

Call for Papers

**Religion and Communism: Comparative Perspectives
Workshop/Book Project**

Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity, Goettingen, Germany

May 6–7, 2011

There is a growing body of anthropological literature devoted to religious revival and religious conversion in both former and currently communist countries. Many of these studies make broader arguments about the relationship between religious practice and communist ideology, or communist forms of governance. But despite recent calls to re-examine the Cold War as a global phenomenon, studies of religion under and after communism have remained within traditionally defined area studies boundaries. This workshop seeks to cross these boundaries by asking: Is there a relationship between religion and communism writ large? What does the comparison between different forms of communism tell us about the relationship between communism, as an ideology and form of governance, and religious practice after 1989? We invite proposals that consider the impact of anti-religious propaganda and/or communist forms of governance on religious practice, the relationship between religious practice and various forms of communist and post-communist markets, comparative moralities, the nationalization of religions as well as new points of comparison for an edited volume that will seek theoretical conclusions about the current state of the field.

Critics will, of course, note that China, Vietnam and North Korea are still communist regimes, while some of the countries of the former Soviet Union, in Eastern Europe and Central Asia, have been post-communist for twenty years. Others might argue that some Asian countries are communist in name only, or that many countries of the former USSR are democratic in name only. However, it is precisely these differences that promise to yield productive results. All of these countries have experienced a history of communist social engineering, and subsequent market reforms. We wish to keep the question of whether or not individual countries are “communist” or “post-communist” open, in favor of asking, what elements of continuity and change are relevant to religious practice? Given different political and economic situations, widely different cultural histories, and the presence of widely different religions, the similarities between Asian and European examples are all the more striking, allowing us to see more clearly the relationship between communism and religious practice.

Analyses of religious practices in communist and post-communist countries have focused primarily on the nationalization of religious practices under socialism, or on the way in which religious practices provide an alternative moral structure with which to counter either the communist state or the “ideological vacuum” of the post-Soviet world. Both of these approaches highlight the way religion came to be defined in communist ideology as a false ideology destined to be replaced by atheist truth. Within this ideology, scientific atheism is progressive and modern, and bringing this awareness to the “backwards” masses justifies state intervention, and often, state violence. This ideology rests on a teleology derived from the same enlightenment traditions that produced

theories of secularism and secularization in Europe and America. However, both of these are ideal political visions. In practice, both secular and atheist states invoke ideas about transcendent power, creating slippages that disturb the neat division between rational statecraft and irrational religion. The existence of state-sponsored atheism within the parameters of the Cold War has transformed, not only the religious practices of those living under atheist regimes, but the political valence of religion around the globe.

A closer examination of the relationship between communism and religion has the potential to contribute significantly to the debate on secularism and religion as a global phenomenon. In order to contribute to this debate we must move beyond case studies to ask broader questions:

— Does communism produce or privilege particular forms of religion, or are there merely multiple constellations of local practice? Has existing research fetishized the communist experience to the exclusion of local cultural factors? Is there something specific to the communist experience that prompts religious revival, or is it more productive to see contemporary religious practice as a response to capitalist reform and part of a global resurgence in public religion?

— What kinds of religious behavior are enabled, constrained or determined by communist forms of governance? How do communist ideas about community, ethnicity, gender, race, class and the nation influence the way religious communities define themselves? What kinds of selves are formed through the intersection of communism and religious practice? Do communist definitions of the “good life” and the “moral person” shape religious aspirations? And conversely, how does religion influence political projects within, as well as directed towards, communist and post-communist states? What is the relationship between trans-national influences such as missionary networks, global economic markets, global media, or political demands for “free religious markets,” and the social, political and moral habits acquired under communism?

This workshop seeks to bring together scholars of religion in communist and former communist countries to address these theoretical questions through comparative data from a broad geographic spectrum. We invite scholars who work on religious practice in post- or currently communist countries to present their work at a two-day workshop, concluding with a round-table discussion. Our goal is to produce an edited volume that assesses the state of current research, provides clarity about what can be said about the relationship between religion and communism, and defines new directions for research. *Projects do not have to be based on comparative research, but must seek to draw theoretical conclusions that enable comparison across geographic boundaries.* Papers presented at the workshop must not be committed for publication elsewhere.

The workshop will be held at the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Religious and Ethnic Diversity in Goettingen, Germany on May 6–7, 2011. Please submit a paper proposal of no more than 500 words and a brief biographical description or CV to Quijada@mmg.mpg.de by October 8, 2010. Travel and accommodation will be provided for workshop participants. Papers will be circulated to all participants prior to the workshop in order to facilitate the discussion. Any questions please contact: Quijada@mmg.mpg.de