

BOOK REVIEW/COMPTE RENDU

Paul Froese, *The Plot to Kill God: Findings from the Soviet Experiment in Secularization*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008, 248 pp. \$US 21.95 paper (978-0-520-25529-6), \$US 55.00 hardcover (978-0-520-25528-9).

Paul Froese's central argument in *The Plot to Kill God* is simple: the Soviet government's attempt to remove religion from the Soviet Union failed miserably because humanity possesses an innate proclivity towards belief in God, which cannot be eradicated through overt legislative processes. Froese writes: "The idea of God is currently a fundamental aspect of human culture and shows no signs of fading, even in some of the most secularized regions of the globe.... The Soviet Secularization Experiment wanted to reject this basic thesis but ultimately found it to be undeniable" (p. 21). Froese is careful to explain that government intervention quite obviously caused an objective secularization of Soviet society, that is, a decline in the numbers and influence of religious institutions, as well as public religious attendance. For Froese, however, this is not the central criterion with which to evaluate whether a society has been secularized. He writes: "the deterioration of religious institutions, the decline of religious practices, the erosion of religious communities, and the differentiation of religious and secular spheres did *not* produce widespread religious disbelief" (p. 23). For Froese, as well as most supply-side theorists of religion, it is the persistence of religious belief, or demand for otherworldly explanations of reality, that constitutes the most important aspect of religion, and if belief in God is not in decline, then religion is not in decline, and such a society is not secularized. Froese argues that the government's attempt to remove religion from the Soviet Union increased the social and religious costs of religious affiliation. While this forced the previous religious monopolies to eject their many free-riders, it did not represent a real decrease in the number of individuals who believed in God, because they were not truly committed religious individuals to begin with. Acceptance of Froese's thesis thus depends on whether one agrees with his definition of religion as essentially belief in the transcendent.

Froese has drunk deeply from the well of supply-side theorists writing in the scientific study of religion, such as Rodney Stark, Roger Finke, and Laurence Iannaccone. They argue that religious growth and decline

are the result of changes that are made to religious supply, and not due to changes made to religious demand, which is relatively constant. Any increase or decrease in religion is the result of changes that are made to the religious contents of a particular religious tradition, or to a sufficiently heterogeneous religious marketplace that is otherwise able to meet the diverse, although stable, demand for religion among the members of any particular society. *The Plot to Kill God* can be understood as a case study that attempts to verify the claims of supply-side theorists who advocate an absolute demand for religion based on the persistence of belief in God.

Froese uses evidence from the Soviet secularization experiment to test six basic hypotheses on religious change found in the sociology of religion. Roughly summarized, they are: (1) religion will decline as scientific knowledge and modernization advance; (2) ritual, not belief in the transcendent, forms the basis of religious demand; (3) religion will fail without the authority and support provided by the state; (4) individuals act rationally, or in ways that are personally advantageous, when making religious decisions; (5) otherworldly rewards, or belief in God, are religion's most important motivators of human behaviour; (6) market forces constrain religious groups.

After a thorough examination of a wide variety of sociological and historical data, Froese demonstrates that: (1) advances in science and modernization did not necessitate religious decline within the Soviet Union; (2) individuals were attracted to religion not simply because its rituals provided them with a sense of "collective effervescence," but also because of the connection it offered to the transcendent; (3) religion can persist when state, and even all public institutional support, is removed; (4) while the majority of Soviet citizens abandoned their religious commitments to avoid persecution, the large minority of Soviet citizens who endured persecution and death as a result of their unwillingness to abandon their religious commitments challenges any absolute adherence to a rational choice theory of religious behaviour; (5) Soviet officials were ultimately unable to replicate the type of faith in their ideology that they observed in religion because they deprived themselves of otherworldly rewards, religion's most important means of motivating human behaviour; (6) the various ways in which both the pre-Soviet, Soviet, and post-Soviet governments enacted legislation that provided state support for or enforced penalties against, practitioners of religion placed significant constraints on certain religious groups.

Froese concludes that the Soviet secularization experiment ultimately failed because Soviet officials ignored the power that the concept of the transcendent has to motivate human behaviour. He argues that

what is known about secularization in the modern West suggests that the Soviets would have best furthered their political agenda, and dealt the most devastating blow to institutional religion, had they wedded the communist message to religious organizations and religious concepts. Then religion would have assumed a largely ethnic or cultural role, as it has in much of Western Europe, and enabled the Soviets to utilize the promise of otherworldly rewards to motivate their followers. Removing the idea of God completely from the Soviet arsenal of persuasion allowed religion to become a powerful tool to oppose communism, and motivated very few Soviets to be willing to sacrifice their lives for the ideal of a merely improved thisworldly state.

Froese assembles a convincing argument for his six assessments and for his explanation of the Soviet secularization experiment's failure. The issues that readers may have with Froese's discussion are theoretical: Does measuring religious belief alone provide an adequate basis from which to evaluate religious change in general? Does the persistence of religious belief in the modern West provide enough evidence to disprove secularization theory? Is religious demand constant across all cultures? If readers agree with Froese on these theoretical assumptions, or are able to suspend criticism of them until finishing the book, they will benefit from his clear exposition. The book is accessible to the nonspecialist, and should be read by scholars, students, and general readers interested in explanations of religious change, in secularization, and in the history of religion in the Soviet Union.

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