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THE IMPACT OF SCIENTIFIC CREATIONISM IN THE SOVIET UNION AND THE SOVIET RESPONSE

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ABSTRACT

Increasing references to scientific creationism in Soviet atheistic publications indicate that it is having an impact. Attacks on creationism in Soviet publications have not ended with glasnost', but concurrently, this policy--which allows greater press freedoms and more importation of material published in the West--may eventually expose more persons in the Soviet Union than ever before to the concepts of scientific creationism.

INTRODUCTION

Even during the current Soviet policy of glasnost' (openness; publicity)--with its increased tolerance for religion and greater allowances for diverse intellectual activity--scientific creationism remains an area of inquiry under major attack by the Soviet atheistic establishment. Creationist materials published in Russian in the West have nevertheless had an effect both in the Soviet Union and on the Soviet emigre community in the West. The philosophic implications of scientific creationism continue to directly threaten the ideological underpinnings of the Soviet atheistic establishment and the Marxist-Leninist world-view. (1) The impact of scientific creationism upon some Soviet intellectuals trained in "scientific atheism" demonstrates its usefulness as an apologetical tool.

IDEOLOGICAL UNDERPINNINGS OF SOVIET ATHEISM: AN ANTI-CREATIONIST CORE

Despite greater current tolerance of religion, "scientific atheism" remains the official world-view of the Soviet Union. (2) As a February, 1988, PRAVDA article stated: "It is...necessary to step up atheist work among all sections of the population." (3) Further, as Soviet affairs analyst Dmitry Pospelovsky writes: "...hostility toward religion is the core of the teaching of historical and dialectical materialism--the philosophical doctrine of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union." (4) The eradication of belief in a Creator is a key goal of Soviet atheism. Since scientific creationism challenges that view, while asserting that educated, scientific people can believe in God, it has come under heavy attack by the Soviet atheistic establishment. There is no room in this world-view even for the theistic evolution of a Teilhard de Chardin, who is almost as vigorously attacked in relevant Soviet publications as creationists. (5)

THE ATTACK ON CREATIONISM

Soviet attacks on creationism have grown in recent years. In 1987, the journal NAUCHNYI ATEIZM (Scientific Atheism)--which referred to scientific creationism as "a real problem [for] scientific atheism"--devoted an entire issue to it, entitled, 'SCIENTIFIC' CREATIONISM: PRETENSIONS AND REALITY. (6) Before that, the issue appears to have been dealt with in brief sections of books dealing with attacks on religion in general or in short articles. Official access to creationist materials from the West appears to have been limited. (7)

Some Soviet publications criticize what they believe is the real root of the problem. One source cites the Creation Research Society and the Institute for Creation Research as the "chief centers" of "so-called 'scientific' creationism." It further claims that creationism is a "specific mutation of theological consciousness." [!] (8) Another claims that belief in creationism in the West has grown, in part, because of "the crisis of capitalism." (9) Another source gives this back-handed compliment to the effectiveness of some creationist publications: "The systematic output of numerous fideist works by these centers [ICR and CRS]

shows a definite influence for making more active those theologians in European countries who are so disposed." (10)

DISTORTIONS

One 1989 Soviet anti-religious book full of distortions on many subjects makes the following claims about creationism in the United States:

In several states in the USA, religious fanatics advanced the demand that Biblical teaching on the creation of the world be taught alongside of the Darwinian theory...In the states of Wisconsin, Missouri and South Dakota, creationism was introduced into the school course of biology. (11)

The book also discusses the 1981 Arkansas creation case, implying that the law is still current and making no mention of the fact that it was overturned by a court decision. (12)

The 1984 edition of the annual ATHEISTIC READINGS attacked the Louisiana balanced treatment statute. It claimed that a foreign correspondent had allegedly visited an American classroom "of one of these courses" where students were taught that "the world was created by a god on 26 October 4004 B.C..." (13) The writer concluded: "Thus, in the twentieth century, in the greatest capitalist country, medieval obscurantism is propagated with the connivance of governmental authority. (14)

THE IMPACT OF SCIENTIFIC CREATIONIST MATERIALS ON THE SOVIET UNION

Understanding the overall impact of Western creationist materials on the Soviet Union is more complex, since it is still unknown how widely they have been distributed. Beginning in 1978, a series of books published in the West laid the groundwork for the current Soviet response to the creationist movement. In 1978, Thomas Heinze's book, CREATION OR EVOLUTION, was translated into Russian, published in the West and then distributed to many Soviet emigres then pouring out of the Soviet Union. (15) Some copies of the book found their way into the Soviet Union, where the book was critiqued in the 1987 NAUCHNYI ATEIZM booklet cited earlier. (16) A Soviet book with nearly the same title as Heinze's original Russian translation was published in 1981. (17)

THE RUSSIAN EDITION OF "A SCIENTIFIC CASE FOR CREATION"

Dr. Henry Morris' book, A SCIENTIFIC CASE FOR CREATION, was published in Russian in 1981. (18) The translation had an impact on intellectual Soviet emigres to the United States in the early 1980's--especially those with scientific or technical backgrounds--who were raised as atheists in the Soviet Union and never exposed to creationist concepts. One emigre mathematician I discussed the book with had this comment: "One must consider this book on its scientific merits. There are a few points I question, but overall it is a very interesting and very important book." Another, a former Soviet engineer, stated: "[This book] is something you can really sink your teeth into. It's scientifically based, and I can follow the arguments very well. It's very, very interesting, and I would like to read more on the subject." He also stated that he could not understand religious books--they were nebulous to him, probably because of his atheistic upbringing.

This book's impact within the Soviet Union has an interesting history. A copy of the book and a letter from ICR Associate Director, Dr. Duane Gish, were mailed to the Presidium of the Soviet Academy of Sciences. There was a reply from Academician A.A. Baev, then a member of the Presidium of the Academy:

The Academy of Sciences does not consider it expedient to enter into discussion of a work so one-sided in its approach to the problem of the origin of life... (19)

This was more or less an official response. Yet, from a Soviet scientist writing to the West--whose name must simply remain "K.", for fear of retribution--came this comment: "Are the approaches of contemporary creationists to the analysis of the evolutionary problems scientific? Yes, they are. I don't see a basis for denying that." (20) He had had an opportunity to read the book and was very interested in the arguments presented.

CONCLUSIONS

The professional Soviet atheistic establishment makes no secret of its open warfare on theism and creationism. Even during the current period of glasnost', it continues to employ ridicule, distortions of fact, and straw men argumentation in its attacks. Nevertheless, when creationist materials are made available to Soviet scientists, such as scientist "K." noted in

this paper, or to self-defined atheistic Soviet emigres, they are often shown to have a powerful apologetical effect. This leads to the conclusion that a widespread introduction of scientific creationist concepts into the Soviet Union could decisively challenge the prevailing orthodoxy of "scientific atheism".

The views expressed are those of the author and are not official views of the U.S. Government nor any department or agency.

REFERENCES

1. The very notion that science and religion might be compatible is unthinkable and very dangerous to the Soviet atheistic world-view. Soviet affairs analyst James Thrower states: "Here we touch on what is, in my opinion, the most 'closed' area in Soviet thought today, an area where even to discuss the possibility of a rapprochement between science and religion is seen as striking at the most fundamental (and, therefore, unfortunately, unexaminable) assumptions of the Soviet world-view. In this area open discussion is impossible and Marxist-Leninist materialism is presented rather than argued." See Thrower, James, MARXIST-LENINIST 'SCIENTIFIC ATHEISM' AND THE STUDY OF RELIGION AND ATHEISM IN THE U.S.S.R., Berlin-Amsterdam, Mouton, 1983, p. 208.
2. Melnick, A. James, "Reflections on Twenty Years of 'Voprosy Nauchnogo Ateizma': 1966-1986", STUDIES IN SOVIET THOUGHT, 36, 1988, p. 117.
3. Okulov, A., Dr. of Philosophical Sciences, PRAVDA, February 2, 1988, p. 3. The article was written to commemorate the 70th anniversary of Lenin's decree separating Church and state in the USSR.
4. Pospelovskiy, Dimitry, A HISTORY OF MARXIST-LENINIST ATHEISM AND SOVIET ANTI-RELIGIOUS POLICIES, New York, St. Martin's Press, 1987, Vol. 1, p. 8.
5. See Akhundov, M. D. and Bazhenov, L. B., Editor's ESTESTVOZNAНИЕ V BOR'BE S RELIGIOZNYM MIROVOZZRENIEM (Natural Science in a Struggle with the Religious Worldview), Moscow, "Nauka", USSR Academy of Sciences, Institute of Philosophy, 1988, pp. 58-59. The authors also cite a book by an E. M. Babosov entitled, TEILHARDISM: POPLYTKA SINTEZA NAUKI I RELIGII (Teilhardism: An Attempt at Synthesis of Science and Religion), Minsk, 1970. According to former Russian Orthodox prisoner of conscience and famous Soviet dissident Anatoly Krasnov-Levitin, the works of theistic evolutionist Teilhard de Chardin were very much in demand in the "samizdat" ("self-published") form before he left the Soviet Union. (Lecture by Anatoly Krasnov-Levitin, Institute of Slavic Studies, Slavic Gospel Association, Wheaton, Illinois, Spring, 1980).
6. Skibitskii, M. M., "NAUCHNYI KREATSIONIZM: PRETENZII I DEISTVITEL'NOST'" ('Scientific' Creationism, Pretensions and Reality), Nauchnyi Ateizm Seria (Scientific Atheism Series), No. 8, 1987, Moscow, Znanie, 1987/88, p. 10. The reader will note that while the Soviet writer puts the word "scientific" in quotes before the word "creationism", Soviet writings do not do the same for the phrase "scientific atheism". The NAUCHNYI ATEIZM ("Scientific Atheism") booklet appears to be the most extensive Soviet attack on the modern scientific creationist movement yet published.
7. According to a 1986 issue of CREATION/EVOLUTION NEWSLETTER, a Czech evolutionist named Dr. Lubos Belka of the Department of Evolutionary Biology of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences who was "very interested in antievolutionism and creationism" ran a "computer search of a USSR database on 'creationism'." It was reportedly "very short...and rather random." See CREATION/EVOLUTION NEWSLETTER, Vol. 6, No. 1, January/February 1986, p. 3. The list included Dr. Henry Morris.
8. Akhundov, M. D. and Bazhenov, L. B., op. cit., p. 59.
9. Skibitskii, op. cit., p. 4.
10. Akhundov, M. D. and Bazhenov, L. B., op. cit., p. 59.
11. Ishchenko, Ivan S. and Ishchenko, Sergei I., IZ PLENA SUEVERII (Out of the Captivity of Superstition), Moscow, Voenizdat, 1989, p. 51.
12. Ibid.

13. As in many Soviet atheistic writings the word "God" is often not capitalized. This particular citation is from ATEISTICHSKIE CHTENIIA (Atheistic Readings), No. 13, 1984, p. 95. There are many more recent examples which could be cited.
14. Ibid.
15. Heinze, Thomas, SOTVORENIE ILI EVOLIUTSIIA? (CREATION OR EVOLUTION?), Chicago, Slavic Gospel Association, 1978. The book was published in 1983.
16. Skibitskii, op. cit., pp. 11, 34-35.
17. Astakhova, V. G., SOTVORENIE ILI EVOLIUTSIIA? (CREATION OR EVOLUTION?), Moscow, Politizdat, 1981. Skibitskii cites the Astakhova book in his brief bibliography, p. 64.
18. SOTVORENIE MIRA: NAUCHNYI PODKHOD (The Creation of the World: A Scientific Approach). Russian translation of Dr. Henry Morris' A SCIENTIFIC CASE FOR CREATION, San Diego, Institute for Creation Research, 1981.
19. Ibid., p. 77 (Russian edition). English-language copies of other ICR books were also mailed to key Soviet libraries (p. 85). A 1983 book published under the banner of the Academy of Sciences attacked Dr. Morris for allegedly using "yesterday's science", putting forward arguments which have "long ago been refused by the development of scientific thought." From Fedoseev, P. N., FILOSOFIIA I NAUCHNOE POZNANIE (Philosophy and Scientific Knowledge), Moscow, "Nauka", USSR Academy of Sciences, 1983, p. 117. The author cites an English version of the book and mentions the fact that a Russian edition exists, p. 116.
20. Letter from Soviet scientist "Dr. K." to Soviet emigre in the West, dated January 31, 1985.