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Jan Tesář

The History of Scientific Atheism. A Comparative Study of Czechoslovakia and Soviet Union (1954–1991)

Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2019. 355 S., 9 Graph., 2 Ktn., 8 Tab. = Religiöse Kulturen im Europa der Neuzeit, 16. ISBN: 978-3-525-31086-1.

The ambition of this publication is to present scientific atheism as a specific discipline that was formed in the second half of the twentieth century in Eastern Europe. The author chose to compare Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, whereby he does not deny the Soviet Union's leading role in the establishment of this "science" but leaves enough space for the emergence and development of "deviations" in the individual countries of the Soviet Bloc. The dynamics described and analyzed by the author may, at first glance, seem somewhat surprising: scientific atheism has been, after all, viewed as a rigid ideological product. Yet, once we take into account how many diverse factors and influences contributed to its development, we discover that from the perspective of the history of science, it exemplifies interesting dynamics in the process of establishment and development of a new scientific field within a homogeneous ideological environment. The author perceives this process in terms of the "production of knowledge".

By adopting this approach, the author is trying to challenge the Western view of scientific atheism that considers it a pseudoscience. His aim is to show that scientific atheism in fact functioned as real science. However, he approaches this issue not from the perspective of the history of science – which could be viewed as a methodologically controversial aspect of the publication – but employs insights from transfer studies and entangled history to explore socio-political and socio-cultural dynamics. His main interpretation model, thus, relies on the transfer of knowledge from the center to the periphery followed synchronously for the two countries in question.

Despite a methodologically most interesting introduction outlining his approach, in the book proper the author tends to adopt a rather more traditional concept of comparing the center and the periphery. This is also where one can note that he is inspired more by Central European and German historiography rather than, as he claims, by anglophone literature.

The structure of the book is built around its core subject: the formation of a new scientific discipline. The first chapter aims to contextualise scientific atheism by going back to the first half of the twentieth century. The author is trying to show that post-war scientific atheism in both the USSR and in Czechoslovakia differed from interwar scientific atheism. It should be noted, though, that the political regimes of these two periods were different and the comparison somewhat marginalises this fact by making sweeping generalisations of leftist activities without trying to go into a more detailed typology of leftist atheism.

Nevertheless, it is characteristic of both states concerned that antireligious activities were not the goal of the regime as such. They were mainly viewed as an instrument to modernise society, especially in rural areas. The aim was to teach people to think rationally and scientifically. Rather than an enforcement of atheism, this was antireligious propaganda aimed at the institutional foundations of religion and not religious dogmas. At this time, atheism tended to be defined in negative terms, i. e., mainly by its ability to unmask and deconstruct religious myths and superstitions.

The second chapter presents the development of atheistic thinking during late Stalinism and the period of the early “thaw”, that is, ideological liberalisation. It describes the gradual process knowledge formation, definition of the term “atheism”, etc. It also tries to find an explanation for the later divergent development of the discipline in Czechoslovakia and the USSR. The third chapter focuses on the institutionalisation of scientific atheism as a separate scientific field. For instance, while in the 1950s, specialised literature on scientific atheism was dominated by translations from other languages, by the end of the decade, domestic scientific production was seen as more pressing. This resulted from the creation of specialised groups of experts; such groups formed at the instigation of the central committees of the respective Communist parties and their thinktanks, which were usually appointed by academies of social sciences attached to the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the USSR or the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia. In contrast to regular scientific disciplines, whose formation as separate fields were fostered from below by individual scientists and their expanding networks, the birth of scientific atheism was dictated from above. Political pressure accelerated the process of institutionalisation thanks to a social consensus and financial backing.

In both chapters, the author tends to focus on the central institutions of scientific atheism in Czechoslovakia while dealing with the university milieu only on the margins – with one exception, namely the “Czechoslovak deviation”. He does not, however, try to explain why this “deviation” in the form of an open dialogue between Christianity and Marxism, which by that time already integrated atheism as one of its cornerstones, took place within the university environment. There are two possible reasons: first of all, generational continuity, because sociology of religion – as represented in interwar Czechoslovakia at the Faculty of Philosophy e.g. by Otakar Pertold, the first professor of religious studies in Czechoslovakia and an important representative of scientific atheism in Czechoslovakia – simply expanded previous research of interwar atheism; it was this direction of thought that was later developed by the radical Stalinist Otakar Nahodil and others. The second reason is the political pressure on the Academy of Sciences as a central scientific institution.

The 1970s and 1980s were then, in the author’s view, a time of stability, a time when discussions about scientific atheism withdrew mainly to the space of specific expert culture. During this period the propagandistic agenda was outside its main scope and scientific atheism disappeared from the public space, which explains its rapid disappearance during the period of perestroika and glasnost.

The author chose a fascinating subject and approached it with very sound knowledge of various possible approaches and awareness of the challenges its interpretation was likely to pose. It is to be much admired that the author was able to read publications on scientific atheism from this entire era, i. e., 1950s–1980s, as serious scientific literature. Regarding methodological issues, though, one could note a somewhat problematic handling of archival sources. The author seems to believe that the archives of the Society for Dissemination of Political and Scientific Knowledge, later Socialist Academy, did not survive. They did, at least for the period of 1973–1989: they are kept in the National Archives in Prague and include over 80 boxes. For the period of 1948–1973, the records of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia with its firmly fixed structure of sessions, allows to access the quite frequent discussions dedicated to the Society. Hence, there is a fairly consistent track record on the Society from its beginnings all the way to its thorough transformation in 1969–1973. Moreover, based on these documents from the central political power one can clearly and relatively easily reconstruct the political interest in the dissem-

ination of atheism. This shortcoming is, in such an outstanding book, regrettable: it is a pity that the author in his archive research overlooked this extensive collection. It would have provided empirical material that would have doubtless allowed for a further, more thorough elaboration of some of his conclusions.

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Stefan Creuzberger

Das deutsch-russische Jahrhundert. Geschichte einer besonderen Beziehung

Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 2022. 670 S., Abb. ISBN: 978-3-498-04703-0.

Das neueste Werk von Stefan Creuzberger, Professor für Zeitgeschichte an der Universität Rostock, trifft offenbar auf ein aufgeschlossenes Publikum. Die erste und zweite Auflage des Buchs folgten ab März 2022 rasch aufeinander. In der Amazon Rangliste „Bestseller Ukrainische Geschichte“ lag der Titel – Stand 22. August 2022 – auf Rang sechs (https://www.amazon.de/gp/bestsellers/books/15778841/ref=pd_zg_hrsr_books). Diese Vertriebs- und Verkaufsdaten sowie die Tatsache, dass das Buch für den Deutschen Sachbuchpreis 2022 nominiert war, belegen, wie groß seit dem 24. Februar 2022 das deutsche Bedürfnis ist, sich unter den dramatischen neuen Umständen in Osteuropa zu orientieren, und wie lückenhaft das entsprechende Informationsangebot erschien. Aufgrund der Entstehungsgeschichte des Werks und des allgemeinen Forschungsstands bleibt das Geschehen des Jahres 2022 im Buch allerdings zwangsläufig ausgespart. Auch wird die jüngste Vorgeschichte des russischen Überfalls auf die Ukraine – von 2012 bis 2020 – auf wenigen Seiten nur sehr gerafft erzählt (S. 344–345, 350–356, insbesondere S. 534–547 und 555–562).

Andere Lücken sind für einen groß angelegten Überblick weniger nachvollziehbar. Zu diesen zählen unter anderem eine nähere Auseinandersetzung mit dem Beginn des Ersten Weltkriegs, mit den politischen Beziehungen der 1930er Jahre, dem 17. Juni 1953 sowie dem Mauerbau. Insgesamt hätte sich einleitend eine eingehendere Reflexion über die präsentierten Zäsuren angeboten, zumal dann, wenn man wie Creuzberger die vergleichsweise populäre – jedoch keineswegs unumstrittene – Bezeichnung des 20. Jahrhunderts als „amerikanisch geprägtes Jahrhundert“ in Frage stellt (S. 18). Ohnehin entfalteten auch die Beziehungen St. Petersburgs bzw. Moskaus mit Nachbarn wie China und Japan oder das deutsch-französische Verhältnis für lange Perioden eine regionale und internationale Wirkungsmacht, die derjenigen der Beziehungen zwischen Deutschland und Russland bzw. der Sowjetunion nicht wirklich nachstand. Generell hätte man sich während der Lektüre in vielen Passagen von Rapallo bis zum Ende des Kalten Kriegs eine stärkere internationale Einbettung der Darstellung in Probleme der wirtschaftlichen Globalisierung sowie in Fragen globaler Neuordnungsprozesse gewünscht. Mit einer solchen Kontextualisierung hätten sich nicht zuletzt unterschiedliche regionale, europäische oder globale Reichweiten der Beziehungsgeschichte klarer markieren lassen. Während und nach dem Kalten Krieg stand das deutsch-sowjetische