

Negation to Fulfillment: The Development of a Soviet Atheist Worldview in the long 1970s

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ABSTRACT

Nicole Harry: Negation to Fulfillment: The Development of a Soviet Atheist Worldview in the Long 1970s
(Under the direction of Dr. Eren Tasar)

Current scholarship the late Soviet Union has used Soviet atheism to reveal tensions of Soviet communism, such as ideology vs governance, superstition vs science, and spiritual negation vs fulfillment. This paper explores these tensions by analyzing the transition of atheism from Khrushchev's negation of religion to a positive worldview developed under Brezhnev through the Soviet anti-religious publication *Science and Religion (Nauka i Religiiia)*. I therefore argue that this transition focused on positing atheism vis-à-vis marginalized religions of the Soviet Union and highlighting the potential fulfillment Soviet citizens could find in their workplace communities in order to sway readers from their beliefs and into the folds of atheism. This shift in Soviet leaders' idea of "atheism" in response to social pressures is indicative of larger questions of legitimacy as one must ask where compromise to maintain legitimacy ends, and delegitimization begins.

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“Atheist materialists are accused of a lack of spirituality, ... but real materialists, the dialecticists, stand for the fusion of spirit and body, and for the leadership of the spirit in this fusion.”¹

- *Nauka i Religii*, June 1980

¹ Ryuriikov, “Pedagogy of Good Patience,” *Nauka i Religii*, no.6, 1980. 8.

INTRODUCTION

Two women lounge on colorful couches - one swinging an amulet with a cigarette to her lips, the other glancing at a calendar of horoscopes, analyzing the alignment between herself, a Scorpio, and “Edik,” a Pisces. A phone line connects the two as they pass the day chatting. Under this scene reads the line: “idleness will make you believe anything.”² The image described above is one of many Soviet anti-religious propaganda posters created throughout the 1970s. Originally interested in the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Soviet Union, I spent the summer of 2019 working closely with a collection of these posters at the Museum of Russian Icons in Clinton, MA. To my surprise, the focus of these anti-religious posters did not only engage with the Russian Orthodox Church, but also reflected concerns about New Wave spirituality, youth culture, and Soviet identity. Late Soviet atheism, I realized, was not solely about the negation of the church, but rather a much larger project responding to a variety of social pressures and public interests. This realization has thus led me to my current questions of the spiritual life of Soviet citizens and their relationship with the state under Brezhnev, a facet of which is explored in this paper.

In her book *A Sacred Space is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism*, Victoria Smolkin provides a framework for analyzing the contours of the Soviet atheist project I saw in my own work at the Museum of Russian Icons. Smolkin highlights three oppositions in the development of Soviet atheism: political opposition between ideological commitments and

² *Boyevoy Karandash*, “You will believe everything from idleness,” *Without God*, 1975. Collection held by the Museum of Russian Icons.

effective governance, ideological opposition between religion and empirical science, and spiritual opposition between emptiness and indifference and fulfillment.³ In this paper, I build on Smolkin's framework by analyzing these oppositions in the pages of the Soviet anti-religious publication *Nauka i Religii* (*Science and Religion*) during the Brezhnev era (1964-1982). From this analysis, I argue that the transition of atheism as a negation of religion to a theoretically fulfilling belief system under Brezhnev focused on deconstructing marginalized religions and highlighting everyday Soviet experiences of the workplace and community.

Nauka i Religii in context

Before exploring the analysis of *Nauka i Religii* presented in this paper, we must first situate the journal in Soviet history. The establishment of this anti-religious publication was a product of converging circumstances during Khrushchev's anti-religious campaigns of the late 1950s and early 1960s. These campaigns were largely nonviolent and focused on combatting religion as a social and economic problem. Additionally, Khrushchev's campaigns also focused on developing a scientific approach to atheist propaganda, attempting to debunk religion through empirical study.⁴

Khrushchev's campaigns of the late 1950s were both the continuation of the anti-religious struggle Soviet leadership had been involved in since its inception, as well as a facet of post-World War II destalinization. Since 1917 through World War II, violent Soviet anti-

³ Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty: A History of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2018): 5.

⁴ Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty*; Eren Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim: The Institutionalization of Islam in Central Asia* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2017).

religious persecution can be divided into three waves: the Civil War (1918-1921), Collectivization (1928-1932), and the Great Terror (1937-1938). The shared goals of these three waves were the extirpation of clergy from society as a class presence and the economic destruction of religious institutions through de-privatization.⁵

Though scholars still currently debate the nuances of causation, the onset of World War II brought with it a revival of religious tolerance as Stalin mobilized religious leaders in the fight against Nazism.⁶ Beyond this discourse of whether Stalin was acting from a position of power or weakness, Jeff Eden argues that “this was a modest but meaningful social revolution that, to some extent, came to be sanctioned by the state – first implicitly through toleration, and then explicitly through state support.”⁷ Thus, Khrushchev’s post-war anti-religious campaigns were not solely another attempt to overcome the final obstacle towards communism, but also linked to his platform of destalinization. In response to Stalin’s war-era policy of religious flexibility, Khrushchev created an anti-religious platform of containment, with a focus on combatting economic crimes and creating public order.⁸ Additionally, propagandists of his campaigns

⁵ John Anderson, *Religion, State, and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994); Bohdan R. Bosiurkiw and John W. Strong, eds., *Religion and Atheism in the U.S.S.R. and Eastern Europe* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1975) Peris, *Storming the Heavens: The Soviet League of the Militant Godless*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998); Dimitry Pospelovsky, *The Russian Church under the Soviet Regime, 1917-1982* (Crestwood, N.Y., Saint Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1984). Gherard Simon, *Church, State, and Opposition in the USSR* (Berkeley, University of California Press 1974); Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty*.

⁶ Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty*, Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim*, Jeff Eden, *God Save the USSR*; Shoshanna Keller, *To Moscow not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign Against Islam in Central Asia* (Westport, CT, Praeger, 2001).

⁷ Eden, *God Save the USSR*: 154.

⁸ Brian LaPierre, “Redefining Deviance: Policing and Punishing Hooliganism in Khrushchev’s Russia, 1953-1964,” PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2006, 270.

integrated the social sciences into their anti-religious platform, developing “scientific atheism,” as the refutation of religious dogma by atheism grounded in empirical science.⁹

It was this campaign against religious theory and economic vagrancy that Brezhnev inherited in 1964. The sociological research done under Khrushchev had revealed that the struggle against religion had moved beyond the spatial or the theoretical, and instead now lay within the personal beliefs of the Soviet person. As Smolkin notes:

The experience of the Khrushchev era forced atheists to reevaluate how they understood religion and what they hoped to achieve with atheism, leading Soviet atheism to shift to a positive atheism in the Brezhnev era. Rather than simply focusing on negative strategies, atheists concentrated on inculcating atheist conviction and the ‘socialist way of life.’ Atheist work turned to moral and spiritual questions.¹⁰

The struggle to articulate a “positive atheism” dominated Soviet atheism under Brezhnev, and the period of his reign was marked by stability, consumerism, and a growing socialist middle class.¹¹ People were thinking about themselves, and atheist propaganda had to address this rising personal focus in its attempts to remain relevant.¹²

Additionally, propagandists’ turn toward positive atheism under Brezhnev was also influenced by the geopolitical changes of détente. In 1975, the Soviet Union joined 34 other signatories, including the United States, in signing the Helsinki Accords - a non-binding

⁹ Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty*; Fletcher, “Reductive Containment: Soviet Religious Policy,” *Tasar, Soviet and Muslim*.

¹⁰ Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty*, 240.

¹¹ Neringa Klumbyte and Gulnaz Sharafutdinova, eds., *Soviet Society in the Era of Late Socialism, 1964-1985*, (Lanham, Lexington Books, 2013).

¹² Natalya Chernyshova, *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era* (London, Routledge, 2013); Miriam Dobson, “The Social Scientist Meets the “Believer”: Discussions of God, the Afterlife, and Communism in the Mid-1960s” *Slavic Review* 74, no 1 (Spring 2015); Donald J. Raleigh, *Soviet Baby Boomers: An Oral History of Russia’s Cold War Generation* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012); Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty*,

agreement focused on questions of European security, human rights, and economic, scientific, and environmental cooperation. In the discussion of human rights, Basket C of the Helsinki Accords explicitly guaranteed rights to freedom of thought, conscience, and religion.¹³ In the wake of this public agreement and growing human rights activism, atheist propagandists referenced the revised Soviet constitution of 1977 to acknowledge that religious believers could not be legally discriminated against as long as they also contributed to society.¹⁴ If atheist propaganda did not confront religion directly anymore, it had to address the source, personal belief, and offer a fulfilling alternative.

Nauka i Religii therefore provides a lens into how propagandists were responding to the social and political climate of Brezhnev's reign. The journal was originally founded under Khrushchev as a publication of the Society for the Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge (*Obschestvo v Politicheskikh i Nauchnikh Znaniy*, or *Znanie*).¹⁵ This organization, established in 1949, developed into an active organization of anti-religious propaganda.¹⁶ *Nauka i Religii* was the flagship anti-religious publication circulated by the Knowledge Society, and the journal was published in multiple regional languages. Additionally, many of the authors in *Nauka i Religii* were graduate students at state universities, often enrolled in the departments of philosophy, history, or sociology. Thus, the propaganda of the journal could be argued as

¹³ Michael Cotey Morgan, *The Final Act: The Helsinki Accords and the Transformation of the Cold War* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2018): 141.

¹⁴ In 1977, the Central Committee of the Soviet Union ratified a new constitution which was largely a pragmatic statement continuing many of the ideas of the previous three constitutions. One area of revision though was the constitution's focus on a citizen's "socially useful" labor, and that their rights were granted in return for their duties to the state. Thus, by proxy, propagandists argued that religious believers could not legally be discriminated against by the state as long as they were also contributing members of society. See: Robert Sharlet, *Soviet Constitutional Crisis: From De-Stalinization to Disintegration* (New York, M.E. Sharpe Inc, 1992): 15-22.

¹⁵ I will refer to this organization as the Knowledge Society for the remainder of this paper.

¹⁶ Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim*, 200.

academically empirical, despite being the product of Soviet scholars and steeped in ideological rhetoric.

Initially, the journal struggled in its campaigns, as its editorial staff attempted to offer content oriented to both the general public and atheist educators, thus fulfilling the interests of neither.¹⁷ Thus, in 1964, the journal's editors, led by Vladimir Mezentsev, reached out to the Central Committee with a request to "humanize" *Nauka i Religii*; moving away from the scientific refutation of religion and instead focus on presenting an accessible atheism.¹⁸ Although this transition continued to employ negative atheism with attacks on religion, part of this "humanization" campaign evolved into the development of positive atheism and propaganda focused on the individual believer seen during the 1970s. Thus, an analysis of *Nauka i Religii* during this period reflects the propagandistic transition from negative to positive atheism under Brezhnev within the publication itself, adding to the broader trend of transition which scholars note during this period.

Historiography

The social history of spirituality and atheism in the late Soviet Union is a relatively new field, as many scholars have focused their work on atheism and religious persecution in periods of terror, not relative stability. Thus, much of the existing literature focuses on the 1920s and 1930s. Though scholars' arguments largely depend on the period they study, the historiography

¹⁷Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty*, 133-136.

¹⁸ *ibid*, 133-136.

of atheism in the Soviet Union largely corresponds with the three oppositions which Smolkin outlines: political, scientific, and spiritual.¹⁹

Scholars of atheism in the 1920s and 1930s broadly agree that the goals of this period's anti-religious persecution were to destroy religion by uprooting the ruling classes, religious leaders, and shatter the economic base of the Russian Orthodox Church through de-privatization.²⁰ Within this context of militant destruction and terror, discourse swirls around Smolkin's opposition between effective governance and ideology. Arto Luukkanen addresses this point as he argues that Trotsky's campaign of religious violence during the Civil War was only viable while Lenin was healthy and supporting him. Stalin's moderation toward religion between the Civil War and collectivization, he posits, was a result of Stalin's attempts to improve peasant relations.²¹ Anti-religious policies of the 1920s and 1930s also addressed themes of enlightenment and education seen in later campaigns, but these trends are often drowned out of scholarship by attention to the violence and terror which accompanied them.²²

The opposition between effective governance and ideology of the 1920s and 1930s continued into the relationship between church and state during the Second World War and the early 1950s as well. As mentioned previously, Stalin relaxed religious persecution and instead invited cooperation with religious leaders of various denominations within the Soviet Union. Jeff Eden asks: Did this relaxation in anti-religious persecution come from a position of power, as

¹⁹ *Ibid*, 5.

²⁰ Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty*; Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim*; Peris, *Storming the Heavens*; Arto Luukkanen, *Party of Unbelief: The Religious Policy of the Bolshevik Party, 1917-1929* (Helsinki, Suomen Historiallinen Seura, 1994).

²¹ Luukkanen, *Party of Unbelief*.

²² Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim*; Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty*.

Smolkin argues, from confident that the church would not become a threat; or from a position of weakness, recognizing that religion could not be eradicated.²³ Eden's recent work also offers a potential third option: "that wartime religious policy was not, in fact, a revolutionary change at all. This approach emphasizes continuity with pre-war policies, casting the Great Terror, not the Great Patriotic War, as the outlier in an otherwise linear narrative."²⁴ All three of these arguments as to why Stalin shifted the Soviet platform toward religion still reflect Smolkin's original political opposition. How can a state adamantly propagating atheism as a central pillar of its ideological identity, also secure legitimacy through working with and catering to the church and its believers?

Though the rhetoric of Smolkin's second opposition, that between science and superstition, existed in the anti-religious propaganda of the 1920s and 1930s, Khrushchev's anti-religious campaigns centered on this juxtaposition. John Anderson argues that Khrushchev's regime saw "... the renewal of interest in the sociology of religion," adding that "the frontline for the application of research findings was the education system."²⁵ This focus on science and education was intended to empirically combat religious dogma.²⁶ In addition to these academic attacks, Khrushchev's antireligious campaign also targeted remaining "vestiges of capitalism:"

²³ Jeff Eden, *God Save the USSR*; Shoshanna Keller, *To Moscow not Mecca: The Soviet Campaign Against Islam in Central Asia* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001): 244; Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty*, 18.

²⁴ Eden, *God Save the USSR*, 20.

²⁵ John Anderson, *Religion, State, and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994): 40.

²⁶ Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty*, Dobson, "The Social Scientist Meets the "Believer": Discussions of God, the Afterlife, and Communism in the Mid-1960s"; Anderson, *Religion, State, and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States*; Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim*. Piivovarov, "Methods of Studying Religiosity," *Nauka i Religii*, no. 12, 1976, 27-30.

unemployment, corruption, alcoholism, and individuals deemed social parasites to re-engage citizens into popular participation towards a communist society.²⁷ As Smolkin outlines,

... the only ideologically coherent explanation for the continued existence of religion in the Soviet Union [to Khrushchev] was that it was a stubborn vestige of a former worldview and was of life... religion had to be irradiated not just from Soviet politics and public life but also from Soviet peoples' consciousness.²⁸

Thus, the final anti-religious campaigns carried out by Khrushchev attempted to eradicate religion through attacking all social obstacles on the path to communism.

It is Khrushchev's campaign of education against ignorance which Brezhnev inherited in 1964. Though the study of atheism and religion in the Brezhnev era is still a maturing field, Smolkin's final opposition, that between negation and fulfillment, is already apparent. Sonja Luehrmann argues that propagandists' attempts to rid society of religion were focused not just on an individual's practices, but on totally transforming society. In doing so, personal conviction was not a private matter.²⁹ Luehrmann's argument thus aligns with the current academic framing of the period, which charts propagandists shifting from a focus on theory, towards engaging with and thus changing the personal beliefs of individuals through attempting to develop atheism into a fulfilling part of everyday Soviet life.³⁰

In addition to organized religion under Brezhnev, there is also a growing body of scholarship studying spirituality more broadly during the late Soviet Union, including interest in

²⁷ Tasar, *Soviet and Muslim*; 196, Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty*, 60.

²⁸ Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty*, 61.

²⁹ Sonja Luehrmann, *Secularism Soviet Style: Teaching Atheism and Religion in a Volga Republic* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2011).

³⁰ Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty*, Dobson, "The Social Scientist Meets the "Believer": Discussions of God, the Afterlife, and Communism in the Mid-1960s."

astrology, yoga, and “New Age” practices. Though some historians argue that the wave of popular interest in spirituality that occurred in the 1990s was an import of Western influence,³¹ a substantive volume of works connects this post-collapse popularity with trends of Russian culture initiated in the late 19th century, especially around themes of space and cosmic spirituality.³² Additionally, scholars argue that the Cold War space race of the 1950s, coupled with popular science fiction, reignited public interest in space and spirituality.³³ Joseph Kellner links all three of these elements as he argues that Russia’s tsarist history of cosmic spirituality, paired with the resurgence of cosmic imagination in the 1950s, reestablished currents of the occult in late-Soviet society which surged into public popularity during the late 1980s and 1990s.³⁴ Thus, not only were atheist propagandists tasked with developing atheism in opposition to organized religion, they were also competing against growing popular interest in other forms of spirituality at large.

Project scope

³¹ Valentina G. Brougher, “The Occult in Russian Literature of the 1990s” *Russian Review* 56, no. 1 (1997): 111-124; Eliot Borenstein, “Suspending Disbelief: ‘Cults’ and Postmodernism in Post-Soviet Russia,” in *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society Since Gorbachev*, ed. Adele Marie Barker (Durham, Duke University Press, 1999): 437-462.

³² Julia Mannherz, “The Occult and Popular Entertainment in Late Imperial Russia” in *New Age of Russia: The Occult and Esoteric Dimensions* ed. Menzel (München, Verlag Otto Sagner, 2012); Brigid Menzel, *New Age of Russia: Occult and Esoteric Dimensions* (München, Verlag Otto Sagner, 2012); Michael Hagemeister, “Konstantine Tsiolkovskii and the Occult Roots of Space Travel” in *New Age of Russia*, ed. Menzel; George Young, *The Russian Cosmists: The Esoteric Futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and His Followers* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2012);

³³ Asif Siddiqi, *The Red Rocket’s Glare: Spaceflight and the Russian Imagination 1857-1957* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2010); Victoria Smolkin Rothrock, “Cosmic Enlightenment” in *Into the Cosmos Space Exploration and Soviet Culture* ed. Asif Siddiqi, James Andrews (Pittsburgh, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011); Victoria Smolkin Rothrock, “The Ticket to the Soviet Soul: Science, Religion, and the Spiritual Crisis of Late Soviet Atheism” *The Russian Review* 73, no. 2 (2014).

³⁴ Joseph Kellner, “As Above, So Below: Astrology and the Fate of Soviet Scientism” *Kritika* 20, no. 4 (Fall 2019): 787.

My project intercedes at the junction between negative atheism, the negation of religion, and positive atheism, a fulfilling worldview. This paper explores this transition in *Nauka i Religii* and reveals that, building on the oppositions outlined by Smolkin, propagandists focused on negating marginalized religions in the Soviet Union while building positive atheism around the everyday Soviet experiences of workplace and community. The legacy of Khrushchev's campaign of negation against ideology continued through the 1960s and 1970s while also becoming superseded by propagandists' development of positive atheism under Brezhnev.

To make these arguments, this paper will first analyze Soviet propaganda's engagement with marginalized religions in *Nauka i Religii* to investigate how propagandists continued to negate religion through denouncing and demonizing faiths beyond Russian Orthodoxy, such as Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, and sects of Christianity. By denouncing marginalized religions, Soviet propagandists were able to both avoid isolating the largest population of Soviet believers through direct rhetoric against the Russian Orthodox Church, while implicitly extending their critiques to this institution. The second section of this paper analyzes the development of positive atheism in *Nauka i Religii*, meant to provide an atheistic belief system as an alternative to spiritual faith. Specifically, this section looks at how propagandists promoted community and labor as the aspects of Soviet atheist life meant to fulfill citizens' personal and social needs, previously provided by religion.

NEGATIVE ATHEISM

Though the propaganda of Brezhnev's regime addressed Smolkin's final opposition between atheism as a negation of faith or a form of spiritual fulfillment, the articles of *Nauka i Religii* also reflected her previous opposition, that of education and "enlightenment" against the perceived ignorance and superstition of religion. To address this second tension, Brezhnev's propagandists continued the theoretical denouncement of religion emphasized under Khrushchev's campaigns in an attempt to sway the religious communities from their beliefs with empirical rationale. Introduced in the name of reinforcing atheism, these negations also continued to reinforce stereotypes of the denominations in question to further weaken core believers. The target of these denouncements and demonization though was not the Russian Orthodox Church, the largest body of believers in the Soviet Union, but rather minority faiths, with a heavy emphasis on long-suspect Christian denominations and Islam. Omissions speak just as much as inclusions though, and I speculate that propagandists avoided targeting the Russian Orthodox Church directly both to avoid directly ostracizing many believers while also understanding that, in these critiques of other faiths, critiques of the Russian Orthodox Church are clearly implied.

Therefore, this section provides a comparative analysis of propagandists' engagement with minority religions in the pages of *Nauka i Religii* to continue denouncing organized religions and display their cultural roots as bourgeois institutions rather than spiritual communities. When denouncing these marginalized denominations, the majority of *Nauka i*

Religiia's propaganda was directed toward Christianity.³⁵ Despite changing rhetoric over time, a repeated theme of this propaganda was the concept of a "crisis of religion."³⁶ This idea outlines that Christianity "... is characterized by deep crisis and decline of prestige around the world, especially pronounced in its inability to solve the pressing problems that face humanity."³⁷ In essence, according to Soviet propagandists Christianity was trapped between attempting to maintain relevance with the growing political activity and social awareness of the global public while still remaining true to its traditional values.³⁸

The authors of *Nauka i Religiia* highlighted the attempts of Christian denominations to reconcile faith with a modernizing, secularizing world to argue that religion was outdated in a modern society. According to these sources, Christianity was fighting for relevance on three fronts: "against atheism, against growing spiritual indifference, and against those claiming that God is dead."³⁹ In this offensive, *Nauka i Religiia*'s authors claimed, Christian theologians posited technological advancements as a continuation of God's will, rather than human accomplishment, while also developing secular facets of the religious community to maintain

³⁵ The only reference to the Orthodox Church I found in my research pre-1977 was found in n.a. "New Direction to an Old Problem," *Nauka i Religiia*, no. 3, 1976, which discussed the Orthodox Church's attempts to reform its platform towards women and rhetoric about biblical gender inequality to remain relevant with women believers. After 1977, there is some mention of the institution of the Russian Orthodox Church in relation to the Soviet state.

³⁶ Jarehivskije, "Argument About the Autonomy of the Laity: Notes on the Third Conference of Apostles in Rome," *Nauka i Religiia*, no 9. 1968, 54-56; Mazokhin, "God is Dead: Notes on New Reforms" *Nauka i Religiia*, no. 1, 1970, 66-68; Pishhik, Jastrebov, "Atheism and Religion in the Modern Struggle of Ideas," *Nauka i Religiia*, no. 3, 1976, 28-30; Dolgikx, "SFRJ: Society and the Church" *Nauka i Religiia*, no 3, 1979, 54-58.

³⁷ Pishhik, "Atheism and Religion in the Modern Struggle of Ideas," 28.

³⁸ Jarehivskije, "Argument About the Autonomy of the Laity"; Pishhik, "Atheism and Religion in the Modern Struggle of Ideas."

³⁹ Masokhin, "God is Dead: Notes on New Reforms," 68.

members becoming disenchanted with faith due to growing political and class consciousness at the global level.⁴⁰

In responding to these hypothetical theologians, propagandists cited Marx's argument that technological development grows from communal needs and as a product of man's intentional manipulation of nature for purposeful action, rather than God's will. Thus the "swift progress of technology is a harmful blow to religious sermons about the weakness and insignificance of humans"⁴¹ and would inspire a materialist worldview. Additionally, the "spiritual crisis of modern capitalism forces bourgeois ideologists to turn to religion and search for means of spiritual influence on the consciousness of the masses to fight against the Marxist Leninist doctrine and socialist social system."⁴² Thus, in their denouncement of Christianity, *Nauka i Religii*'s propagandists purported that, in response to the perceived inevitable socialism and waning religion, Christian denominations attempt to adapt their own doctrines to fit modern contexts, reflecting that their doctrines alone were not appropriate for contemporary society. Additionally, they argued, these denominations remained unsuccessful due to both the direct implementation of and growing global awareness towards Marxist-Leninist and socialist theory.

Though the propagandists' engagement with Islam was more neutral in tone than its descriptions of Christianity, the rhetoric of denouncement was still present, and often reinforced stereotypes of Muslims and Islam, such as laziness and "exoticism." These articles sought to "demystify" Islam's "holy origins," as *Nauka i Religii*'s propagandists felt that knowing the historical origins of religious practices and beliefs did more to challenge believers than simply

⁴⁰ Tseleshhev, "Scientific-Technologic Progress and Religion," *Nauka i Religii*, no 3. 1968, 1-4; Mazokhin, "God is Dead: Notes on New Reforms," 66-68.

⁴¹ Tseleshhev, "Scientific-Technologic Progress and Religion," *Nauka i Religii*, no. 3, 1968, 1-4.

⁴² Pishhik, "Atheism and religion in the Modern Struggle of ideas," 28.

speaking against the dogma and traditions themselves.⁴³ Thus, in order to argue the foundation of Islam lay in historical, political, and economic factors, rather than spiritual tradition, propagandists discussed multiple facets of Islamic culture in *Nauka i Religii* through the 1970s, including architecture, mystical figures (*shcheykhi*) and holy sites.

In attempting to reveal the socio-historical roots of Islam, atheist propagandists argued that both holy sites and the teachings of these spiritual mystics are the result of societal needs rather than religious belief. In arguing this point, they traced the origins of Baliki (*Balyky*), an Islamic holy site in Turkey, to pagan legends, claiming that the lake found at the site could cure infertility. These authors argued that though the pagan practice of leaving amulets and dolls for healing was outlawed by Islamic faith, the tradition of legend remained, and the site developed its “holy” status from its pagan origins.⁴⁴ Similarly, the imamate was qualified as a means of political organization legitimized by religious practice. *Nauka i Religii*’s propagandists argued that the imamates rose to power in the political struggle of the Islamic clergy against feudal lords in the 18th century Caucasus. Over time, the Islamic clergy became political leaders and aligned themselves with the Tsarist powers, thus exploiting the citizens of the Caucasus for wealth and political legitimacy granted by the Tsar.⁴⁵ Both of these discussions in *Nauka i Religii* also reinforced the popular stereotype of Islamic tradition of laziness and exploitation by political leaders.

The “exoticism” of Islamic tradition by *Nauka i Religii*’s propagandists is seen in the work of, C. Umarov, a graduate student of historical science who wrote about his experience

⁴³ Umarov, “Changing Fates of the Saints” *Nauka i Religii*, no. 7, 1976, 41.

⁴⁴ Yunusov, “Trip to Balikli,” *Nauka i Religii*, no. 12, 1976, 7-11.

⁴⁵ Umarov, “Changing Fates of the Saints” *Nauka i Religii*, no. 7, 1976, 41-43.

when an Islamic mystic came to stay with his neighbor in Grozny. According to Umarov, the visitor claimed to be a holy warrior of Islam (*shcheykh*), an intermediary between Allah and believers. During his visit, this warrior performed rituals for believers within the community, claiming that “the ones who accept it [the ritual] will be cleansed of everything bad, and most importantly, will always be able to avoid all kinds of dangers.”⁴⁶ Umarov observes both the ritual and the behavior of its participants after their cleansing and notes that “the ritual did not appear to have any affect ... but no matter how innocent the ‘activity’ of such wandering miracle workers may see at first glance, it brings great harm since it supports the religiosity of believers.”⁴⁷ He also adds that “they [holy warriors] skillfully weave the earthly needs and ‘interests’ of believers to the will of Allah... and in an environment where they enjoy influence, these holy warriors control almost every step of the believer.”⁴⁸ Umarov’s writing “exoticized” Islam as he highlights the language of cleansing rituals and spiritual warriors and healers. The ritual he observes therefore becomes a mystical experience beyond understanding to those partaking, but, he argues, is ultimately futile as he observed no result. Instead, injecting his own atheist argument, Umarov posits the ritual as a means of social control by religious figures, connecting material need to religious rhetoric to maintain believers’ loyalty.

Soviet propagandists also emphasized the historical, rather than spiritual, roots of Islamic tradition in discussing contemporary Islam, again attempting to posit its contradictions as bourgeoisie invention and class divisions. In making this argument, authors concluded that asceticism developed in Islam due to divisions in material wealth between the Muslim poor and

⁴⁶ Umarov, “Changing Fates of the Saints” *Nauka i Religii*, no. 7, 1976, 43.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 43.

⁴⁸ *Ibid* 43.

the Muslim upper class. The poor therefore leaned towards asceticism in hopes of salvation in the next life, ultimately isolating them from the socialist goal of finding earthly joys and developing the material quality of life in this world.⁴⁹ Though discussion of Islam in *Nauka i Religii* did explore multiple facets of the faith, the goal of the authors was still to discredit and denounce the superstition of religion through what they saw as a rational, Marxist-Leninist analysis.

Beyond Christianity and Islam, propagandists also addressed additional faiths, such as Judaism and Buddhism, though these religions received much less attention and nuance. When discussing Judaism in *Nauka i Religii*, for example, propagandists did not engage with the faith itself and instead mobilized Judaism for their anti-Zionist platform. Thus, the central theme in articles on Judaism is the distinction between Zionists and the Jewish community at large. As one propagandist wrote, “Zionism is a reactionary system of views and a reactionary organization serving imperialism and class issues (*yavlenie klassov*)” and thus, the conflation of Judaism and Zionism only served the goal of delegitimizing the Jewish community.⁵⁰ This strong anti-Zionist sentiment continued to resonate through the decade, as authors claimed the social discontent of Israel’s citizens is due to the general unpopularity of the government’s imperialist, Zionist policy. *Nauka i Religii* consistently posits that the social conflicts in Israel were the result of class divisions, in which the bourgeoisie political leaders (Zionists) are weaponizing Judaism for political gain.⁵¹ Despite the divisive anti-Zionist rhetoric of *Nauka i Religii*, little attention is given to the traditions and practices of Judaism itself to either educate readers or

⁴⁹ Safarov, “Ascetism in Islam,” *Nauka i Religii*, no 9. 1968, 28-31.

⁵⁰ Ivanova, “The Dogma of God’s Election and its Zionist Interpreters,” *Nauka i Religii*, no. 9, 1968, 12-16.

⁵¹ Bakanurski, “Under the Banner of the Torah,” *Nauka i Religii*, no 7, 1976, 83-87.

attempt to sway believers. Additionally, though propagandists did attempt to separate Zionism from the Jewish community, their discussions of Zionism also reinforced false anti-Semitic stereotypes such as the Jewish community's potential desire for political control or identity as bourgeois, rather than engaging with the faith and its beliefs themselves.

In contrast to the faiths discussed above, which were the subject of propaganda throughout the 1970s, *Nauka i Religiiia*'s propagandists only began discussing Buddhism at the end of the decade. That being said, Buddhism's inclusion is worth noting as it is both the only contemporary, non-Abrahamic faith to receive repeated attention in the publication and to be referenced as one of the "three world religions" known to Soviet citizens.⁵² Despite recognizing that readership acknowledged Buddhism as a religion, atheist propagandists used their articles in *Nauka i Religiiia* to evaluate Buddhism's religious status, as it lacked the supernatural element of a God-figure seen in the Abrahamic faiths. Multiple articles confirm Buddhism as a religion through their references to Lenin's work "Material and Empirical Criticism."⁵³ Despite the differences between faiths, especially those which are "god-seeking" (*bogoyskately*) as opposed to "godless" (*bezbozhniy*), *Nauka i Religiiia*'s propagandists applied Lenin's argument to claim that all religion, including Buddhism, stem from tension between the material and the transcendental.⁵⁴

Additionally, propagandists discussed elements of Buddhist philosophy with similar materialistic rhetoric applied to other religions. As one author writes:

⁵² Kochetov, "Is Buddhism a Religion?" *Nauka i Religiiia*, no 3. 1979, 24-27; It is never clarified what the other two religions deemed "World Religions" are, which is a direction worth further investigation.

⁵³ Kochetov, "Is Buddhism a Religion?"

⁵⁴ Kochetov, "Is Buddhism a Religion?" *Nauka i Religiiia*, no 3. 1979, 24-27?"; Dolgova, "Shakyamuni and Others," *Nauka i Religiiia*, no. 3, 1979, 28-30; Kochetov, "Russian Public Thought and Buddhism," *Nauka i Religiiia*, no. 10, 1979, 33-37.

Numerous scenes of retribution for offenses, images of cruel punishments to which all living beings are subjected, are located in six sectors of the '*samsariin khurde*' ('wheels of rebirth'). They were supposed to frighten believers, to enter into the thought of the ways of 'salvation.'⁵⁵

This focus on fear and suffering in the material world in order to receive salvation in the afterlife was also seen in this paper's discussion of asceticism in Islam and was a common point of pressure when refuting religion. Atheist propagandists argued that the religious dogma of "suffer now for an afterlife to come" was only a veil to justify bourgeois exploitation, and that instead, individuals should work to build their own salvation, their own communist utopia in their current material world.⁵⁶ Thus, by Soviet definition, Buddhism confirmed that even spiritualities without a God-figure were still religions and utilized the rhetoric and tools of bourgeois oppression.

Beyond using Buddhism to challenge whether spiritualities without a God-figure still constituted a religion, atheist propagandists also explored the history of Buddhism in Russia and its spiritual philosophy. Propagandists posited that Buddhism had attracted Russian interest since the 19th century due to Russia's geographic position spanning Europe and Asia, and its advocacy by public figures such as Tolstoy. Alternately, the publication had little discussion of Buddhist practices themselves. Additionally, propagandists do not account for why they reintroduced a discussion of Buddhism in *Nauka i Religii* at the end of the 1970s, though one may assume it is due to a resurgence in public interest. That being said, propagandists do add that Buddhism sustained through the anti-religious persecutions of the 1920s and 1930s as these

⁵⁵ Dolgova, "Shakyamuni and Others"

⁵⁶ Miriam Dobson, "The Social Scientist Meets the "Believer": Discussions of God, the Afterlife, and Communism in the Mid-1960s."

attacks targeted the Russian Orthodox Church, causing individuals, especially the bourgeois intelligentsia, to turn toward “new” religious teachings (*“noviy” religiozniy ucheni*).⁵⁷

Though this comparative analysis of religious denunciation acknowledges that negative atheism clearly remained a method of atheist propaganda through the 1970s, there was also an increase in articles which encouraged citizens to cooperate with believers. Especially in the latter half of the decade, propagandists began to advise readers to include believers in their social circles, including local *Komsomol*, to encourage conversion through personal relations, not simply denunciation.⁵⁸

Thus, even in the sphere of negative atheism and the negation of religion, atheist propaganda was shifting toward a personal approach of conversion, focusing on swaying the internal beliefs of an individual and a hallmark of Brezhnev’s religious policy. Despite this turn toward the individual, as this section shows, the propagandists of *Nauka i Religii* still addressed Smolkin’s second opposition, that of enlightenment vs. superstition, through their denunciation of minority religions in the Soviet Union. As the decade progressed, though, this negative atheism gave way to positive atheism, and propagandists’ attempts to shape atheism into a fulfilling worldview, the subject of the next section.

⁵⁷ Kochetov, “Russian Public Thought and Buddhism.”

⁵⁸ Piivovarov, “Methods of Studying Religiosity,” 27-30; N.A. “No, Not in Vain,” *Nauka i Religii*, no. 1, 1977, 61; Babiy, “Complex Path,” *Nauka i Religii*, no. 10, 1979, 7. Yarovoy, “Life Changes, People Change” in *Nauka i Religii*, no 1, 1977, 46-49; Sergiienko, “Again About Crosses and ‘Holy Letters’” in *Nauka i Religii*, no. 10, 1979, 40.

POSITIVE ATHEISM

The comparative analysis of religious denunciation acknowledges that negative atheism clearly remained a method of atheist propaganda through the 1970s, emphasizing the tensions between science and religion. That being said, Smolkin's final opposition comes to light as propagandists attempt to develop the emptiness of atheism as negation into positive atheism, a theoretically fulfilling alternative to religion. In *Nauka i Religii*, this positive atheism is centralized on the platform that personal fulfillment and significance comes from one's community and labor (*trud*). Propagandists argued that "the inner world of a person cannot be reached through the official word, but rather through individual work," and "... only when the worker feels not like the object of agitation, but rather like a comrade, when he sees that they [the propagandist] are delving into his argument, listening to what he is saying, will he succumb to persuasion ..."⁵⁹ Thus, by the middle of the decade, atheist propaganda was embracing positive atheism with a holistic appeal to practicality and emotional connection.

This section explores how atheist propagandists attempted to posit positive atheism as an alternative worldview to religion, using community and labor as the tools to fulfill the personal and social needs previously provided by religion. I first begin by addressing aspects of religious and atheist theory useful to understanding the development of positive atheism, and then analyze *Nauka i Religii's* positive atheism in the framework of Smolkin's final opposition, between negation and fulfillment. This section also addresses how atheist propagandists attempted to use

⁵⁹ Terets, "The Main Word of Happiness," no. 7, 1976; Solovets, "The Problem is Resolved Anew," *Nauka i Religii*, no. 12, 1976, 11-12.

the fulfillment of community and labor to address metaphysical questions such as the meaning of life.

In order to speak consistently about positive atheism and religion at large, I use the term “worldview,” which I use to speak about organized religion and Soviet atheism equitably. Religious theorists continue to debate and refine how to define “religion,” especially in a modern society of secularization and pluralism,⁶⁰ while also developing methods to discuss different belief systems comparatively.⁶¹ Therefore, for the purpose of this project, I am using the term “worldview”⁶² to encompass atheism, organized religion, and the human inclination for spirituality at large.

Even in the more secular, modern world which religious theorists are exploring, one atheist scholar draws attention to two specific aspects offered by religion which, he argues, atheists should learn from to understand the importance of religion: the ability to live together in communities and the support to endure varying degrees of hardship. He noted that “the error of modern atheism has been to overlook how many aspects of the faith remain relevant even after their central tenets have been dismissed.”⁶³ Though this scholar wrote decades after the Knowledge Society was publishing *Nauka i Religii*, these two concerns of functioning society

⁶⁰ Emíl Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans and edited by Karen Fields (New York, The Free Press, 1995); N.J. Allen, Pickering, Miller, *On Durkheim’s Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York, Routledge, 1998); Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, Anchor Books, 1967).

⁶¹ Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York, The Fortress Press, 1991, original publication 1963)

⁶² I define worldview as the structures, ideas, and beliefs which either society or an individual chose to accept as rationale for their internalization of reality. For more on the influences of this definition see: Paul Hedges, *Towards Better Disagreement: Religion and Atheism in Dialogue* (London, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2017); Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*.

⁶³ Alain de Botton, *Religion for Atheists: A Non-Believer’s Guide to the Uses of Religion* (New York, Pantheon Books, 2012): 9.

and understanding the human experience, are relevant to the journal's focus on community and labor.

The roles of community and providing labor were central to *Nauka i Religii*'s worldview of positive atheism as it attempted to address both aspects of religion which atheism could learn from: interpersonal relations for a functioning society and a shared emotional community. The remainder of this section will therefore analyze *Nauka i Religii*'s engagement with these two themes as the publication provides a platform for the developing values of positive atheism in the worldview put forth by Soviet propaganda throughout the 1970s. Additionally, propagandists also attempted to use labor and community to address one of the largest metaphysical voids filled by religion: the meaning of life.

Turning first to the concept of community, atheist propagandists challenged the idea that morality only exists in a religious context, which was a position they felt believers held. Rather, they argued in *Nauka i Religii* that morality occurred before religion, as morality developed in conjunction with social development and community.⁶⁴ To this point, one article specifically cited the pre-revolutionary Socialist Democrat Georgi Plekhanov (1856-1918) in that "Plekhanov considered that not god, but the development of production and community of people were the cause of the emergence of conscious and socially significant motives for behavior."⁶⁵ Thus, *Nauka i Religii*'s propagandists used the previously established Socialist figure of Plekhanov to argue that, as mentioned in religious philosophy, morality developed from community, and the need to codify "good" and "bad" interactions in order to interact productively.

⁶⁴ Kozhurin, "G.B. Plekhanov on Religious Morality," *Nauka i Religii*, no. 1, 1970, 44-49; Tselishhev, "Scientific-Technological Progress and Religion," *Nauka i Religii*, no. 9, 1968, PN.

⁶⁵ Kozhurin, "G.B. Plekhanov on Religious Morality," 44.

In refuting religion specifically, the authors of *Nauka i Religii* also posited that theologians only conflated religion and morality to sanctify actions as moral norms which are beneficial to the church, especially in the development of the bourgeois capitalist state. In this system, they argued, the laws beneficial to the bourgeoisie, and thus the church, could be codified as “God-given commandments,” holding more emotional gravitas for believers than secular law.⁶⁶ Rather, the Soviet leadership argued that “... the historical experience of the development of the countries of socialism ... indisputably proves the correctness of the Marxist doctrine of the existence of morality without religion,”⁶⁷ as these socialist states, according to *Nauka i Religii*’s propagandists, are able to produce fair and functioning societies and legal codes without relying on religion to incite positive social interaction.

In applying this Marxist doctrine to the development of community in the worldview of positive atheism, the authors of *Nauka i Religii*, pointed to the workplace as the center of community, replacing the role of the church to provide communal support and overcome social differences.⁶⁸ The authors and editors of *Nauka i Religii* recognized that people turned to religion especially during times of tragedy or trouble for communal support, and thus hoped to develop a similar community in the workplace.⁶⁹ As one research study summarized in a 1976 publication noted:

There are no believers in the collective, therefore, there is no one to transform. ... [although] not all who don’t believe in God are convinced atheists. In difficult life situations, some people can

⁶⁶ Brushlinskiya, “A Conversation About Intimacy,” *Nauka i Religii*, no. 3, 1976, 17-23; Kozhurin, “G.B. Plekhanov on Religious Morality,” 44-48.

⁶⁷ Kozhurin, “G.B. Plekhanov on Religious Morality,” 48.

⁶⁸ Beschastnaya, “On a Singular Basis,” *Nauka i Religii*, no. 3, 1979, 16-18.

⁶⁹ Dobrinskiiy, “To Educate the Person,” *Nauka i Religii*, no. 3, 1976, 24-25; Popov, “Good Example of a Leader,” *Nauka i Religii*, no. 7, 1976, 17-18.

switch to religious belief. Additionally, not all non-believers have a sufficient understanding of the essence of religion, its role both in the history of our country and in the modern world.

The researchers of this study additionally noted that “such ideas [of religion] are generated by a lack of Marxist atheist education by workplace leaders... and the isolation of believers from workplace community.”⁷⁰ Thus, the study concluded that, in order to support the scientific-materialist worldview, the workplace needed to also be a space of ideological education in which members were able to contribute their resources, whether material or intellectual, for the benefit of the collective. It was not enough for people to not believe in God, but they must also be committed atheists, and the workplace community was the foundation for this education and community support. State leaders hoped that the educational resources they provided to workplaces would include educational circles or lectures held by various members of the workplace, as well as collective material aid to employees in need.⁷¹

More pragmatically, bosses were expected to know who among their workers were atheists or believers so as to better direct educational energy.⁷² Through the development of workplace communities, atheist propagandists hoped that workers would become active atheists, rather than passive “non-believers.” Thus, they hoped to promote feelings of a personal community and continued access to atheist education, thereby both developing and finding fulfillment in their worldview of positive atheism.⁷³

⁷⁰ Popov, “Good Example of a Leader,” 18.

⁷¹ Dobrinskiiy, “To Educate the Person,” 24-25.

⁷² Popov, “Good Example of a Leader,” 17-18.

⁷³ Dobrinskiiy, “To Educate the Person,” 24-25.

Like some atheist scholarship, the propagandists of *Nauka i Religii* also argued that people turn to spirituality as a means of explaining questions of metaphysics and ontology, such as the meaning of life or why humans exist.⁷⁴ Thus, in addressing these questions, the answer provided by *Nauka i Religii*'s propagandists was again simple: labor. Specifically, labor with significance beyond the individual, for the collective (*kollektiv*).⁷⁵ Articles, especially in the second half of the 1970s, argued that the demands of life could "seem a tragedy" if one allowed oneself to feel small and insignificant. Yet, a propagandist noted, "when a person catches the real connections of even their smallest affairs with the great revolution [the struggle for communism] ... when they see that even a little really, really helps this revolution, his life takes on higher meaning and death... will be powerless before their work."⁷⁶ This quote emphasized how the propaganda of positive atheism attempted to engage with the metaphysical question of the meaning of life (*smysl zhizni*) – one's significance was greater than one's self because the labor one produces contributes to the greater good of communism and the collective, which will, according to these propagandists, outlive *Nauka i Religii*'s 1970s readership.

The story of Sasha, a 28-year-old invalid, personifies the ideas of positive atheism, especially the focus on community and labor. At 20, Sasha was in a car accident and became paralyzed from the waist down. In 1979, he wrote to *Nauka i Religii* and identified himself as neither a believer nor an atheist, simply a "shattered, sick person who is facing thoughts of death,"⁷⁷ and he wrote to the publication to address the question: "What is life?" Sasha answered

⁷⁴ De Botton, *Religion for Atheists*; Hedges, *Towards Better Disagreement*, Daniel Pals, *Nine Theories of Religion* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2015).

⁷⁵ Nuiykin, "Life and Bargains with It," *Nauka i Religii*, no. 7, 1976, 6-12; Yevsikova, "The Paths We Chose Ourselves," *Nauka i Religii*, no. 12, 1976, 2-4.

⁷⁶ Nuiykin, "Life and Bargains with It," 12.

⁷⁷ Ballod, "A Step Through Catastrophe," *Nauka i Religii*, no. 10, 1979, 8.

his own question by saying: “It is just a program assigned to each person: Work, home activities ... Behind this there is nothing but gradual aging and approaching death.”⁷⁸ He added that because of his disability, he saw himself as removed from this repetitive “program” of life. He felt he could not build personal relationships or be of use to society as he could not walk or care for himself easily. The author of the article, I. Ballod, visits Sasha in response to his letter, and observed “the word ‘shattered’ can be quickly attributed to his mental state. Morally, Sasha is very broken ... [and] In his despair, I heard a reproach to our whole century, which did not teach him to face trouble and left him unarmed in the face of suffering.”⁷⁹

The two begin a correspondence as Ballod, a propagandist and special correspondent for *Nauka i Religiia* attempts to give Sasha the tools, through positive atheism, which he had previously lacked to find fulfillment in his situation. The two analyze the experience of three other individuals who were paralyzed, one of whom taught himself to walk again, one of whom accepted his fate and found a suitable job for his condition, and one who, since being paralyzed at birth, found fulfillment through developing programs for the local community. Through their analysis, Sasha and Ballod conclude that “only in activity does a person recognize and express oneself, strengthens their “I” (*ya*). The most precious experiences are connected to activity, through feelings of usefulness, success, and personal accomplishment.”⁸⁰ Ballod added that “Sasha needs peoples ... and people need Sasha,”⁸¹

⁷⁸ Ballod, “A Step Through Catastrophe,” 8.

⁷⁹ *ibid*, 8.

⁸⁰ *ibid*, 8.

⁸¹ *ibid*, 11.

As a result of their conversation, Ballod helped Sasha find employment with a psychologist who worked with disabled people. In this role, Sasha was able to use his own experiences to comfort other patients, which allowed him to feel of use to others, and thus included in and useful to the broader collective of society.⁸² Thus, using Sasha's story as an example, Ballod reinforced the broader argument of atheist propaganda that it is through the work which contributes to one's community, one can find significance in one's own existence.

Intertwining the meaning of life with Marxist-Leninist theory directly, *Nauka i Religii* outlined the goals of labor as undermining religion and promoting the worldview of positive atheism as people came to learn their strengths and capabilities through work. As Sasha's experience showed, one's sense of personal worth, or the meaning of one's life, was grounded in what one's labor can offer back to the collective. Additionally, Ballod's interactions with Sasha also emphasized that everyone had a role to offer to society. Thus, according to the rhetoric of positive atheism, labor became a prerequisite for self-significance and the material basis of Soviet atheistic ideology.⁸³

In addition to promoting the argument that individuals find purpose through their contributions to society at large, propagandists also argued that the meaning of life did not come from understanding theory and scientific truths, but is found overtime "in the source of real familiarization with truly necessary things for humanity."⁸⁴ Therefore, the meaning of life, as presented by positive atheism, came from understanding the significance of one's work for the

⁸² Ballod, "A Step Through Catastrophe," 8-11.

⁸³ Payne, "Two Goals of Labor," *Nauka i Religii*, no. 10, 1979, 55-56.

⁸⁴ Nuiykin, "Life and Bargains with It," 6.

greater functioning of the collective and the role of work and workplace to create a community where all members felt needed and supported.

Nauka i Religii's authors attempted to persuade non-believers, such as Sasha, into becoming active atheists through the development of a worldview of positive atheism. By outlining morality as a socio-cultural development rather than a religious one, these propagandists hoped to convince their readership that the true needs of a functioning society were community and labor; where individuals felt the significance of their work toward larger goals, both socially and in the community of workers around them. Propagandists' development of this positive atheism therefore highlights Smolkin's final opposition of negation and fulfillment, as propagandists under Brezhnev used *Nauka i Religii* to transition atheism from the negation of religion to a fulfilling belief system.

CONCLUSION

This paper outlined how Soviet propagandists developed atheism from solely the negation of religion to an attempt at a fulfilling worldview through the deconstruction of minority religions and emphasis on work and the Soviet community. This transition emphasized the final two oppositions outlined by Smolkin, as the continuation of Khrushchev's negative atheism refuted faith with reason, and a positive atheism, developed under Brezhnev, that attempted to address ideological emptiness and apathy through the development of a fulfilling atheist worldview. Looking more broadly at late Soviet society, the transition observed in this paper also returns to Smolkin's political opposition, between effective governance and adherence to ideology. Brezhnev's propagandists were reacting to the changing social landscape around them, and this final transition towards positive atheism and individual connections was in response to one of their greatest concerns – ideological apathy among Soviet citizens.⁸⁵

In her recent work, Natalya Chernyshova poses the question: If Brezhnev's regime was as ideologically uninspiring as past scholarship has described it, then how did it maintain power for almost 20 years?⁸⁶ She answers this question by arguing that the Brezhnev regime was able to show compromise and adjustment in response to pressures from the realities of Soviet society.⁸⁷ This response to social pressures can also be seen in strategies of atheist propaganda, such as the

⁸⁵ Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty*, 240.

⁸⁶ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2005), Chernyshova, *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era*, 240.

⁸⁷ Chernyshova, *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era*, 160.

development of positive atheism in *Nauka i Religii*, as propagandists were forced to adjust their rhetoric to the social landscape around them. As the denouncement of religion continued to prove unfruitful and citizens' ideological apathy grew, the Soviet leadership had to continue adapting the idea of atheism, now into a fulfilling worldview, in order to attempt to garner and maintain social interest and support. Despite the flexibility and compromise of Soviet ideology which allowed Brezhnev's regime to maintain legitimacy, Chernyshova raises a second question: Where did this ideological flexibility end and erosion begin?⁸⁸

Chernyshova's argument complements trends in scholarship which look at the Soviet Union's loss of ideological legitimacy and ultimate collapse.⁸⁹ Some scholars, such as Alexei Yurchak, argue that it was this loss of ideological legitimacy that caused the Soviet Union to collapse peacefully, rapidly, and unexpectedly.⁹⁰ The transition from negative atheism to positive, as explored in this paper, therefore also addresses the opposition outlined by Smolkin between effective governance and ideological adherence. This opposition was seen as Soviet leaders and propagandists continued to reframe atheism, a central part of Marxist-Leninist theory, in attempts to maintain public interest and legitimacy.

Therefore, this paper analyzes the transition of atheism from a negation of religion to a fulfilling worldview under Brezhnev as his regime responded to and implicitly compromised with the social momentum of the 1970s, not only attempting to re-invigorate interest in elements of Soviet ideology but also to maintain his regime's political legitimacy. As this paper showed,

⁸⁸ Chernyshova, *Soviet Consumer Culture in the Brezhnev Era*, 160

⁸⁹ Stephen Kotkin *Armageddon Averted: The Soviet Collapse 1970-2000* (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008); Sabrina P. Ramet, *The Three Yugoslavia's: State-Building and Legitimization, 1918-2005* (Washington DC, Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 2006); Smolkin, *A Sacred Space is Never Empty*; Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*.

⁹⁰Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*.

the atheist propaganda in *Nauka i Religii* encouraged this transition in two ways: through the continued denunciation of minority religion and emphasis on the potential fulfillment of labor and the workplace community. As the first section outlined, propagandists' continued denunciation and deconstruction of religion in the pages of *Nauka i Religii* extended the history of Khrushchev's antireligious campaigns, pitting reason and science against perceived religious superstition and "backwardness." The second section of this paper then investigated the turn from the remnants of Khrushchev's negative atheism to the positive atheism developed under Brezhnev. This transition addresses the final opposition outlined by Smolkin, that between emptiness and fulfillment as it tried to take atheism from the empty negation of religion to a fulfilling, independent worldview. In developing this positive atheism, propagandists focused on connecting with believers at a personal level, with the hopes that they would find personal significance and fulfillment through contributing to the communities around them.

The arguments of this paper add to the preliminary scholarship on atheism and religion in the late Soviet period, while also developing new directions for future work. Propagandists' focus on dissuading believers from their religious belief raises questions of what it meant to be a "believer" in the 1970s Soviet Union; what communities believers saw themselves as part of, and what elements of their faith were they being dissuaded from. Similarly, *Nauka i Religii's* revisions to the platform of atheism begs an understanding of the social meaning of atheism itself, and how citizens saw themselves navigating concepts of spirituality and atheism in late Soviet society.

Keeping the potential for future work in mind then, I conclude this project with a reader letter to *Nauka i Religii* sent to the publication in 1976. The author of this letter, Korniyev, sums up the social disillusionment with and ideological apathy toward the Soviet scientific-materialist

worldview as he writes: “atheists inspire us [believers] that faith robs happiness and earthly joys, but that is not true, they [atheists] do not give us personal happiness in return. They also demand sacrifices, but not in the name of God, rather in the name of future happiness for people. So, what is the difference in belief, between God and communism? We are happier than atheists – Religion is salvation for all on earth, communism is only for those who live under communism.”⁹¹

⁹¹ Tsiinko, “Person for History or History for Humans,” in *Nauka i Religia*, no. 3, 1976, 52.

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