

13 Dmitry A. Uzlaner: *The Soviet Model of Secularisation* (2010)

Translated and introduced by Sebastian Rimestad

Introduction

Dmitry A. Uzlaner (b. 1984) studied philosophy and religious studies at the M. V. Lomonosov University in Moscow. In 2009, he completed his PhD (*kand. nauk*) on the neo-classical model of secularisation in Western sociology of religion. Since then, he has been interested in the ‘post-secular turn’, both as a theoretical concept and as an empirical process in contemporary Russia, including the discourse of traditional values that has been championed primarily by the Russian Orthodox Church. He has been the chief editor of the Russian-language journal “State, Religion, Church in Russia and Abroad” since 2012, while holding various teaching and research positions in Moscow. Moreover, he has been involved in a number of international research projects, most prominently “Postsecular Conflicts” at the University of Innsbruck, Austria, under the leadership of Kristina Stoeckl.¹

The text below is a summary of part of Uzlaner’s research on the history of secularisation theory, namely an analytical overview of the Soviet approach to “secularisation.” It is an external perspective, which attempts to objectively pinpoint the differences between the Western and Soviet models of secularisation in the 1960s and 1970s, and their repercussions for the discussion of the term today. The text was published in one of the main Russian journals of sociology, called *Sociological Research*.

Bibliographical Information

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I His most important publications in English on this topic include: Mikhail Suslov and Dmitry Uzlaner, eds. *Contemporary Russian Conservatism: Problems, Paradoxes, and Perspectives* (Boston, MA: Brill, 2019); Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner, eds. *Postsecular Conflicts: Debating Tradition in Russia and the United States* (Innsbruck: Innsbruck University Press, 2020); and Kristina Stoeckl and Dmitry Uzlaner, eds. *The Moralist International: Russia in the Global Culture Wars* (New York: Fordham University Press 2022).

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In recent years, most of the sociological theories of secularisation have been either refuted or subjected to the most detailed criticism. However, despite all this criticism, one thing is obvious – secularisation, that is, the loss of religion's social significance, is a real process that many societies around the world have gone through (and, in some places, these processes are still ongoing). This means that the phenomenon of secularisation needs a theoretical explanation. In this regard, it is reasonable to attempt a 'revision' of the existing models of secularisation. With this achieved, it will be possible to understand the foundation on which the new (or updated) model (or models) of secularisation is being built.

In previous publications, I attempted to analyse the Western experience of understanding secularisation, using the example of what I called the "neoclassical model" (Uzlaner 2008a; 2008b). This present article reconstructs the Soviet experience.¹ I propose conditionally calling the theoretical developments in the Soviet Union the "Soviet model of secularisation" (there have obviously been disagreements between different researchers over this, but I still dare to talk about a single model). Below I will outline the main provisions of this model, compare it with the Western (that is, neoclassical) [p. 62/63] model, and identify the strengths of the Soviet approach, which can prove useful in the future.

The formation of the Soviet model of secularisation largely repeated Western experience: it started in the 1960s and 1970s, when a number of authors began to actively discuss this topic in their publications. In Soviet sociology, the topic was addressed by Iu. A. Levada (1965), I. N. Iablokov (1971; 1972), A.G. Tvaltvadze (1968), as well as the authors of the collection *Towards a Society Free from Religion (The Process of Secularisation in a Socialist Society)* (Lopatkin 1970), and others. Like their Western colleagues, Soviet authors fundamentally relied on the legacies of certain classical thinkers when building their theories, in their case K. Marx, F. Engels, and V. I. Lenin. For ideological reasons, the ideas of the founders of Marxism-Leninism were adopted uncritically, and the legitimacy of these thinkers' positions was not questioned. Rather, academic research in the Soviet Union was concerned with reproducing their ideas, and using empirical research to confirm them. This uncritical use of classical ideas is one of the main differences between the Soviet model and the Western model, which took a critical look at, and even revised, some of the basic assumptions made in the sociologies of Weber, Durkheim, and not least Marx. Furthermore, in the West, sociological theories of secularisation immediately came under fierce criticism from religious thinkers and other sceptical authors, criticism which was not always fair, but was usually meaningful. The Soviet model lacked this kind of criticism.

1 [note 1 in the original] I was only able to find one article on this topic in existing literature. See *De neve* 1973.

However, this uncritical acceptance also had its advantages: Soviet sociologists openly set out all the philosophical premises on which they built their vision of secularisation. In the case of Western sociologists, such clarity was absent: sometimes they flatly denied (or failed to mention) that their model was based on some philosophical foundations that still needed to be substantiated, and that their model of secularisation could collapse if these premises turned out to be false. They believed that they were dealing with exclusively sociological problems that did not require any philosophy. The philosophical naivety of Western theories of secularisation has long been noted by their critics (Glasner 1977; Hadden 1987). Soviet authors, on the other hand, were consistent; they began with a presentation of general fundamental philosophical propositions, then moved on to general sociological concepts arising from them, and only then proceeded to a special scientific analysis. Thanks to this, the Soviet model turned out to be much clearer, more transparent, and consistent.

Logic requires that a description of the Soviet model should begin with a presentation of the ideas of the classics of Marxism-Leninism, but these ideas are so well known that I refrain from repeating them here. Let me simply note that, from the writings of Marx and Engels (1955; 1959; Marx 1955a; 1955b; Engels 1961), and Lenin (1968a; 1968b), it is possible to single out a completely finished model of secularisation.² Religion is an illusory superstructure, generated by an imperfect economic basis. This basis can be improved in accordance with objective laws, leading to the improvement of the superstructure. In the end, there ought to be a perfect base and a perfect superstructure. There is then no place left for illusory religion, since those flaws in the basis that led to its appearance have been destroyed. However, the elimination of religion does not happen by itself – in this process, the individual plays the most active role. Actually, Soviet sociologists only had to turn the implicit model of secularisation into an explicit one, and to detail certain provisions for this. [. . . p. 63/64]

What Did Researchers Seek to Comprehend within the Framework of this Model?

Soviet researchers focused on what happened to religion in a socialist society, and to some extent also in a capitalist one. Their task was to trace, and empirically substantiate, specific changes in the economic basis of society, and how these changes affected religion. However, unlike their Western colleagues, who strove exclusively for a neutral analysis, and denied any interest in the described process, Soviet authors also set themselves practical tasks. Religion was a harmful illusion that impeded the advancement

2 [note 2 in the original] This being said, none of the classics used the concept of “secularisation” in the contemporary sociological sense.

of humanity and society; therefore, the process of secularization was part of social progress that contributed to the development of humanity, and an individual's spiritual freedom, interests, and abilities. As R. A. Lopatkin (1970)^I concluded, the secularisation of societal and individual life was a necessary condition for achieving all of the above goals. Thus, the study of the phenomenon of secularisation was not purely of theoretical interest, but also had practical ramifications: the sociologists wanted to understand the causes of secularisation, to identify what hinders it, and to give recommendations to help eliminate the harmful illusion of religion. Hence, many Soviet works on secularisation bore a similar title: "Reasons for the Existence and Ways to Overcome Religious Remnants" (Prichiny 1963; 1965; Stroitel'stvo 1966; Cherniak 1965).

What Was Their Main Postulate?

The answer to this question is obvious: as the objective conditions of human existence improve, religion weakens and eventually dies out. Secularisation is a natural consequence of the progressive improvement of society's economic basis; this improvement makes religion superfluous. Soviet researchers recognised the validity of the basic thesis of the Western model, that modernisation leads to secularisation; however, they considered this statement insufficient. It is necessary here to say a few words about how "secularisation" was interpreted in Soviet sociology, and the differences between this interpretation and the Western one.

The first task facing Soviet scholars who became interested in the problems of secularisation with renewed vigour in the 1960s was to develop the very concept of "secularisation" itself. In 1965, beginning his study of the phenomenon, Iu. A. Levada (1965, 171), quite in the spirit of Western researchers of that time, stated that "secularisation" was a term "which is very widespread, but does not have any strict definitions". The best definition was proposed by R. A. Lopatkin (1970, 19): secularisation is "the process of liberation from the influence of religion over all aspects and levels of the life of society and the individual, as well as the assertion in public and individual consciousness of the materialistic worldview and the systems of norms and values based on it as a necessary condition for the functioning and progressive development of society and the individual".

The main difference between the understanding of secularisation adopted in Soviet sociology and the Western interpretation was the identification of two sides: a negative and a positive side. Soviet secularisation was not just "the liberation from the influence of religion" (i.e. the negative side), but also "the assertion of a materialistic worldview"

I SR: This text is also reproduced in this volume, in English translation, see text no. 54.

(i.e. the positive side) (Lopatkin 1970, 19).³ A full-fledged secularisation should combine the decline of religion with “the assimilation of the principles of scientific atheism by the people” (Lebedev 1970, 134). It was for ignoring the second, positive side of secularisation that Soviet authors criticised Western concepts. However, it was not only the concepts that were criticised, but Western society as a whole. Bourgeois theorists had failed to see a positive dimension of secularisation due to the imperfection of their society: “The positive side of secularisation comes into full force only under socialism, when all conditions are created for people to assimilate the scientific worldview, [p. 64/65] the spread of which has become massive” (ibid). Accordingly, under capitalism, “the very process of secularisation . . . does not reach its full completion on a large scale”. Hence the shortcomings of the Western model of secularisation: “Apparently, to a large extent, this can explain the fact that secularisation is still considered by bourgeois sociologists of religion only as a negative process” (ibid). At the same time, of course, a number of correct implications of the Western model were recognised – for example, the idea that modernisation contributes to secularisation. However, another difference between the Western and Soviet understandings of secularisation was manifested here: if, in the Western model, secularisation was associated with a number of ‘superficial’ changes (modernisation), then in the Soviet one it was associated with a radical reorganisation of the basis of the entire socio-economic structure. As A. G. Tvaltvadze (1968, 192) wrote, “Marxist philosophy does not deny the dependence of secularisation on changes in social structures, expansion of communication ties, an increase in the role of science, mass transformation of culture, greater mobility of people, and other phenomena in society that accompany the process of its ‘industrialisation’”. In his opinion, there could be no question of any full-fledged secularisation until there was a change in the entire bourgeois formation, and no full-fledged model of secularisation could arise until “class struggle is recognised as one of the decisive factors of secularisation” (ibid).

How, and on What Material Basis, Was the Model Built?

Within the framework of the Soviet model, socialist society was proclaimed the perfect human society (Marx 1955c, 4), in which all the necessary objective conditions for the withering away of religion were created for the very first time. Accordingly, the task of researchers was to empirically demonstrate the course of this withering away, and the establishment of an atheistic (correct) worldview – the only one capable of giving

3 [note 3 in the original] Of course, by no means did all Soviet sociologists agree with this formulation of the question. For example, I.N. Iablokov (1972, 160) disputed the thesis that atheisation was the positive side of secularisation, arguing that, under socialism, many atheists had never been believers at all.

a person their much-needed happiness. Since there could be no question of any revision of the philosophical foundations of the model, any lack of secularisation, or any secularisation felt to be progressing at too slow a pace, required the researcher to identify the reasons that were preventing the emergence of the correct superstructure for the correct basis. These tasks were solved on the basis of empirical research, including noteworthy research in the Penza region, on the basis of which *Toward a Society Free from Religion* (Lopatkin 1970, 19), probably the best Soviet work on secularization, was produced.

Soviet researchers did not ignore developments in capitalist societies, but here they faced a somewhat different task: analysing the vitality of religions in Western countries, and showing the connection with the imperfection of the basis of bourgeois society (Shershneva 1987).

What Did the General Scheme Look Like?

The Soviet model of secularisation was built on the foundation of Marxist-Leninist philosophy. [...] Accordingly, the model of secularization was built into the general scheme of the historical development of mankind. This development was interpreted as progress from a less ideal stage to a more excellent one, and, finally, to the most perfect one, in accordance with the laws discovered by Marx. Religion was one of the indicators of imperfection; therefore, for objective reasons, it would weaken in the course of history, until, finally, it would completely disappear. Accordingly, secularisation, albeit in its most rudimentary form, began long before the appearances of capitalism or socialism. [...] p. 65/66. ...]

The reasons why Soviet sociologists interpreted *religious* conflicts and disputes as secularisation, i.e. as steps towards the withering away of religion, are understandable: society was improving, and accordingly, religion was weakening, even if it looked like it was undergoing a transformation. Then, as if to confirm this interpretation, it was indicated that over time, secularisation had begun to take on an increasingly pronounced meaningful character, and finally, “from a certain point, mainly starting from the French Enlightenment, secularisation has gone beyond the struggle of progressive social forces with the church and has begun to include the struggle to overcome religion in general” (Lopatkin 1970, 14).

However, this was still only the prehistory of secularisation. Real secularisation began under the conditions of capitalist and socialist societies. In order to understand the Soviet model of secularisation, it is vital to introduce two important terms: the objective conditions and the subjective factor. [...]

Objective conditions for the process of secularisation have been created in modern societies (both capitalist and socialist), and only here (which is logical). The development of productive forces caused by the scientific and technological revolution led to a

radical reorganisation of life in those societies, and to the natural weakening of religion. However, the quality of these objective conditions is different in capitalist and socialist societies. With all the successes of capitalism, there has not yet been a change in the structure of society, making full-fledged secularisation impossible. Secularisation has instead remained in the first, negative stage. As for Soviet society, the basic objective conditions have been achieved, so secularisation in socialist society has been moving from the negative to the positive stage. Additionally, in socialism, under the conditions of a 'correct' basis, the subjective factor associated with the active struggle against religion began to play a key role.

Unlike Western theorists, for whom this aspect was not so obvious, Soviet sociologists clearly pointed out that secularisation does not occur by itself, that the active participation of social actors is necessary for its successful completion, and that it is pointless to consider it "external to the social class that is interested in carrying out secularisation" (Tvaltvadez 1968, 192). In part, this attention to the subjective side of secularisation was due to Lenin's parting words, that religion should not be taken as a personal, private matter. Even where the correct basis has been established, it is foolish to expect that religion itself will wither away without any help: first, it is possible that even in a socialist society, especially in remote places, the old order that feeds religious illusions can be preserved; second, in the superstructure – of which religion is a part and reflects the real basis – there are also so-called remnants, the overcoming of which requires real effort. In short, the subjective factor is involved in the realisation of this potency. [. . . p. 66/67. . .]

Accordingly, the combination of the subjective factor and objective conditions should result in successful secularisation and, ultimately, in the overcoming of religion. In a socialist society, all these conditions for secularisation were fully present, so the Soviet researchers rightly concluded that "in socialist countries, secularisation is at its most *thorough*" (Ugrinovich 1985, 194). The Soviet researchers did not limit themselves to simply developing and clarifying the theoretical foundations of the secularisation process. They were, themselves, active supporters of this process, participating in atheistic propaganda and the ideological opposition to churches' attempts to maintain their positions. Indeed, by virtue of the fact that the superstructure does not automatically react to a change in the basis, but has a certain scope for action, religions resist their decline. This resistance can take many forms, from rapprochement with reactionary regimes that impede change, to attempts at internal reform and adjustment to new circumstances. To comprehend the processes of religion's struggle with objective tendencies, a secularisation-sacralisation scale was introduced (sacralisation being "the spread, strengthening and deepening of ties to religious cults, giving material and ideal objects, consciousness, behaviour, and relations between people a 'sacred' religious meaning and significance" (Lopatkin 1970, 20). Accordingly, each event in the religious world was considered from the perspective of this scale, with the researcher assessing whether it contributed to secularisation or sacralisation.

Soviet researchers sought to substantiate their theoretical developments through empirical research aimed at revealing the real position of religion, primarily in a socialist society. [. . . p. 67/68. . .]

Not meeting many wholeheartedly committed believers in their studies, Soviet sociologists concluded that the main trend in modern religiosity was its natural decline (Ul'ianov 1970, 165). Strictly speaking, in the Soviet model of secularisation, even at the theoretical level, only decline was recognised as a possible change in religiosity: one could be either a wholeheartedly committed believer, or an aspiring atheist – there was no third option (Tancher/Duluman 1964; Andrianov/Lopatkin/Pavliuk 1966).

Empirical data collected in the vastness of the Soviet Union and other socialist countries seemed to confirm the veracity of the Soviet model of secularisation: the number of atheists grew, while the number of believers decreased (Ugrinovich 1985, 192–203). All of this allowed Soviet sociologists to consider their own reflections legitimate and justified.

What Conclusions Were Drawn about the Prospects for Secularisation?

In this regard, Soviet researchers were much more categorical than their Western counterparts: secularisation must end in the complete disappearance of religion. At the same time, as one of the researchers wrote, “secularisation, as a consequence of social progress, is a historically irreversible process” (Baikov 1970, 208). Moreover, while the creators of the Western neoclassical model positioned themselves as objective researchers who were not interested in either the success or failure of secularisation, the Soviet researchers clearly specified their sympathies: “the crisis of religion is a positive phenomenon, one of the links in the liberation of man from spiritual oppression” (Kurochkin 1969, 37). Finally, they not only sympathised with secularisation, but were ready to assist it to the best of their ability, participating in the strengthening of what was called the subjective factor.

This, in general terms, was the Soviet model of secularisation. As a conclusion, I would like to note its strengths, which may be useful for building an updated model of secularisation. First, there is the thesis that secularisation has not only a negative, but also a positive side. Leading Western researchers have also moved towards the analysis of this positive dimension of secularisation, albeit understood differently (Taylor 2007). Second, there is the thesis about the subjective factor, that is, the recognition that objective factors alone – be it modernisation, rationalisation, or even a socialist revolution – are not enough; the active participation of groups interested in secularisation is also needed. Attention to this factor is also increasing in the studies of modern scientists (Smith 2003). Third and finally, the philosophical integrity of the Soviet model deserves praise, given that this was lacking in the Western secularisation research of the time.

However, none of the merits of the Soviet model saved it from actual collapse. In this sense, it repeated the fate of the Western neoclassical model: while, empirically, it received more and more confirmation (from the 1960s onwards), its foundation was weakening. The political collapse of Soviet Marxism, of which the Soviet model was a logical part, marked its most serious crisis. Russian researchers, like their Western colleagues (indeed, even a little earlier than them), faced the need to create a new – or at least a greatly updated – model. However, while work in this direction began almost immediately in the West (Martin 2005; Casanova 2006), the Russian researchers abandoned any efforts of this kind for a while.⁴ I would like to hope that this is a temporary pause, and the theoretical understanding of secularisation in Russia will continue. The developments of Soviet scientists may prove more useful than ever in this task.

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4 [note 5 in the original] Perhaps the only exception to this is the research activity of Iuliia Iu. Sinelina [1972–2013].

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