

In the name of Lenin, and of  
Stalin, and of Voroshilov, AMEN:  
Soviet Communism as a Political  
Religion

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“On my honor, I have neither given nor received any unacknowledged aid on this exam.”

Communism in the USSR was made to be a “political religion,” or a political ideology and practice that took on all forms and jurisdictions that religion occupies in most societies. It did this mainly by continuing many of the forms and practices of the Russian Orthodox Church, whose influence and very existence it had attempted to destroy and replace at the same time, and through establishing a new moral order.

If one notices the number of correlations between Russian Eastern Orthodoxy and communism, it is almost eerie. Lenin takes on a god-like Jesus persona; his sayings and writings become “sacred” texts—sacred the word being used by Stalin and other communists after his death—and his body is embalmed and preserved for all to see in the Mausoleum in Red Square in Moscow. Lenin himself becomes both god and relic in the same stroke, worshipped as a god and preserved as a relic. Just as thousands would go to churches, making pilgrimages to see relics, so too would thousands go to Moscow to see Lenin’s body and pay their respects. Lenin was also often quoted as Jesus would have been; that is, quoting Lenin on a political matter carried as much weight as quoting Jesus on a moral issue. His name was repeated at political gatherings, themselves almost like a mass, much in the same way God’s names was repeated in prayers, chants, and hymns. Lenin figures prominently in the Soviet national anthem; he is in both verse and refrain. The anthem is formally known as the *Hymn of the Soviet Union*, and this is no coincidence. The *Hymn* is as much a religious tribute to Lenin and his vision as it is a tribute to anything else, just as many Orthodox hymns are hymns to Jesus and his vision. Yet he is not just a Jesus figure; aside from preaching the Word, he also, like Moses, led his people to the Promised Land, bringing his party home after long years of exile, while at the same time delivering his people from capitalist slavery; both Nicholas II and

Kerensky assume the role of Pharaoh. Lenin also partly fulfills the role of Joshua as he not only leads his people to the Promised Land, but also is the first ruler of the new state.

In many ways, this religion also has its form of a Bible. Its prophets from ages past were mainly Karl Marx and Frederick Engels. Their works would compromise what could be viewed of as an Old Testament: the foundation of the religion, yet at the same time not absolute. Just as Jesus and other prophets, pontiffs and patriarchs expounded on the older teachings and added their own slants, so could Lenin, Stalin, and others offer their new ideas, dubbed “creative Marxism.” The writings of Lenin and Stalin, just like the teachings of Jesus in relation to the Old Testament, would win out over the older, more traditional teachings and pure Marxists and became a sort of New Testament. Just as Jesus’ saying to the Pharisees that he will eat pork because anything that God makes cannot be unclean made many Leviticus dietary laws obsolete and Patriarch Nikon’s views changed many Orthodox customs, so too did Lenin’s April Theses allow for a much more accelerated version of Marx’s Revolution and Stalin’s Socialism in One Country allow a departure from the strong international current in Marxism.

Ironically, it is Stalin that is really the most Judas-like character in this whole drama, but the victors write history, and so Leon Trotsky would become the character of betrayal, the example of the weak Apostle. In fact, Trotsky resembles Saint Paul more than anyone else, the brilliant communicator who is able to win many early converts, himself viewed as a convert, but Stalin changed the “history” and Trotsky was the most combative towards the then emerging new Stalinist order; thus he was painted the color of traitor for all to see.

Stalin himself figured prominently in the new religion: he was clearly the high

prophet, the Supreme Patriarch, and assumed power an Orthodox clergyman would not have wielded since the fall of Constantinople when a Supreme Patriarch existed or since the split with the Roman Catholic Church before that. Just as teachings of these rulers became part of Church doctrine, so too does Stalin make sure his view becomes the official version. He even took the more absolute version of authority from Orthodoxy's Catholic roots. Just as prayers were uttered for metropolitans and patriarchs, countless cheers of "Long live Comrade Stalin!" were uttered. And just as the patriarch or the highest existing clergyman would have been the moral and spiritual leader of his people, so Stalin was the moral and political leader of his people, showing them the true path. Stalin even spoke in the ways many of the older religious leaders would have: his only education was at a seminary and he wrote most of his speeches, articles, and books in a set style very similar to the question-and-answer format of the Orthodox Catechism.

Certain Sacraments of the Orthodox Church were replaced under communism, most notably the Sacrament of Reconciliation with, principally, the concept of Self-Criticism. People expressing "heretical" beliefs or disagreements could publicly admit the error of their ways to the Party, much like a sinner could confess his sins to a priest. This originally had a rehabilitative effect just as Reconciliation did; in both situations the persons would be rehabilitated, their "sins" forgiven. Yet Stalin would largely destroy this rehabilitative effect of Self-Criticism as it just became a temporary delay from expulsion, imprisonment, or worse.

Both Christianity and communism also had quite a missionary aspect. The Church had sent many priests abroad to convert "heathens" to the Word, and the communists sent many agents abroad to help incite communist revolutions. Eventually,

most of the global communism was to be managed directly from the USSR under the body known as the Comintern, or Communist International, from which virtually all communist parties in the world took direct orders, though this amount of control would decrease with later defections over ideological issues. Also, both are inherently missionary: Jesus speaks extensively on spreading the Word to Gentiles, and the Acts of the Apostles are filled with references to the missionary nature of Christianity and God's love for *all* people. Likewise, Marx's *Communist Manifesto* speaks of a revolution in which borders matter not; a world proletarian revolution, in which nationality will matter little, is one of the inevitable outcomes of the communist revolution; a revolution in one country will quickly inspire other revolutions in others countries.

Just as the Church would reform itself through councils, the Communists would reform themselves through Congresses and meetings of high-level officials. In both cases, once a decision was made, the dissenting minority would have to submit to the will of the majority or be declared heretics, and the issue was not further discussed. Also, both Church councils and Soviet Congresses would be referred to as sources of doctrine.

Other more self-explanatory aspects are worth mentioning. Both religions also had a view of a final battle; the Church had Armageddon, the communists had a final showdown with the capitalist world. The Communists would replace Church feast days with their own holidays, like May Day or holidays honoring professions such as Aviators' Day. One of the most overt forms of communism taking the place of Orthodoxy existed in the household: traditionally, Russian peasants kept small icons in a corner of their home where they could pray and reflect; the communists would have these icons replaced with pictures of Lenin and later Stalin and Voroshilov, and political study,

a form of prayer itself, would take place there. And just as Moscow had viewed itself as the beacon of “true” Christianity, the Third Rome, or third great center of Christianity after Rome and Constantinople/Byzantium, under Communism it would view itself as the beacon of the path to a true communist utopia.

Finally, communism in the USSR sought to establish a new moral order. Where before morality had been based on biblical teachings and one’s treatment of others, one’s honesty and trustworthiness, communism attempted to create a society where loyalty to the state, Party, and to the advancement of the causes of socialism and communism defined moral rightness. Anything done in the name of these causes was justifiable, no matter what the cost. A child could justifiably turn his parent and friends in to authorities if they were “suspect,” and would receive national attention and praise from the Soviet press. Lying and pretending to gain information on possible informants, no matter how close they were to a person, became widespread. Simple decent human qualities were deemed unimportant, and ruthlessness, ambition, and conformity to state wishes all became highly valued in a moral sense; trust in anyone became rare. Even people speaking out for humane treatment of prisoners were deemed immoral as “enemy” sympathizers. In terms of an “enemy,” Satan and sinners were replaced with Trotsky and Trotskyites, capitalists, and *kulaks*, or well-to-do-peasants. Many of these people were good people, but in the new order and culture that emerged in the 1930s, there was no place for them; they were the evil “class enemy,” and it was their fate to be “liquidated,” or eradicated as a class. These were the new dregs of society, replacing the thieves, liars, and murderers who became moral beacons as long as they supported Stalin and his Party.

Thus, Communism in the USSR can easily be called a “political religion.”

***Source:***

Thompson, John M. 1996. *A vision unfulfilled: Russia and the Soviet Union in the twentieth century*. Lexington: D. C. Heath and Company.