* 3:2 (2002): 356–61.

<sup>31</sup>The 1954 campaign has largely been seen as an attempt to mobilize the rural economy by fighting religious practices that undermined labor productivity. Froggatt also notes that the campaign was also an attempt by Vladimir Bonch-Bruевич, an old atheist and the Director of Leningrad's Museum of the History of Religion and Atheism, to secure the precarious position of the sector on religion and atheism of the Institute of History of the Soviet Academy of Sciences by resurrecting early Soviet iconoclasm ("Science in Propaganda and Popular Culture," 106–11).

<sup>32</sup>Kira V. Tsekhanskaia, "Russia: Trends in Orthodox Religiosity in the Twentieth Century (Statistics and Reality)," in *Religion and Politics in Russia: A Reader*, ed. Marjorie Mandelstam Balzer (Armonk, NY, 2010), 9. See also Nathaniel Davis, "The Number of Orthodox Churches before and after the Khrushchev Antireligious Drive," *Slavic Review* 50 (Autumn 1991): 614. On new government control over religious affairs see Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia*, 187–88.

significant decline in the number of atheist lectures in 1956 (from 24,574 in the first half of 1955 to 16,946 in the first half of 1956), as well as a decrease in the proportion of atheist lectures (from 6.3 percent of the total in the first six months of 1955 to 3.5 percent in the same period of 1956). Znanie's leadership, however, explicitly criticized the position that religion was not harmful since it no longer contradicted science and had become politically loyal to the Soviet state, "supposedly stepping on the path of the battle for communism," and used the above figures to reprimand local branches for "undervaluing this most important area of ideological work."<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, Znanie's atheists were not blind to the fact that the population showed little enthusiasm for their services. In 1956 the Moscow branch received only six requests for atheist lectures, and even when Znanie actively offered its services to local enterprises, they were often declined "regardless of the qualifications of the lecturer."<sup>34</sup> On the eve of the new antireligious campaign, the organization charged with bringing the atheist message to the masses struggled to articulate what atheism was, who was in charge of it, and why it mattered.<sup>35</sup>

While the exact origins of Khrushchev's antireligious campaign remain obscure, one plausible narrative is that the campaign was ignited on April 15, 1958, when V. D. Shapovnikova, a special correspondent of *Literaturnaia gazeta*, sent a letter to Mikhail Suslov, the guardian of party ideology.<sup>36</sup> In her letter, Shapovnikova brought the party's attention to a disconcerting phenomenon: the presence of religiosity among citizens of the world's most revolutionary society. Shapovnikova began by describing her shock when she first encountered religiosity on a trip to the countryside where she had been sent to write a feature about Baptist prayer meetings. Her experience, as well as the considerable reader response to her article—Shapovnikova wrote to Suslov—indicated that a "great force stands behind the preacher" and that "we are very weakly armed against such a force." Shapovnikova noted that the urban intelligentsia was unfamiliar with rural audiences. But for Shapovnikova, who saw herself as a representative of a progressive, modern Soviet community, what was even more troubling was the absence of effective atheist propaganda. "We cannot even say with certainty the extent of the danger before us," she wrote. "I am convinced that the danger is great."<sup>37</sup> Finally, she noted, those whose task it was to enlighten the population—the State Museum of Religion and Atheism in Leningrad and Znanie—failed to appreciate the consequences of their sluggishness. Znanie, for example, still had not begun publishing *Nauka i religiia* four years after the July 7, 1954, Central Committee decree had officially permitted it.

Shapovnikova's letter sounded an alarm within the party; indeed, Tatiana Chumachenko even suggests that it provided a "certain stimulus" for the antireligious campaign.<sup>38</sup> In its aftermath, the Central Committee organized a conference on religion and atheism, which

<sup>33</sup>GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 375, ll. 35–38 (quote from l. 35).

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., l. 36.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., l. 37.

<sup>36</sup>RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 91, ll. 23–29. After I concluded my archival research, I encountered Shapovnikova's letter again in Chumachenko's book. Chumachenko's discussion of how the letter fits into the development of the antireligious campaign was very helpful in providing context (*Church and State in Soviet Russia*, 149–50).

<sup>37</sup>RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 91, ll. 23–29 (quoted in Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia*, 149).

<sup>38</sup>Chumachenko, *Church and State in Soviet Russia*, 149–50.

produced the “Report by the Agitation and Propaganda Department of the Central Committee of the CPSU for Union Republics on Shortcomings in Scientific-Atheistic Propaganda.”<sup>39</sup> However, even as the party signaled that the topic was back on the political agenda, it did not offer concrete proposals for a new atheist program, and, in the absence of alternative institutions, Znanie was tasked with figuring out what role science ought to play in “scientific atheism.” A 1959 internal Znanie report explained that the successful construction of communism depended on the “ideological conviction” and the “moral characteristics” of the people, and that communist (as opposed to bourgeois) morality entailed “dedication to communism and an uncompromising attitude toward its enemies, the consciousness of one’s societal duties, the active participation in labor for the benefit of society, the essential upbringing of the man of the future, [and] the overcoming of capitalist survivals in people’s consciousness.” Among the “survivals” that needed to be overcome, religion was “one of the most significant.”<sup>40</sup>

The Communist party, basing itself on science, has always been irreconcilable (*neprimirima*) toward religion, which in the lives of laborers plays the role of spiritual hog-wash (*dukhovnoi sivukhi*), poisoning man’s consciousness. Preaching resignation to fate, the passive wait for heavenly life in the next world, religion gets in the way of believers becoming conscious builders of communist life, lowers their initiative and energy in their labor and social lives. The observance of religious rituals is often accompanied by violations in labor and government discipline, is detrimental to agriculture, and leaves people spiritually desolate (*opustoshaet*).<sup>41</sup>

Religion, the official position held, undermined productivity, alienated believers from Communist society, and robbed them of true knowledge and agency.

However, behind the confident veneer, Znanie cadres repeatedly decried religion’s strength and atheism’s weakness. An atheist lecturer in the Moscow region pointed out that “the ice had budged” but that atheist work itself was marred by old ways of thinking” and wondered, “What is the difference if I say that we have increased the number of lectures by 100–200–500 percent in comparison with the previous year” when Communists themselves lacked “militancy” and a “Leninist attitude toward religion.” To illustrate his point, he told his audience about a note he received during a recent lecture for five hundred propaganda workers in Moscow: “During Easter, by tradition, we have Easter cakes and painted eggs in our home. But we do not believe in God. I am a Communist, my brother is in the Komsomol, and my father is a party candidate. Is it really so very bad?”<sup>42</sup>

The party tried to communicate that a Communist who painted Easter eggs—or went to church, had icons, or participated in religious holidays and rituals—was indeed “very bad.” As the Ideological Commission noted, “there are many signals that party organizations do not devote the necessary attention to the atheist education of laborers, have a conciliatory attitude towards the activities of churchmen and sectarians, do not actively battle survivals

<sup>39</sup>RGANI, f. 5, op. 33, d. 91, l. 135.

<sup>40</sup>Ibid., ll. 8–27.

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., l. 9.

<sup>42</sup>GARF, f. A-561, op. 1, d. 281, ll. 56–61, 43–44.



Figs. 4 and 5 “The Ascension.” “Why are you lifting me up?” “For bad atheist lectures!” *Krokodil*, May 10, 1962 (left), and “Blessed Virgin, rejoice!” *Krokodil*, 1962, no. 28 (right).

of the past. Not infrequently, Communists reconcile themselves to the fact that religious rituals are conducted in their families, and sometimes even participate in them themselves.”<sup>43</sup> Of course such “bad” Communists had always existed, but the new ideological atmosphere made their lack of discipline inexcusable. Party pronouncements reasserted that Communists could not tolerate religion in either their personal or professional lives, and the new Party Charter announced at the Twenty-Second Party Congress (1961) made explicit that it was not enough to remain indifferent: Communists were required to battle religious prejudices actively.<sup>44</sup>

With this convergence of Cold War competition, de-Stalinization, antireligious fervor, and scientific enthusiasm coming together at the height of the Khrushchev era, *Znanie* finally received its long-desired atheist journal, and in September 1959 the first issue of *Nauka i religii* appeared for the Soviet public. Alongside the requisite Leniniana, the journal presented materials on “Legends and Facts,” meant to dispel historical myths and unmask superstitions with science; features on “The World of Tomorrow,” highlighting scientific and technological achievements and their social implications; cautionary tales of religious hypocrisy and misconduct at home and abroad; public renunciations of religion by former believers; and entertaining material for both children and adults: short stories, humorous anecdotes, and even scripts on atheist themes. But these made up only half of the journal’s contents. The other half was devoted to methodological recommendations for

<sup>43</sup>RGANI, f. 5, op. 30, d. 409, l. 116. The issue of Communists participating in religious rituals continued to be debated in subsequent years. See D. Sidorov, “Terpiemy li religioznye obriady v sem’e kommuniste?” *Agitator*, 1964, no. 6:41–42.

<sup>44</sup>*Ustav KPSS* (Moscow, 1961), 6.

atheist propaganda workers; reports on shifts in the party's political direction; new ideological proposals (for instance, the creation of socialist rituals); and reports (often critical) of atheist work conducted across the USSR.

*Nauka i religiia*'s mission was to make known the Communist position on religion, showcase Soviet scientific achievements, and proclaim (socialist) humanity's triumph over nature and communism's superiority to all other ways of life. Appropriately, cosmonauts—Soviet scientific prowess made flesh—became the public face of state atheism, featuring prominently and often on the pages of the journal. Space heroes were the most compelling and effective way of generating genuine reader interest, and as Soviet space victories continued to astound the world, the party called on both *Nauka i zhizn'* and *Nauka i religiia* to use cosmic enthusiasm to make atheist propaganda more appealing, especially to the youth.<sup>45</sup> In the early 1960s both journals' circulation grew considerably, with *Nauka i religiia* increasing from 70,000 in 1959 to 200,000 in 1965 (though its circulation was still modest in comparison with the more popular *Nauka i zhizn'*).<sup>46</sup> *Znanie*'s activity in general grew exponentially, with the society's annual number of public lectures growing from 3,217,000 in 1957 to 12,757,000 in 1962.<sup>47</sup>



FIG. 6 “Let’s trade: I’ll give you my halo; you give me your helmet.”  
*Krokodil*, March 30, 1965.

<sup>45</sup>GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1210, l. 34.

<sup>46</sup>RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 119, l. 58. For comparison, the popular science magazine *Nauka i zhizn'* had a circulation of 167,000 in 1961; by 1963, circulation almost tripled to 475,000; and by 1964 *Znanie* received permission to raise circulation to 750,000 and felt confident enough to request that the figure be raised to one million (GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1310, ll. 29–30, 62, and d. 1371, l. 54).

<sup>47</sup>GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1310, l. 85. As a basis for comparison, in 1948 *Znanie* gave 83,000 lectures.

Considering the attention and resources being devoted to scientific enlightenment and atheism under Khrushchev, why, then, did *Nauka i religiia* find itself in crisis just five years after beginning publication? In the summer of 1964 the journal's editorial board was purged and shortly after Zaichikov and Mezentsev appealed to the party for permission to reform the journal. Mezentsev shared that he "did not like hearing at the [Central Committee's] Ideological Department that we do not know how to propagandize our worldview, and to this point do very little to popularize it. ... After all, at reader's conferences, readers very reasonably tell us: you take away our faith, but what do you give us in return?"<sup>48</sup> While *Nauka i religiia* was a potentially powerful vehicle to bring the atheist message to the masses, it needed a "less academic" title to find its way into the home—and the heart—of ordinary Soviet people. The journal's title positioned science as the best weapon against religion, but atheists were losing confidence that science could provide a sufficient foundation for Soviet identity.<sup>49</sup> But if not science, then what? The initial titles proposed—*Svet (Light)*, *Znanie i vera (Knowledge and Faith)*, and even *Zhizn' i religiia (Life and Religion)*—were a variation in nuance, but they still upheld the binary opposition of light, science, reason, and life, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, religious darkness, irrationality, and death. The journal had largely served the propaganda purpose for which it was created—providing a platform for the antireligious campaign—however, by the end of the Khrushchev era atheists began to question not just the efficacy of administrative campaigns but also whether scientific enlightenment was the best way to win the Soviet soul.

### NOT BY SPUTNIK ALONE

Measuring and evaluating the effectiveness of atheist propaganda is certainly not an exact science either for atheists or the historian. Nevertheless, it does seem that—despite statistical reports about church closures, and the undeniable fact that the state's administrative measures were devastating for both religious institutions and communities—atheists themselves noted little progress. Indeed, internal transcripts reveal that, over the course of the campaign, much of the same criticism appears at the beginning of the antireligious campaign (1958–59) as at its height (1960–62) and wane (1963–64). Whereas some cadres enthusiastically described isolated successes, most reports pointed to the counterproductive effects of administrative tactics in winning the population to their cause, and provided evidence—especially in statistics of high, and often rising, ritual observance—of the fact that atheism continued to lose ground to religion.

By the mid-1960s, sociological data confirmed that atheists were missing something fundamental. Reflecting on these trends, I. I. Brazhnik, the deputy chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs, argued that "the illegal, rushed (*nezakonnoe, pospeshnoe*) closure of churches" only increased religiosity. In Dnepropetrovsk oblast, where 129 churches (83.5 percent) had been closed between 1961 and 1966, data for 1967 showed that "there were 217 percent more rites conducted in the remaining 20 churches than had been conducted

<sup>48</sup>GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1371, ll. 2–3.

<sup>49</sup>Attempts to rename *Nauka i religiia* were taken up in 1963, 1964, and again in 1965 at a conference devoted to evaluating the journal's work (GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1371, ll. 2–3, and d. 1447).

in 150 [churches].” At the same time, in Vologda oblast, where no churches had been closed, ritual observance had declined. “We should not determine the patterns in such a linear fashion (*ne ustanavlivat' takuiu priamuiu zakonomernost'*),” Brazhnik stated, “but let the comrades from Dnepropetrovsk and Moldova explain these figures.”<sup>50</sup> More than half of Moldova’s churches had been closed since 1961, Brazhnik noted,

Nevertheless, or, more exactly, despite this—or, perhaps, even more exactly, because of this—the population’s religiosity is not declining but growing. Not long ago, we reported on this to the party’s Central Committee. In 1963, 31 percent were buried according to church ritual, whereas in 1965 [the figure increased to] more than 40 percent. The income of the Russian Orthodox Church in 1962 was 1 million, whereas in 1964 it was 1.8 million. In Tiraspol' raion, all churches are closed, yet in 1964, 1,000 newborns were baptized.<sup>51</sup>

It is worth underscoring that Brazhnik’s criticism of Soviet policies was not uncommon by the mid-1960s, and that behind closed doors, positions like his were not dissenting voices, but an integral part of the establishment.<sup>52</sup> In the face of such results, the council encouraged the party to scale back administrative policies and pronouncements against offending the feelings of religious believers begin to appear more often. This did not mean that the ideological establishment questioned state atheism as a goal, but they were losing confidence that atheist propaganda, as it was being practiced, would lead to success.

ЯВЛЕНИЕ ЛЕКТОРА-АТЕИСТА НАРОДУ (по картине А. Иванова)

Рисунок Н. СЕМЕНОВА



FIG. 7 “The Epiphany of the atheist lecturer to the people.” *Krokodil*, September 20, 1962.

<sup>50</sup>Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii-m (formerly Tsentr khraneniia dokumentov molodezhnykh organizatsii) (RGASPI-M), f. M-1, op. 34, d. 130, ll. 31–32.

<sup>51</sup>Ibid.

<sup>52</sup>John Anderson notes the shift in the Soviet approach to religion and atheism in 1964–65, but he sees figures like Brazhnik as “dissenting voices,” warning that they should not be overemphasized. See Anderson, *Religion, State, and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (New York, 1994), 68–76.

In an ironic twist, then, Soviet atheism found itself trying to catch up to religion in the struggle to modernize and remain relevant to contemporary life. Even as atheists criticized religion's "reconciliation" with science and its move toward social and spiritual concerns as hypocrisy and dissimulation (*prisposoblenchestvo*), they also conceded that this adaptability accounted for religion's continued vitality. Conversely, atheism's militancy, a legacy of the early Soviet period, was now seen as a weakness rather than a strength.<sup>53</sup> However, this sea-change in state atheism should not be read as a "liberalization" or an abandonment of the atheist mission. By rejecting administrative "excesses," atheists shifted means not ends. Indeed, the end of the campaign *against* religion did not mean the end of the campaign *for* atheism. Indeed, as the antireligious campaign receded, atheism appeared more frequently in print and became the subject of academic seminars and conferences, as well as party committees and plenums (in June and November 1963).<sup>54</sup> Resource were allocated to form new organizations, most prominently the Institute of Scientific Atheism under the Academy of Social Sciences, officially formed by the January 2, 1964, Central Committee resolution "On Measures for Strengthening the Atheist Education of the Population."<sup>55</sup>

But how was Soviet atheism to articulate a positive identity appealing enough to convert without offending religious sensibilities? Leonid Fedorovich Il'ichev, a Khrushchev protégé and chairman of the Ideological Commission, proposed that in their propaganda, atheists "appeal primarily to man's reason ... but we lose sight of the emotional sphere. Meanwhile, clergy and sectarians aim to act upon not only, and not so much, on reason, as on man's emotions. ... We ourselves need to not only understand the meaning of the emotional factor, but to make practical use of it."<sup>56</sup> In the mid-1960s, some proposed that religion was not so much an epistemological or a philosophical phenomenon, but a spiritual one. Mezentsev suggested that the Soviet answer to religion was not science but the Marxist-Leninist *worldview*: "Religion, after all, is a worldview, not a body of knowledge, [and] we need to title the journal more appropriately. It is more correct to say 'Marxism-Leninism and Religion.'" In order to rise to religion's challenge, "we can and we must give our views on the world, our Communist worldview," and since "the battle is being waged along moral lines, we must take moral issues to be our foundation." Mezentsev proposed more new titles that might better reflect the journal's mission: *Rodnik (Spring)*, *Znania dlia vsekh (Knowledge for All)*, *Svetoch (The Torch of Truth)*, *Chelovek i mir (Man and the World)*, and the slight (yet significant) variation, *Mir cheloveka (The World of Man)*.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>53</sup>As Herzog notes, from the early 1950s, American security analysts "had pointed to religion as a potential U.S. strength and Soviet weakness" (*Spiritual-Industrial Complex*, 131).

<sup>54</sup>See *Plenum Tsentral'nogo Komiteta Kommunisticheskoi Partii Sovetskogo Soiuz, 18–21 June 1963: Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow, 1964).

<sup>55</sup>"O meropriiatiakh po usileniu ateisticheskogo vospitaniia naseleniia," *Partiinaia zhizn'*, 1964, no. 2. The new line on atheism was also signaled to the Soviet public in *Pravda*. See "Aktivno vesti ateisticheskoe vospitanie," *Pravda*, March 2, 1964.

<sup>56</sup>L. Il'ichev, "Formirovanie nauchnogo mirovozzreniia i ateisticheskoe vospitanie," *Kommunist*, 1964, no. 1:23–46.

<sup>57</sup>GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1447, ll. 2–3.

### “WILL WE MOVE AWAY FROM ATHEISM OR NOT?”

The debate about *Nauka i religii* was a referendum on Soviet atheism. The fact that none of the proposals for the journal's new title included either “science” or “religion,” and the proposition that *Mir cheloveka* best reflected the journal's mission, reveals a shift in atheist thinking about the relationship of the role of ideology in Soviet life. What did this mean for the future of Soviet atheism? “Will we move away from atheism or not?” asked A. F. Okulov, the director of the newly established Institute of Scientific Atheism.

How should we understand this? If we approach this from the point of view of the title, then it seems that the journal will move away from it; if from the point of view of the contents, then, conversely, the journal will move toward man.

Recently in England I talked to a priest regarding the activities of the modern church. This is not the church in our previous understanding, but rather a large ideological institution. ... We spoke to a very educated preacher who said that the main thing in their work is *not* to prove the existence of the Most High; the main thing is the issue of human relations. ... Human relations—this is the main thing! The church took advantage of this even before, and we need to legitimize that attention to the problem of human relations on Earth as a very important issue.

Okulov argued that atheists were trying to hit a moving target, battling the abstract religion of ideological texts rather than the lived religion that spoke to the spiritual concerns of humanity. For Okulov, this miscalculation had serious consequences: “I looked at the West through the eyes of an atheist,” Okulov remarked, “and I think that we conduct most of our atheist work to no effect (*v pustuiu*).” What atheism needed, he suggested, was “a journal dedicated to human beings and human relations.”<sup>58</sup> Yet, while there was a consensus about the general direction, important questions remained: How would the journal deliver the new message, and who was the audience?

The editors noted that the materials aimed at *Nauka i religii*'s two target audiences—believers and atheist cadres—often undermined one another. “It is clear that each of these [audiences] has its own needs—in terms of themes, level of education, or form of delivery—and [these needs] are often absolutely incompatible. For example, a believer can only be repulsed by various methodological materials [aimed at propagandists] discussing approaches to believers [and] methods of tearing [believers] away from religion, while for the propagandist, these materials are essential.”<sup>59</sup> Znanie leaders complained about the burden of the journal's “dual nature” (*dvoistvennoe polozenie*), and stressed that the time had come to make a choice about whether *Nauka i religii* would be a methodological pamphlet intended for internal consumption by propaganda specialists, or a mass publication aimed at bringing believers into the Soviet way of life.

To a degree, the problem was soon solved when the Institute of Scientific Atheism began publishing its own journal, *Voprosy nauchnogo ateizma*, aimed at cadres and devoted to the theory and methods of scientific atheism. However, what was more importantly was the emerging consensus that attracting converts was more important than preaching to the

<sup>58</sup>Ibid., II. 16, 17.

<sup>59</sup>GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1310, l. 29.

atheist choir. But even if there was agreement on turning *Nauka i religiia* into a popular publication, the problem remained that the masses were out of reach. Okulov observed that, “even in such large cities as Voronezh, many people do not read newspapers, do not listen to the radio, do not even go to the movies.” Pointing out that there were 23 million uneducated people in the RSFSR, he asked: “What do newspapers do for these people in the spiritual sense (*v dukhovnykh otnosheniakh*)?”<sup>60</sup> The philosopher M. M. Grigorian agreed that atheists had to find a way into the lives of these “23 million barely literate people,” and that rather than seeing the rejection of militancy as a betrayal of atheism’s mission, “we need to confirm our understanding of the world with a popular, entertaining language, so that [it becomes] another spiritual support.”<sup>61</sup>

However, at the same time that atheists agreed that their success hinged on their ability to reach the masses, they also worried that catering to popular demand would compromise ideological purity. “I fear that we will ... attract a wider readership with an arsenal of methods,” one cadre noted, “but the battle against religion in contemporary conditions was and will be the main goal, and we cannot forget this. Reform (*perestroika*) must be done very carefully.”<sup>62</sup> Many, therefore, expressed discomfort about straying from customary approaches. D. M. Ugrinovich, the chair of the Philosophy Department at Moscow State University, observed that *Nauka i religiia* would become the first Soviet publication to take up spiritual concerns, whereas *Nauka i zhizn'* could rely on a long tradition of popular science publications that made scientific content accessible to the masses. This problem—how to manage the tension between popular demand and ideological purity, to cater to consumer taste while performing a political and pedagogical function—was endemic to Soviet ideology.<sup>63</sup> Atheists pursued an elusive goal: to produce a journal that addressed spiritual concerns effectively enough for readers to arrive spontaneously at ideologically correct conclusions about Soviet life.

Reforming *Nauka i religiia* into a popular magazine also presented another problem: would appealing to the masses abandon atheist cadres and lose the journal’s primary audience? V. M. Chertikhin, the editor of the atheism division of Politizdat, cautioned that by “concerning ourselves with this wider reader, we might forget about the level of scientific propaganda, which might decline [and then] there will be little benefit from the journal.”<sup>64</sup> For atheist cadres, *Nauka i religiia* was one of the very few sources, indeed sometimes the only source, for atheist material. “Atheist propaganda is complicated,” observed P. I. Sumarev, professor of philosophy at the Institute of Railroad Transport. “It is conducted in

<sup>60</sup>Ibid., I. 17.

<sup>61</sup>Ibid., II. 23–24.

<sup>62</sup>Ibid., I. 10.

<sup>63</sup>As Stephen Lovell writes, “Soviet culture was never merely about turning citizens into passive objects of propaganda. To the contrary, the whole of the Soviet period may be seen as a balancing act between the need to impose authority and the need to elicit involvement. ... They did not only have to listen to accept the truths of Bolshevism, they had to enunciate these truths themselves.” See Lovell, “Broadcasting Bolshevik: The Radio Voice of Soviet Culture, 1920s–1950s,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 48 (January 2013): 94. On the tensions between ideological goals and consumer appeal also see Joshua First, “From Spectator to Differentiated Consumer: Film Audience Research in the Era of Developed Socialism,” *Kritika* 9 (Spring 2008): 317–44.

<sup>64</sup>GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1447, I. 9.

universities and among believers in Houses of Culture [and] reading huts, but there is no one center, and we do not know what is going on elsewhere.”<sup>65</sup> The Moscow Planetarium (run by Znanie), the Institute of Scientific Atheism, and the Museum of Religion and Atheism in Leningrad were emerging as methodological centers, but in the mid-1960s they were in the early stages of coordinating atheist work on a union-wide level, and the reality was that, for most cadres, what took place at these Moscow and Leningrad institutions remained out of reach. This absence of a “home” for Soviet atheism was a serious oversight. The party, Znanie, and the Council on Religious Affairs constantly received complaints from provincial cadres about the need for systematic training and atheist materials, such as visual aids and programs for atheist events. Even with its modest circulation, then, *Nauka i religii* was still one of the few widely accessible atheist publications in the Soviet Union.



FIG. 8 “If they continue to work like this, we’ll put a cross on the club.”  
*Krokodil*, April 10, 1962.

A forum for atheist cadres was also necessary because mistakes were endemic.<sup>66</sup> I. K. Panchin, of the Department of Atheism at the Moscow Food Industry Institute, argued that so far, few atheists had moved beyond “the tradition of the 20s and 30s,” and continued to “divide people into atheists and believers.”<sup>67</sup> Iurii Stel'makov, a graduate student at Moscow State University’s recently created Department of Scientific Atheism and a representative of the Komsomol Propaganda Department, insisted that to understand the

<sup>65</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>66</sup>Ibid., II. 11–12.

<sup>67</sup>Ibid., I. 13.

complex dynamics of religiosity it was necessary to focus on individual psychology and experience rather than class and social categories. He reminded his colleagues that the standard formula used to explain religiosity—“A person falls on hard times (*popal v bedu*) and is dragged into a sect”—was “a harmful primitivism” and that, rather than being manipulated by devious clergy, “a person must [first] develop such a need, and then ... the person is not dragged in, but himself joins a sect.” Stel'makov denounced atheist propaganda that used “elementary contradictions ... in the spirit of—since cosmonauts have gone to space, then there is no God, since [they] did not see him there, and so forth,” and instead urged atheists to embrace the complexity of human experience:

In ... the journal there is a good letter that says, “The Bible is as contradictory as life itself.” This is good, because it reflects the imperfection (*nesovershenstvo*) of human reason. And this is the point often made by progressive believers. In response to all of our arguments about contradictions, they just laugh ... and say that the cosmonaut was constrained by the walls of his spaceship and could not see god, [or] that god is in my heart, or in infinity.<sup>68</sup>

At the end of the day, he concluded, “we try to replace the truth of life with the truth of facts.” But the real danger of “primitive” atheism was that it repelled its intended audience, and ultimately alienated precisely those whom atheists sought to reach: “We have one atheist lecturer, former KGB, who looks at even the most ordinary Baptist as an enemy. ... We tend to look at believers as politically unreliable, dangerous individuals. In these conditions, no atheist work is possible. ... After [such atheist measures] believers would say, we accept communism, but not this form of communism.”<sup>69</sup>

A. V. Mel'nikova, an historian, highlighted the intimate link between religion and culture, challenging atheists to focus not just on enlightenment but also on traditions, aesthetics, and emotional appeal: “Right now the Jesuits are researching how religion has always been the primary force that formed national culture. Everything created by man East and West is presented by our enemies as the achievement of religion, as proof of its high and influential place in the history of humanity,” Mel'nikova warned. “We need to oppose this with something.”<sup>70</sup> Since “religion uses everything to defend itself,” *Nauka i religiia* had to cater to society’s growing interest in spiritual culture by producing material on cultural monuments (largely, churches) and tourism to sacred places.<sup>71</sup> At the same time, however, the journal had to marginalize the role of religion in the country’s spiritual history. The problem for Soviet atheists—one they readily acknowledged—was that atheists were latecomers to this ideological battlefield. One cadre noted that Soviet atheists were

<sup>68</sup>Ibid., II. 19–20. The argument that space conquests were an effective tool in atheist propaganda was often cited, in archival materials and in my interviews with former atheist cadres, as emblematic of “vulgar” atheism.

<sup>69</sup>Ibid., II. 22, 21, and 19. Stel'makov especially noted that the youth “see in atheism a relatively primitive teaching,” arguing that if “the issue is not just in squeezing out religion from the minds of believers, but to prevent its spread,” then reaching the youth would “finally expel religion from our society.” On Stel'makov’s Komsomol work see RGASPI-m, f. 1, op. 32, d. 1198, II. 2–20.

<sup>70</sup>GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1447, l. 26.

<sup>71</sup>Ibid. On the development of cultural tourism see Sanami Takahashi, “Church or Museum: The Role of State Museums in Conserving Church Buildings, 1965–1985,” *Journal of Church and State* 51:3 (2009): 502–17.

raising worldview issues “for the first time,” whereas religions “have long since occupied themselves with these questions.” Nevertheless, what was particularly worrisome was that Marxism-Leninism lacked spiritual substance, so that “even if we have cadres and strength in the sphere of natural sciences, we still have not been successful with Marxism-Leninism because there was not enough attention given to this question.” When believers asked what atheists offered “in exchange for religion,” he concluded, “we provide either scientific statistics or philosophy, and other than this we give nothing.”<sup>72</sup>



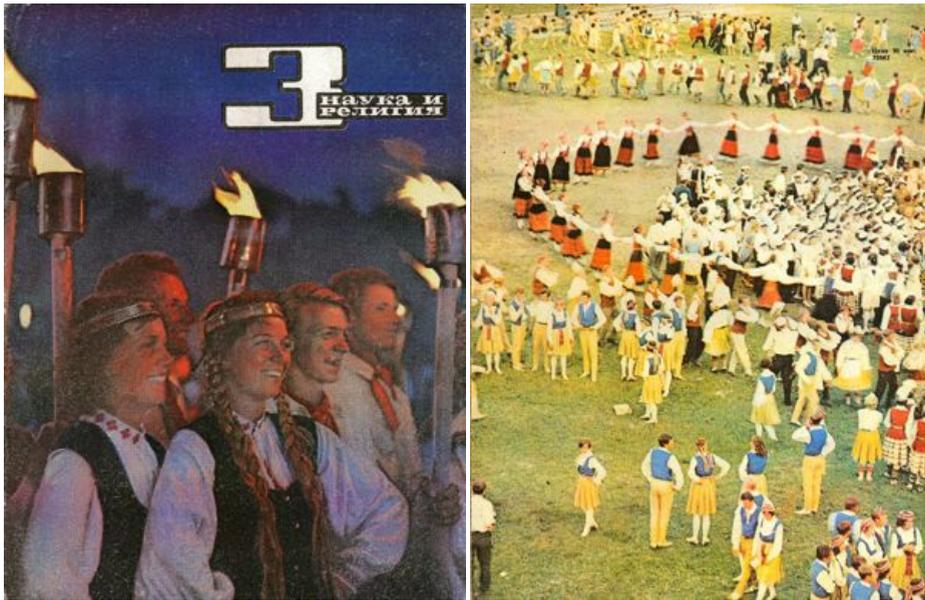
FIG. 9 “God Does Not Exist!” V. Menshikov, 1975.

Communism offered bright prospects, but the inner world of Soviet people continued to be filled with contradictions and difficulties. B. Mar'ianov, the journal's executive secretary, noted that more needed to be written about “the tragedy of the spiritual world.”<sup>73</sup> It was not enough to address the individual in general; atheists had to speak to diverse, and particular, spiritual experiences. As Sumarev put it, “*Mir cheloveka* is indeed a more fitting title. ... But such a thing as ‘man’ in general does not exist. Rather, there are concrete human beings, toward whom we will address ourselves. We often discuss believers, but we forget that, in our society, the believer does not exist in isolation. If his surroundings march in step with life, then it will be easier to tear him away from religion and to educate him in

<sup>72</sup>GARF, f. 9547, op. 1, d. 1447, l. 14.

<sup>73</sup>RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 52, l. 91.

the spirit of our Communist morality.” Sumarev implied that the shortcomings of Soviet atheism were indicative of Soviet deficiencies in general—perhaps, even, that they were a direct consequence of them—and urged atheists to work on the “emotional intensity” (*nasychshennost'*) of atheist propaganda. “The problem with atheist propaganda is that we have absolutely desiccated it,” he observed, “It is impoverished in the emotional sense, whereas a believer lives by his emotions.” But to make atheism “emotionally saturated,” atheists had to figure out a way to involve the creative intelligentsia—writers, artists, musicians—who, as many lamented, stood “on the sidelines” of the atheist project.<sup>74</sup>



FIGS. 10a and 10b “Youth holidays in Lithuania—the fusion of folk traditions and modernity, joy and talent.” *Nauka i religija*, no. 3.

Indeed, from the beginning, atheism had a difficult time mobilizing creative power. Scientists had consistently disappointed antireligious activists with their general indifference to atheism and their reluctance and even resistance to participating in atheist propaganda.<sup>75</sup> And the humanists were no better. The Central Committee noted that the intelligentsia was sympathetic to religion, portraying it as the essence of the country’s spiritual heritage.<sup>76</sup> This was evident in the increased demand for religious literature (including Russian religious philosophy), a revived interest in tourism to sacred places, and an “uncritical” view of religion in certain works of contemporary literature, like Vera Panova’s *Skazanie o feodosii* (*Legend of Feodosia*) (1967) and Vladimir Soloukhin’s *Rodnaia krasota* (*Native Beauty*) (1966) and *Pis'ma iz russkogo muzeia* (*Letters from a Russian Museum*) (1966).<sup>77</sup> And the

<sup>74</sup>Ibid., I. 30.

<sup>75</sup>See, for example, V. Arsiukin, “Ravnodushie,” *Sovetskaiia Rossiia*, January 14, 1972.

<sup>76</sup>RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 98. On the revival of nationalism as a form of protest see Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, MA, 2009), 226–69; and Yitzhak M. Brudny, *Reinventing Russia: Russian Nationalism and the Soviet State, 1953–1991* (Cambridge, MA, 1998).

<sup>77</sup>On Soloukhin’s nationalism see Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children*, 244–45, 251–52.

intelligentsia's attitude seemed to be spreading: "In certain circles, it is becoming 'fashionable,' a sign of good form (*khoroshego tona*) to have an icon in one's apartment ... to glorify (*vozvelichat'*) the 'historical accomplishments' of the church, and the 'moral merits' (*dostoinstva*) of religion, and, conversely, to express irony and even distaste (*nepriaznoe otnoshenie*) toward atheism."<sup>78</sup> Soloukhin even went so far as to call atheists "iconoclasts" in a Soviet publication.<sup>79</sup>

*Nauka i religiia* attempted to direct public interest in spiritual heritage into more innocuous channels through rubrics like "The Holies of Our Motherland" (*Sviatyni nashei rodiny*), where they aimed to "free everything historically and aesthetically valuable of its religious wrapping (*obolochki*)." It was crucial to draw a distinction between religion as unscientific worldview, and religion as cultural history, because "the interest of Soviet people, and especially the youth, [in these subjects] has grown sharply," and the journal needed "to give people the right orientation on these far from simple questions."<sup>80</sup> However, even if atheists could criticize the role of religion in the country's spiritual history, it was difficult to articulate *atheism's* positive role in culture, especially since "such issues were insufficiently worked out even in theory."<sup>81</sup>

Figuring out the positive role of atheism was not just a theoretical concern. It extended into the very fabric of everyday life, as every act of administrative indifference worked to undermine the promises inherent in Communist ideology. A. T. Moskalenko, of the Siberian Division of the Academy of Sciences, stressed that the journal had to bring attention to the subjective experience of Soviet life.

The title *Mir cheloveka* is good. There is a world of man, but we ignored it for many years. Believers say that we are only interested in international issues, [that] we do not look into a person's soul, [that] man's soul has never interested [us]. I can bring an example: a woman comes to the party obkom, asks for help, and is refused. Prior to this, the woman already went to all the sects, but was nowhere able to find the truth, and thought she might find it at the obkom of the party. But even there no one helped her. And now a person does not even know where to seek truth. ... We sometimes do not understand the worries of our Soviet people, and do not take them into account. As a result, [we have] such examples as when a person worked at an enterprise for 20–30 years, [and then] retires, falls ill, and before death asks for a priest. Having been a party member for a long time, [he] hands back his party card and joins a sect. And we are afraid to say that we have such defects (*iz'iany*). Let us also try to remember the subjective worries of man. We speak too often about objective [conditions] and forget the subjective worries.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>78</sup>RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 98, l. 1.

<sup>79</sup>Ibid., l. 3.

<sup>80</sup>A. S. Ivanov, "Zhurnal 'Nauka i religiia'—vazhnoe zveno v ateisticheskom vospitanii," *Gosudarstvo, religiia, tserkov' v Rossii i za rubezhom* (2009): 345–54, also available at [http://religio.rags.ru/journal/anthology3/a3\\_26.pdf](http://religio.rags.ru/journal/anthology3/a3_26.pdf) (last accessed on September 28, 2013). Anatolii Semenovich Ivanov, the executive editor of *Nauka i religiia* from 1968 to 1982, had worked in the apparatus of the Party Central Committee prior to coming to the journal. "The work [of the journal] is indivisible from the broader process of the development of atheism in the country; it was the reflection [of atheist work], and at the same time was one its component parts (*zven'ev*)" (Ivanov, "Zhurnal 'Nauka i religiia,'" 350).

<sup>81</sup>Ibid., 351.

<sup>82</sup>RGASPI, f. 606, op. 4, d. 14, ll. 10–11.

Soviet atheism, then, failed people on two levels: in everyday life, as local organs failed to address individual grievances (leading the Soviet woman to lose faith in the obkom and appeal to the sects); and in providing answers to existential questions, as when an exemplary worker, a long-time party member, asks for a priest before death, or even “hands back his party card and joins a sect.” Considering the promise at the heart of Communism, Moskalkenko’s presenting the problem in Dostoevskian terms is revealing: just as Ivan Karamazov’s handing back his ticket was interpreted as a rejection of the irreconcilable contradictions of religion, the party member’s “handing back his ticket” on the threshold of death was a rejection of the Soviet cosmos.

If atheists wanted to win over the population, they could not ignore that, at its foundation, Communism was about humanizing social relations and redeeming the individual from alienation. It was the secular redemption offered by Marxism that was supposed to eliminate the individual’s need for religion, since Soviet ideology offered citizens a vision of a society so just and humane that the “opiate” of religion would be unnecessary. Yet, in the late 1960s, even as the model “Soviet person” prepared to celebrate the country’s fiftieth anniversary, real Soviet people continued to turn to religion—raising the possibility that the roots of religion were located in the failures of Soviet socialism. Within the Marxist-Leninist “laws of development” (*zakonomernosti*), religion could not be a part of Soviet life without putting the foundation of communism in question. As long as the local obkom continued to fail the Soviet everywoman—to miss the opportunity to offer her the truth and solace for which she searched—religion would remain an obstacle to the desired convergence of Soviet citizens and Communist ideology. At the final hour, even the most exemplary Soviet citizen might “hand back his ticket.”

### SCIENCE, RELIGION, AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

The story of *Nauka i religii* provides a lens into the ideological landscape of the late Soviet period, which saw the transformation of Khrushchev-era ideological mobilization into the crisis of confidence under Brezhnev. The soul-searching of Soviet atheists raised many productive questions and produced a more self-reflective generation of ideological cadres, but while these questions were repeatedly posed, they were rarely answered. Underneath the official veneer, then, Soviet ideology underwent important and telling transformations in the way ideologists understood the war between two opposing systems and worldviews. Cadres did not just support and reproduce the official doctrine, but also asked critical questions and reevaluated customary assumptions and approaches. The Khrushchev-era antireligious campaign was the point of origin for late Soviet atheism, but it is only under Brezhnev that the state attempted to understand religion beyond ideological stereotypes. Failures made the ideological establishment aware of the alarming disconnect between theory and policy, and for the remainder of the Soviet period, ideologists debated the role of the state in spiritual life. As B. A. Grigorian, the journal’s deputy editor, put it, the task of the journal, and of atheism, was “to show the constructive work (*sozidatel’niuiu rabotu*) and positive foundations—scientific, historical, philosophical—that can fill the

vacuums that form as a result of a person's liberation from religious conceptions and beliefs."<sup>83</sup>



FIG. 11 “Members of the congregation, we must fix up the atheist club. It is an eyesore for the whole neighborhood.” *Perets* (a satirical journal in Ukraine), 1989, no. 4.

This article argues that the efforts to make sense of religion's continued existence under socialism and to create a “positive” atheism reveal an engagement with the Soviet “spiritual vacuum” by the ideological apparatus. The discussion that emerged in the editorial offices of *Nauka i religia* had an impact on the course of Soviet atheism. Studies of Soviet religiosity revealed a “modernized” religion, and made clear the flaws in simply opposing it with science and portraying it as a politically reactionary force. The interest of ordinary people in spiritual questions, moreover, directed the journal to shift its focus so that by the 1970s, Anatolii Semenovich Ivanov, the journal's editor-in-chief during most of the Brezhnev era (1968–82), saw the exposition of “the moral content of atheism” to be among the journal's most important functions.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>83</sup>Ibid., II. 1–7.

<sup>84</sup>Ivanov, “Zhurnal ‘Nauka i religii,’” 345.

Man—his place in the world, the meaning of his existence, the purpose of his life—stands in the center of the battle of religion and atheism on moral issues. These “eternal questions” have always concerned people, and continue to worry them, regardless of whether or not they believe in God. Religion offers a person a certain life program (*zhiznennuiu programmu*), in which it indicates how a person is to build his relationships with others, departing from the acknowledgement of constant divine interventions into his thoughts and affairs.<sup>85</sup>

It was up to *Nauka i religiia* to show Soviet readers “the vitality (*zhiznennost'*) of Communist moral norms, [and] the greatness of the moral world of the Soviet person,” and by the late 1960s, much of the journal was devoted to worldview issues, inviting readers to debate existential questions like “The Meaning of Life.”<sup>86</sup>

To be sure, the journal continued to devote a great deal of attention to scientific enlightenment, with rubrics such as “Nature and Reason,” “Scientific Horizons,” “Theology and Science,” and “Inside Scientific Laboratories,” as well as material devoted to the “scientific technological revolution” and the cultivation of a scientific “dialectic of cognition” (*dialektika poznaniia*). It also continued to propagandize against religion. Nevertheless, the journal’s new engagement with spiritual life dramatically altered the nature of scientific atheism. From this point on, *Nauka i religiia* had to perform two functions, neither of which was simple or easily reconciled with the other. On the one hand, the journal had to show the harm that religion inflicted upon society and individuals, and, on the other hand, to provide positive content and reveal the meaning of life from an atheist position. However, as atheists reluctantly acknowledged, both religion’s harm and atheism’s purpose were a matter of dispute.

The new direction in the work of *Nauka i religiia* also had an unintended consequence. On the journal’s pages, readers learned about the history of religion; about sacred spaces and places; and about the significance of religious rites. For many Soviet readers, *Nauka i religiia* was the only place where they encountered sacred texts, and readers were known to cut and save excerpts from the journal’s pages.<sup>87</sup> The journal was also the first Soviet mass publication to give a voice to religious belief by printing conversations with believers; as a result, it became a space for a circumscribed dialogue—limited, of course, by the unequal power relations of the two sides. In effect, then, by offering readers religious content and engaging them in debates about spiritual life that included the religious perspective, the journal kept religion in Soviet public life.<sup>88</sup>

Equally important is the fact that *Nauka i religiia* became a vehicle for the sentimental education of ideological cadres. In their effort to improve the journal, its writers became educated in topics like religious history and the legal status of religion and believers in the Soviet Union and abroad. Interestingly, by the end of the 1970s, the journal’s staff did not even necessarily see themselves as part of the atheist establishment. Of course, the fine line between covering religious material and allowing religious propaganda onto the pages

<sup>85</sup>Ibid., 348.

<sup>86</sup>Ibid., 349. In 1975, for instance, the journal devoted three full issues to the meaning of life, and had sections on this theme in every issue.

<sup>87</sup>Smirnov and Krug, “V zashchitu svobodomyshlia.”

<sup>88</sup>Brushlinskaia interview.

of an official Soviet publication often placed these journalists in a precarious position, and some were criticized for presenting religion in an insufficiently critical light. Nevertheless, reflecting on her long career with *Nauka i religiiia*, Olga Brushlinskaia, the journal's current editor-in-chief, noted that "this was not the *Bezbozhnik* of Emelian Iaroslavskii's time. Of course, we defended the advantages of the scientific approach (*nauchnogo podkhoda*). But in comparison with the customary Soviet agitprop, this was a true breakthrough (*proryv*)."<sup>89</sup>

The frequent contact of *Nauka i religiiia* writers with the lives of ordinary believers often exposed them to violations of believers' rights, and sometimes offered them opportunities to act as intermediaries. Eventually, these experiences undermined their conviction in the atheist mission itself. "We would ask atheist propagandists back then whether they knew what they were fighting against," Brushlinskaia recalls. "Oftentimes they did not even have the necessary understanding about the lives of believers. ... And besides this, you have to be certain that the believer, who becomes an atheist thanks to you, will be happier for it." In the changing landscape of Soviet belief, atheists searched for positive content in an effort "not to leave [the] reader spiritually empty (*dukhovno pustym*)."<sup>90</sup>

However, even after all of the discussions, the title of *Nauka i religiiia* ultimately stayed the same.

<sup>89</sup>Smirnov and Krug, "V zashchitu svobodomyслиia."

<sup>90</sup>Brushlinskaia interview.