Fragile Conviction

Pelkmans, Mathijs

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Part II

Dynamics of Conviction
What Happened to Soviet Atheism?

It was July 2009, and after a day of various work activities, Kadyr and I drove up a hill overlooking Kokjangak, picked up some beers along the way, and sat in the grass, relaxing and talking about the things that were on our minds. Kadyr knew I had been asking people questions about atheism, and he decided to share the following anecdote, of which I had already heard other versions (and not only in Kyrgyzstan). The anecdote was about a young antireligious activist who had been sent to the summer pastures to lecture the herdsmen of the collective about evolution. When the activist finally finished his long and tedious lecture in which he had explained that our human ancestors were apes, one of the oldest herdsmen raised his voice: “This is all very well, and I am willing to accept that your forefathers were apes, as long as it is clear that mine were decidedly human.” We laughed, but it remained unclear what the laughter was about. Were we—or was Kadyr—simply laughing at the narrow-mindedness of the antireligious activist and the quick-wittedness of the herder? Or were we perhaps also ridiculing the old man as a remnant of an outdated worldview, as someone who could not be taken seriously either?
The anecdote and the ambivalence that spoke through it testify to the kinds of epistemological conundrums that Kadyr and many others of his generation and background experienced. Kadyr was in his late forties, married, with four children, living in a modest house on the outskirts of Kokjangak. He had studied in Bishkek (then still named Frunze), subsequently worked as an engineer in the coal mine, and, after the mine’s closure, lived off his small plot of land and his modest income as director of a local credit union. Kadyr would describe himself as a Muslim, a designation that for him was tightly interwoven with Kyrgyz culture and tradition. If asked, he would add that he was “not close to religion,” which referred to the fact that he never went to the mosque and did not pay attention to the pillars of Islam. His secular position resembled that of many middle-aged town dwellers and was linked to a set of values that reflected having lived through the late Soviet period. Though Kadyr had never cared about scientific atheism, and, as we saw, was happy to ridicule it, the larger Soviet framework to which atheism had been tied was still of relevance to how he saw himself: modern, educated, and cultured.
In this chapter we will look at the ways in which people like Kadyr position themselves in relation to atheism, and subsequently gain insight into what happened to Soviet scientific atheism more generally. This atheism had vanished from public view in the early 1990s, almost as if its heavy-handed dissemination for a good seven decades had never taken place. As reflected in the anecdote, atheism came to be an object of ridicule and dismissal. In this chapter I ask what this public dismissal reveals not only about the “postatheist condition” but also about the features of “actually existing atheism” during the Soviet period. Drawing attention to contradictions in the architecture of atheism, I argue that the absence of a utopian dimension in Soviet atheism prevented its authentic realization and failed to incite lasting commitment and conviction in most people, which in turn enabled the swift removal of atheism at the end of the Soviet period.

However, the ambiguity of laughter suggested that the ridiculing and dismissal of atheism did not necessarily go very deep, and the anecdote could also be read as letting the antireligious activist off the hook. The staging of an elderly and presumably uneducated herder suggested apprehensiveness about religious ideas, in this case as a legacy of a “backward” past, but which was also linked to the idea that religiosity indicates narrow-mindedness. Such notions were particularly common among people who presented themselves as “not religious” or “not close to religion,” whose anxieties were being fueled by the proliferation of new religious voices. In other words, the public dismissal of atheism did not mean that the various attitudes and ideas associated with it melted into thin air. Ironically, the public disappearance of atheism triggered renewed defenses of that which had never been desired.

**Surface Disappearance**

Back in 1999, when Soviet life was still a recent memory, I had a conversation with a friend who was an academic and former Communist Party member living in Bishkek, someone who referred to himself as being “not religious.” The previous day he had watched, on his regular TV channel, a US-made documentary decrying evolutionary theory. The documentary had presented scientific evidence in support of the view that the world
was only several thousand years old, and used this to uphold the strength of intelligent-design theory. “It is amazing,” my friend told me, “all those years I had assumed that evolution was a fact, but, as it now turns out, that was just atheist propaganda.” What interested me about this incident were not the specific strengths or weaknesses of either theory, but rather the re-classification of the “fact” of evolution into Soviet “propaganda” precisely because it happened in such an ad hoc manner. It suggested that because all previously acquired knowledge had potentially been propaganda (in the sense of having deliberately been distorted), knowledge itself had become unstable. But did this imply that atheism had simply evaporated? Or was the fact of evolution (and more broadly scientific atheism) perhaps never completely accepted as factual? And even if accepted as fact, what kind of intellectual and emotional investment, if any, did that indicate? For an investigation of these issues, a good point of entrance is the observation that evolutionary theory and atheist ideology vanished from the public sphere in August 1991. The contrast between two books from the early 1990s written by Kyrgyz scholars conveniently illustrates this disappearance of atheism from public discourse.

In 1991, before August of that memorable year, Melis Abdyldaev, a Kyrgyz philosopher and scholar of atheism, published, in Russian, Iz istorii religii i ateizma v Kyrgyzstane (From the History of Religion and Atheism in Kyrgyzstan). The book contains a detailed history of the successes of the antireligious struggle, as well as the various obstacles that had to be overcome. His tone is often jubilant, and toward the end of the book he writes that “at present we have an entire battery of functioning people’s universities of atheism” (1991, 110), delivering atheist activist graduates (propagandisty–ateisty) who are prolific in their activities. For example, one of Kyrgyzstan’s provinces had no less than ninety teachers of atheism who gave a total of 2,221 lectures on atheism in the year 1986–87 (116–17). Abdyldaev acknowledges that the atheist project was by no means completed, and lists the familiar problems such as the use of crude and offensive techniques (109; see also Ro’i 1984, 31). But he envisions a bright future in which religion will have withered away, and he proposes that this goal will be reached faster if atheist activists engage more seriously with the philosophical basis of their project and proceed in nonconfronting manners, for example by promoting nonreligious rituals (1991, 126–27).
Just two years later, in 1993, another Kyrgyz scholar, Anara Tabyshalieva, published (also in Russian) *Vera v Turkestane: Ocherk istorii religii Srednei Azii i Kazakhstana* (Belief in Turkestan: Essays on the History of Religion of Central Asia and Kazakhstan), which traces the history of various religious traditions. In a chapter titled “Soviet Times,” Tabyshalieva mentions the closure of mosques and churches, the change of alphabet, the *hujum*, or unveiling campaigns, and the terror of the 1930s when believers were regarded as Trotskyites and imperialist spies (1993, 112–15), all as aspects of the long and erratic struggle against religion. But while Abdyl-daev focuses on the massive antireligious input, Tabyshalieva stresses the limited or even contradictory output. For example, she suggests that the cheap literature on atheism often functioned to trigger interest in religion (116), and argues that the antireligious regime ultimately failed to inculcate atheist worldviews in its citizens. She concludes that “the renaissance of religiosity turned out to be the unexpected answer to the long and indifferent domination of atheism [and] the loss of belief in a communist or a socialist future” (122).

Tabyshalieva’s book is an example of atheism’s disappearance, of how it vanished almost overnight from scholarly work, political rhetoric, and public discourse. But at least the book still mentions Soviet atheism. Later texts on the history of religion published in Kyrgyzstan invariably reduced the Soviet atheist project to a couple of paragraphs at most, its authors often jumping from pre-Soviet to post-Soviet times (see, for example, Chotaeva 2004; Moldobaev 2002). Political spokespersons equally distanced themselves from atheism, and used references to Muslimness and “nomadic spirituality,” such as those found in the epic of Manas, to bolster their claims to power. It would be problematic to conclude from such trends that Kyrgyzstan was rapidly becoming a “religious place,” but what is significant is that direct references to atheism had become conspicuously absent. The “atheist experiment” had become an object of ridicule, an awkward memory to be forgotten, and an increasingly irrelevant historical artifact.

When Tabyshalieva wrote that the renaissance of religion was the “unexpected answer,” she touched on a core element in the argument that Alexei Yurchak later expounded in his book *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* (2005). Writing about the Soviet system as a whole, he states that “although the system’s collapse had been unimaginable before
it began, it appeared unsurprising when it happened” (1). Yurchak solves this seeming paradox by arguing that the Soviet system and its ideology had been eroded from the inside out, and that people had already oriented themselves in new directions when the collapse occurred. Focusing on the role of language he documents the unfolding of a shift from “constative meaning” in which the content of ideological statements was understood to refer (relatively straightforwardly) to societal realities, to “performative meaning” in which ideological language becomes largely self-referential. In practical terms this meant that the content became subservient to the form, that is, both speakers and listeners increasingly focused on how things were being said, instead of what was being said. This “hegemony of form” obscured and destabilized the relation between signifier and signified, between ideological discourse and the reality to which it ostensibly referred. Moreover, because the specific content of ideological language had become largely irrelevant, people became increasingly creative in looking for meaning elsewhere. In hindsight, this opened up creative possibilities that prepared Soviet citizens for the collapse, even if they had been unaware of it at the time.

Although Yurchak does not address atheism or antireligious discourse, the similarities are obvious. Scientific atheism had been an integral part of Soviet ideology, and Soviet citizens did not expect it to disappear before it actually did. Moreover, the hegemony of form had obscured the weaknesses of the antireligious efforts. This is not to say that the antireligious position was mere pretense. For teachers, atheist activists, and Communist Party members it constituted a discourse of familiarity and mutual understanding. But even for them atheism did not in and of itself project an attractive vision onto the world. While people continued to perform allegiance to atheism, their attitudes had become increasingly ambivalent and ironic, so that once the Soviet Union collapsed, atheism could be dismissed without much further discussion.

Notwithstanding these similarities, the case of atheism has several distinctive features. Another reference to Tabyshalieva may clarify this. She speaks of the renaissance of religiosity as the answer to “the long and indifferent domination of atheism, to the social disruption and economic disappointments that were chaotically produced, and most importantly to the loss of belief in a communist or a socialist future” (1993, 122, emphasis added). Along with many authors Tabyshalieva writes about the disillusionment
with the communist project that characterized the late Soviet period, but she appears to suggest, by using the word “indifference,” that in the case of atheism the implicit illusion may never have existed. Hence the kinds of cynicism that ensued were of a different nature. Consider the well-known Soviet joke “They pretend to pay us and we pretend to work,” which was popular precisely because it summed up the sense of disillusionment with the Soviet project and its disempowering effects. This joke could be easily translated to atheism, and many citizens of the Soviet Union would have agreed with the formulation “They pretend to eradicate religion, and we pretend to be atheists.” But the effect is different. Whereas in the original anecdote everyone would agree on the importance of fair payment and the ultimate goals of (socialist) labor, in the reformulated version even the goal (of eradicating religion) was being questioned.

The important difference, then, seems to be that atheism never had a utopian element independent from the larger Soviet structure of which it was a part. This was evident when I asked an acquaintance if in her view atheism still existed, and received an answer full of surprise as to why I would even ask that question: “Atheism? All the institutions have disappeared!” At one level this was a straightforward truism, but what spoke through it was the assumption that “of course” the idea of atheism could never outlive its centralized institutionalized form.

Soviet atheism represented an extreme instance of the “hegemony of form” that had rendered ideological content redundant. This explains, to a degree, why Kyrgyz scholars, politicians, and ordinary citizens were able to distance themselves so quickly from the Soviet atheist project. There is a problem, though. If allegiance to atheism was largely about “form,” can we not also postulate that atheism’s dismissal was similarly about “form,” giving us only very few insights into the continuities and discontinuities that operated below the surface? In other words, by answering one riddle—how and why did atheism disappear from public discourse?—we have created new ones. If we can speak of disappearance at all, what was it that had disappeared, and what had come in its stead?

The former communist mentioned in the beginning of this section had reclassified the “fact of evolution” as fantastic “propaganda,” and had done so with relative ease because he had never been emotionally invested in this “fact.” This calls for an exploration of what “actually existing atheism” had amounted to. Equally relevant to mention is the ad hoc nature of the
former communist’s reclassification. He was flirting with creationism at that very instance, but in later years would often talk dismissively about the new prominence of religious voices in the public and political domain. As will be documented below, atheism, to the extent that it existed, did leave important traces on people’s attitudes and dispositions, which in spite of its surface disappearance would take on relevance in new contexts.

The Problem of Realizing Atheism

The suggestion “hegemony of form” provides an important clue for why atheism could be easily dismissed. But why did Soviet atheism fail to be emotionally and intellectually embodied? Yurchak’s emphasis on the routinization of ideological language, together with Weber’s more encompassing argument regarding routinization through institutionalization (1968, 54–61), are important considerations, but these need to be augmented by an analysis of the architecture of atheist ideology itself. I provisionally hypothesize that an important reason for the “hegemony of form” in the case of atheism is that it is an empty ideology in the sense that it does not offer a forward-looking idea that allows people to identify with it or, in Althusser’s words, to be interpellated by it.

Yurchak unwittingly points at the possibility of such a line of inquiry when he refers to Soviet ideology as a case of “failed interpellation” (2005, 116–17), but does so without following up on the brief reference to Althusser. Reconsider the anecdote of the atheist activist and the herdsman that started off this chapter. One of the many ironies of this anecdote is that, despite it having traveled widely across (post-)Soviet space, it is unlikely that such encounters happened often. The reason is that the failure of interpellation is a two-way process, as can be illustrated with reference to Althusser’s original example, concerning the police officer who hails an individual—“hey, you there!”—at which the addressee turns round, and in the moment of turning becomes (is reaffirmed as) an ideological subject ([1971] 2008, 48). The point of the comparison is not just that the herdsman who “turned” ridiculed and indeed emasculated the “police officer,” but that the atheist activists were themselves often hesitant in hailing individuals. Instead of confidently hailing, they would hesitantly whisper, “Hey, you there.” Frequently they would only “hail” on paper but not in
person, or they would end up drinking vodka with the audience they were supposed to enlighten.

This may appear a flippant caricature, and we will have time to revisit it, but these are the elements that come through strongly in the complaints of late Soviet scholars. The problem with atheism in the 1970s and ’80s was its inability to produce a compelling alternative to religion. Sure, the antireligious efforts did not lack in quantity (of publications, manpower, etc.), but they often lacked zeal. Thus, while the course Foundations of Scientific Atheism was being taught in hundreds of universities and technical high schools across the country, “complaints continued that there was much laxity and little enthusiasm on the part of students and instructors” (Pospielovsky 1987, 112). And while the “number of atheistic lectures . . . in Uzbekistan doubled from 28,289 in 1966 to 47,921 in 1976” (Kocaoglu 1984, 146), it was highly doubtful that these lectures (whatever number were actually delivered) convinced many people.

Notwithstanding the massive antireligious efforts (and not only on paper), Soviet sociologists acknowledged the lack of progress in inculcating atheist worldviews and attitudes. By 1981, writes Dimitry Pospielovsky, “the establishment’s main concern was with the increasing amount of indifference to atheism and atheist propaganda, a kind of agnosticism as it were, in the ranks of the Soviet youth” (1987, 117). Some blamed this on the “conciliatory attitude to religion on the part of some communists and Komsomol members, and their participation in religious ceremonies and services” (Ro’i 1984, 33). Ro’i concludes on the basis of literature written by Soviet scholars in the Kyrgyz SSR that “atheistic propaganda lacked drive and specificity” (31). Working with similar literature David Powell concludes that “perhaps the most basic failure of atheist propaganda is its failure to reach believers” (1967, 372).

Atheism has a problem of interpellation because it lacks a utopian dimension or a “devotional core.” Returning to Althusser, he argues that all ideology is centered around an “Absolute Subject” that “interpellates around it the infinity of individuals into subjects in a double mirror-connexion,” thereby subjecting these individuals to itself “while giving them . . . the guarantee that this really concerns them and Him” ([1971] 2008, 54). But this understanding of ideology cannot be applied easily to atheism, as can be illustrated even by looking at the term itself. “Atheism” combines the prefix “a-” indicating “absence of,” with the suffix
“-ism” indicating an active stance or ideology. That is, just like “amorality” indicates not immorality but the mere absence of morality, so can a-theism be seen as the mere absence of “theism” or religion. The more “active” or energized types of atheism can be either antagonistic or substantive. In the antagonistic version, atheism manifests itself as an anti-theism, deriving its fervor from its contrarian position. In the substantive version, atheism manifests itself as athe-ism, developing an alternative set of values to aspire to. However, each of these possible versions of atheism contains an internal contradiction.

(Not) Remembering Soviet Atheism

As mentioned, in Kyrgyzstan after 1991, Soviet atheism had become an embarrassment of sorts, something preferably to be forgotten. Most people I spoke to simply dismissed the topic. This silence stood out precisely because other memories of the Soviet past were so readily communicated. My acquaintances in Kokjangak talked with pride about the heydays of their mining town, about the work ethic that had existed, and of having been part of a civilization in the making, just as they talked (with less enthusiasm) about the human sacrifices that had been made to produce this civilization and the corruption that accompanied its decay (see chapter 2). In contrast, people were highly reluctant to speak about atheism and antireligious efforts. When I would ask questions about it, the most typical response resembled the following one: “We just pretended to be atheists, but in our hearts we always believed [in God].” This response devalued atheism in the present, while the insistence on pretense suggested that Soviet atheism never had any value in the past either. Though this statement and similar ones confirm the failed interpellation of the previous section, it is important not to take them at face value. Pushing beyond people’s knee-jerk reaction, I encouraged several former teachers and activists of atheism to elaborate on their views.

As a former school director, Asel’ Kosobaeva was a respected inhabitant of Kokjangak. She had been schooled in scientific atheism but looked back
at it with distaste. “Scientific atheism,” she stressed, “is such a Soviet term, very vulgar [Russian, vul′garnoe] and coarse [gruboe], a simplistic distortion of religiosity.” We spoke in her house, while her daughter-in-law brought in tea and food. She elaborated:

Nowadays there is no one left who will say that they are atheist. But actually, we weren’t atheists during the Soviet period either—back then we were also believers. Our God, the God of the Soviet people, was Marxism, Leninism, we were believers in the ideas of Marx and Lenin. And you see this [confirmed] when you go to the university [in Bishkek]. They have this Department of Religious Studies now, but its professors used to teach scientific atheism. That’s absurd, isn’t it?

Asel’ rationalized her own involvement by saying, “Yes, I was a Komsomol member, an activist, a communist. That was all—how should I say it? . . . They didn’t give us the possibility to think independently.” Asked to give examples of the antireligious activism she used to be involved in, Asel’ mentioned a trip with other activists to a village near Kokjangak:

When we arrived in Oktiabr’skoe [village] we were directed to this Kyrgyz family, about whom [local teachers] were exasperated: “We have no idea what to do with them.” The family turned out to be a young husband and wife, both in their twenties, Kyrgyz, who had become Baptists! So I asked them: “How can you be Baptists?! That is an entirely different faith! Are you not even thinking of your parents? This is a Muslim environment. It is fine that you are not Muslims, but you are Asians, so why . . . ?!” And then they answered. I didn’t know what to say, so I just remained silent. They talked about their lack of basic means [of living]. Their parents had been poor: the husband’s parents had died, the wife only had an elderly mother. And the Baptists had helped them, with money, with building a house. . . . You know, “Religion is the opium of the people.” That’s the basis, everything follows from that.

Asel’s stories contain many interesting elements, ranging from the ways in which the relation between religion and culture was configured to the specifics of antireligious activism and the explicit suggestion about “opium of the people.” Such leads will be followed up after we look at a few more viewpoints. What is worth emphasizing here is that during our conversation,
Asel’ unreflectively shifted from a dismissal of atheism to a rejection of unorthodox forms of religiosity, such as in this case Russian Baptists, which culminated in her affirmation of the “opium of the people” dictum.

Olga Nikolaevna, a Russian woman in her sixties, used to teach English in school number 1, the only school in Kokjangak still having a Russian-language curriculum. After her two children moved away to Bishkek and Russia, she and her husband thought about leaving as well, but they considered themselves too old, and anyway, they both still had work. She wasn’t entirely sure why I wanted to talk about atheism:

Atheism no longer exists, neither in the schools nor at the university. Those topics have disappeared, they are no longer propagated [bol’she ne propagandiruiut]. On the contrary, nowadays it is religion that is propagated in the schools. In school number 4 the imam teaches “morality” from the Koran, and if more Russians had stayed in town, surely the Bible would have been used as well.

Olga told me that she had not thought about atheism in decades. “The thing is,” she added, “we learned scientific atheism so-so, just to pass the exam, and that is why I don’t remember much about it.” She tried to find her old books on atheism to refresh her memory for our conversation, but the books had disappeared from the house. Although she had primarily taught English, she also used to teach several “class hours” each week that were devoted to Soviet citizenship. “We talked about the things that the plan stipulated: first was patriotism; second was moral upbringing; third was religious and atheist education, and so on.” When the focus was on atheist and antireligious topics (once or twice a month), she prepared by reading popular literature and adjusting it to the age group she was teaching.

For example, I would ask them: “One of the Ten Commandments is not to commit adultery—you really think that those priests stick to that rule?” That’s how I tried to convince my pupils. . . . And I contrasted the childish primitiveness of religion with the flourishing of science in our country. For example, I would talk about the conquest of space [kosmos], asking the children: “If there was a God, surely the astronauts would have seen Him. But
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did the astronauts see God? Is there at least one astronaut who did?” [Olga excused herself to go to the kitchen, and when she returned, she said:] I am surprised that I personally spoke those words in class. Now it turns out that some astronauts actually did see aliens, but that they were sent to mental institutions [psikhushki]. If they saw signs of an extraterrestrial civilization, they were too afraid to talk about it.

Olga’s story is significant for a number of reasons, one of which is that it showed her past commitment to teaching, including teaching atheism, going to some length to translate and adjust the abstract message to her particular audience. This resonates with Sonja Luehrmann’s observation about the effort and indeed sincerity of atheist teaching in the Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic of Mari El, that through their engagement with atheist ideology, her informants fashioned themselves as Soviet teachers and practitioners (2011). While recollecting these memories Olga seemed almost surprised that she had held such strong views, a surprise that was probably related to her later flirtations with Orthodox and Pentecostal Christianity.

Svetlana Iussupovna used to be head of the Bishkek branch of the Knowledge Society (Znanie), the all-union society devoted to public lectures on scientific topics, and had been an active communist all her life. 9 Throughout our conversation she emphasized that the stories about the antireligious campaigns were all terribly exaggerated: “We never closed any churches or mosques, and we never imprisoned anyone because of his or her beliefs. Sure, I’m not denying that we fought [Russian, borolis’] against religion, but it was just a small part of everything else that we did. It came, maybe, on the tenth place.” This was true even in a literal sense, such as when taking part in educational programs designed for pastoralists. “I was part of a campaigning team [agitbrigada], and when we traveled to the mountain pastures [Kyrgyz, jailoo], we would bring all kinds of things—about health, about agriculture, and also about atheism.” She then continued to speak about the antireligious activities she had taken part in:

We never went to the mosque or to the Orthodox church. Yes, we fought against religion, but mostly Jehovah’s Witnesses and Baptists. I was even at
their meetings. It was difficult to get there, because they constantly changed their location. But we received information of who is going where, et cetera. Mind you, no one would be imprisoned for their beliefs. Imprisonment only happened when the law was broken. For example, we had a law that children under eighteen should not be drawn into the cult. . . . We actively campaigned [agitirovali], we told people that there is no God, that it is human morality that makes society, those kinds of things. And we asked them: “Why do you need this God? Don’t you know how detrimental [vredny] all of that is?” That is how we worked, but the thing is that at that time there was order. Everyone had work. This [chaos] is what we got with your ideology, when money comes first. Nowadays people only think about making money, they don’t care if what they sell is bad for people’s health.

After the interview had ended we drank tea with cookies and talked about the changes in the city as well as her former colleagues. Many of them had started to teach about the history of religion instead of socialism. She looked dismissive, saying, “For me that doesn’t work. Life is short, and I don’t have time, I can’t simply change my ideology.” She then took a bottle of vodka from the cupboard and announced, “Let’s conclude this meeting the Soviet way” (po sovetskii).

These briefly presented views significantly overlap. They agreed that atheism had disappeared to the extent that it had become rare to find self-proclaimed atheists, and that religious voices were being propagated instead of atheist ones. They connected these trends to the collapse of Soviet institutions and Soviet morality, but they disagreed as to whether this was a positive or negative development. Beyond these agreements and disagreements the three women emphasized different aspects or dimensions of “really existing” Soviet atheism.

The Issue of Substance

Does atheism have substance? In other words, should we read it as merely the absence of religion—that is, as a-theism—or as an ideological stance in its own right, athe-ism? The examples above suggest that both interpretations need to be considered.
The nonideology, or empty ideology, view came through most strongly in the comments of Olga, who had difficulty providing details when I prompted her to do so, suggesting that the topic never had any intrinsic value to her. This is not to say that she did not make an effort in her teaching. She filled the void of atheism by providing lively examples of the hypocrisy of religious leaders, and by emphasizing the progress of science. Along somewhat similar lines, Svetlana stressed that atheism was part of the larger project of socialism, and that as “the tenth thing,” it derived value from that connection. The emphasis on science and the larger socialist project indicated that “atheism” did not have affective qualities in and of itself.

This “emptiness of atheism” creates a problem, because as long as it is centered on a void or absence it has trouble producing commitment. As atheist activist Madalyn Murray O’Hair said about atheism in North America, the problem is that “although [atheists are] numerous [they remain] unorganized and complacent” (cited in Martin 2007b, 220; Baggini 2009). Similarly, the humanists in Britain tend to present themselves as an unrecognized avant-garde for a silent majority of like-minded others (Engelke 2014; Matthew Engelke, pers. comm.). The situation was different in the state-socialist version of atheism. There, atheist organizations boasted huge membership, but especially toward the end of the Soviet period these were characterized by a weak internal structure behind a Potemkin-like facade (Peris 1998, 118–20). Officials and specialists were well aware of the indifference of both atheist activists and their audience. A telling example is provided by David Powell, citing a Soviet official who, in his speech at a conference of atheist specialists, exclaimed, in exasperation, “I repeat: it [religiosity] is a feeling, and you cannot fight it without instilling a counter feeling” (1967, 375).

The need to produce “counter feelings” may well be why atheisms the world over have a tendency to acquire “religious” characteristics. This is evident particularly in organized forms of atheism, where the original emphasis on reason and rationality or on “the absence of religion” is complemented by the celebration of heroes and exemplary men and women, by “sacred” symbols, and utopian visions of society. As Grace Davie (2012, 4) has suggested, “Communities of unbelief in each country form mirror images of [the existing religious] institutions.” This “mirroring” works in two distinct ways, as can be seen in the Soviet case. On the one hand, there is
the tendency to define atheism as the opposite of how specific versions of
religions are being seen, and thus to stress the features of “rationality,”
“progress,” and being “for the masses,” all in contrast to the backward-
ness and oppressive nature of religion. On the other hand, though, there
is a tendency for atheist organizations to manifest themselves, in Jesse
Smith’s words, as the “functional equivalent of organized religion” (2013,
92). Convenient Soviet examples are the Lenin and Stalin cults, the almost
“religious” devotion that many Soviet citizens demonstrated to these lead-
ers, and the emphasis on creating secular rituals that engaged with the
big questions of life and death (see especially Lane 1981). Ironically, these
“functional equivalents” suggest that atheism only becomes affective at the
moment that it negates itself, when it is no longer an “a-theism” but a
pseudo religion. This pseudoreligious fervor fizzled out in the late Soviet
period, although Asel’ still invoked it by saying, “We were also believ-
ers” back then—"Our God was Marxism, Leninism.”610 But although she
spoke of Soviet atheism as a religion, in which communist prophets had
taken over the place of Jesus and Muhammad, she also stressed that it was
a vulgar and simplistic imitation of religion. Or as Tabyshalieva wrote,
among the intelligentsia the cynical question emerged: “Did we have the
pure atheism or did we perhaps [only] get its imitation?” (1993, 121).

Scientific atheism did not have an appeal in and of itself, but rather
gained legitimacy, at least for some activists, by being part of a larger
scheme. This came through most clearly in Svetlana’s suggestion that
antireligious struggle was “maybe the tenth thing,” and her emphasis on
the importance of the larger Soviet project. But when this larger scheme,
the promised communist future, lost in credibility, there was very little to
lean on. The resulting problem of indifference, of erosion from within, has
been termed “a-atheism” by William van den Bercken, who suggested that
this “fairly common phenomenon in Soviet society” was best described as
“a form of secularization within the ideological monoculture, of removal
of ideology from the personal sphere” (1985, 275).

The Issue of Difference

As mentioned earlier, atheism often reveals itself as an anti-theism. So-
viet atheism gained momentum through the fight against organized reli-
gion. Atheist and antireligious fervor was at its height in the early decades
of Soviet rule. Contested as these antireligious efforts were, the early members of the bezbozhniki (the communist league of the godless), the female Uzbek communists involved in the hujum, or unveiling campaigns (Kamp 2006), and the workers and peasants involved in the expropriation of religious buildings and properties across the USSR (Husband 2000) cannot be denied some measure of enthusiasm. That is, atheism was a motivating force when it faced a clear adversary, and could present itself as part of a forward-moving project directed at a modern future.

The idea that atheist fervor is produced through opposition also emerged from the stories people told me about their own involvement in antireligious efforts in the late Soviet period. Recall Svetlana Iussupovna’s insistence that she never went to fight against a mosque or Orthodox church but instead targeted the Jehovah’s Witnesses and Baptists. She elaborated on the detrimental effects these “sects,” as she called them, had on young children. A similar point was made, indirectly, by Asel’ Kosobaeva, who found herself outraged when talking to Kyrgyz who were no longer Muslims but had become Baptists. The message speaking through this example was that certain forms of religiosity were too closely interwoven with the social and cultural fabric of late Soviet life to be seen as legitimate targets of antireligious interventions. Instead, the antireligious activists targeted unfitting elements such as Kyrgyz Baptists or the Jehovah’s Witnesses. The point is that the antireligious position gained legitimacy and fervor at those moments when it was directed at a clearly identifiable adversary.

It was thus through identifying the problematic “Other” that antireligious rhetoric was likely to find wider resonance even in the late Soviet period. At some point I discussed with several middle-aged men their views of the local “unregistered Baptist” community living in Kokjangak. The Soviet media, schoolteachers, and other official communications had always portrayed these Baptists in an extremely negative light, using the derisive terms sekta (sect) and fanatiki (fanatics). Talking about this, Nurbek, one of my self-avowed not-religious acquaintances, remarked: “I never believed the stories that the Baptists would sacrifice one of their children on a special holiday and would then eat the child, I never believed that. But I did believe the stories that once a year they would retreat to partake in a secret sexual orgy.” The anecdote was intentionally humorous, but also indicated that Nurbek used to perceive intense forms of self-avowed religiosity as being out of the ordinary—intriguing, abnormal—and, moreover,
that he had internalized those aspects of antireligious propaganda that were in line with already-held fears, desires, and perhaps especially his (teenage) fantasies.

By contrast, when it came to the fight against versions of religion that were deemed legitimate, things were different. It is not accidental that Svetlana stressed that they never went to the (Orthodox) church or the mosque. The difficulties atheist activists experienced with regard to affiliation with Islam were also due to the fact that a boundary between religion and culture cannot be easily drawn. Although during the 1930s and 1950s, in particular, the Soviet regime had waged extensive antireligious campaigns in which imams were prosecuted and most mosques and madrassas were shut down, it had been far less successful in eradicating the many aspects of religious expression and identity that were part of everyday life. In fact, even while the Soviet regime successfully combated many public manifestations of religion, it ironically also encoded religious identities through its nationality politics. As Kemal Karpat has shown for Soviet Central Asia more generally, the appeal of newly created national categories derived (in part) from “the incorporation of many elements of the religious culture in the emerging ‘national’ cultures [which gave] the adherents of the latter a sense of the historical continuity, strength, and durability of their cultures” (1993, 416). Vice versa, the incorporation of religious elements in conceptualizations of ethnicity, nationality, and culture also enshrined the position of Islam. As a Soviet periodical noted, “The survivals of Islam often appear under the mask of national traditions” (Ro’i 1984, 34). Soviet authorities bemoaned this intertwining of religious and national affiliation, as in the following complaint of the obkom (province committee) secretary of Osh Province (oblast) in southern Kyrgyzstan: “Some people suggest that a person who observes Islamic rites demonstrates thereby ‘respect’ for his nation, and in deviating from them insults it” (cited ibid., 36).

By the end of the Soviet period, national identity was intimately tied to Muslimness, but a Muslimness that had been stripped of much of its “spiritual” content and was thereby made compatible with Soviet ideals (Shahrani 1995). Conversely, the processes allowed for an environment where self-avowed atheists could actively claim to be Muslims. This overlap between religion and culture has continued to inspire interesting points of view among the “not religious,” such as the following statement of a middle-aged woman who used to be member of the Communist Party: “Look, we
are atheists, but of course we all believe in God.” She later elaborated: “We are atheists. Yes, we are Muslims, but let me explain. We are all Muslim people—Kazaks, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, Turkmen, Tajiks. We were born Muslims. That’s it” (quoted in McBrien and Pelkmans 2008, 87).

Disillusionment with the communist project is often—by and large correctly—attributed to the effect of a widening gap between the utopian communist vision and the reality of everyday Soviet life. But how does atheism fit into this picture? Soviet ideology was highly utopian, and the communist idea was accompanied by visions of healthy and affluent workers who achieved self-realization through their involvement in collective labor, and a new and modern age of technological achievements. Atheism, in itself, did not inspire such visions. Soviet leaders never promised atheism, and citizens did not desire atheism. The lack of a utopian dimension meant that it could not survive as a self-standing positive ideology. Its dependence on an Other meant that atheism (as anti-theism) worked only for as long as an external religious adversary could be identified, while attempts to instill “counter-feelings” from within resulted in pseudoreligious qualities that negated or compromised the atheist position. Sure, Soviet atheism continued to exist as part of the ideological state apparatus, embedded in a range of institutions, but disinterest and skepticism had corroded it from within long before the Soviet Union collapsed.

New Resonances of Soviet Atheism

As he had done on previous occasions, Kadyr expressed his perplexity of what he saw as people’s gullibility, their propensity to buy into the “fairy tales” (skazki) of the imam and any of the new preachers. We were sitting, once again, on a grassy hill overlooking the town, this time accompanied by Bolot, one of Kadyr’s oldest friends. Each of us holding a bottle of Baltika beer, we were sharing stories. “I am astonished that my neighbors believe this crap [erunda],” Kadyr repeated. Bolot agreed with him, but couldn’t refrain from mentioning that in the early 1990s he and Kadyr had once traveled all the way to the city of Kokand (located two hundred kilometers to the southwest) to see a spiritual healer. We laughed, as one does
with beer in hand, about the various events in Kokand, including Bolot’s momentary belief that drinking some kind of magical potion was going to heal his chronic headaches. . . . After a short silence, half a cigarette long, Kadyr said, now in a pensive mood, “I know, but those were different times . . . everyone was confused back then.” Their visit to a famous spiritual healer was remembered as having been about curiosity, experimentation, and momentary confusion, after which they had come to their senses. By contrast, people who had started to devote themselves to strict interpretations of Islam or Christianity were in Kadyr’s view of a different sort; they had become “fanatics.”

Earlier I mentioned that Kadyr had never cared for scientific atheism, and had been happy to ridicule the predictable rhetoric of antireligious activists. At the same time, though, his views expressed ambivalence. With the Soviet system no longer in existence, with religious leaders expressing their opinion without being challenged, and with religious symbolism becoming more conspicuous in the public sphere, the disappearance of atheism was no longer a straightforwardly positive change. In other words, it seemed that the contextual changes led Kadyr and Bolot to reconsider their position. As Bolot put it: “Much of what the communists taught us was right, but at the time we didn’t appreciate it.” This idea resonates with the key analytical problem of this chapter: the problem of an empty ideology, which produced indifference as long as it was the dominant, official narrative, yet started to be appreciated after its structures collapsed. The contrarian quality of atheism—deriving energy from its antagonistic counterpart religion—regained relevance after the collapse of the Soviet Union, with the ironic result that the “not religious” appeared to be defending something that they had not desired when it existed. The question that therefore needs to be answered is: How did the oppositional and relational dimensions of atheism become reconfigured after 1991?

One of the challenges faced by the “not religious” was that their conduct was no longer always sufficient to qualify as Muslim. During Soviet times it had been a sine qua non that Kyrgyz men would drink vodka (see also Khalid 2006, 1); alcohol consumption was an important ingredient in assertions of masculinity and was closely entwined with ideas of hospitality. Although most men continued these practices, they were increasingly
criticized for doing so. Women faced other challenges. When once visiting school number 4 with my Kyrgyz colleague Himia, we briefly talked to some teenagers who were loitering in the school yard. One of these young men confronted Himia, telling her that she should not wear trousers and should wear a head scarf. It was an exceptional and very confronting occasion to Himia, not only because her Muslimness was being questioned, but also because age hierarchies were publicly being violated.

There were other challenges to established patterns of engagement with Islam as well. If during the Soviet period it was generally assumed that only the very old would pray (and rarely in a mosque), by the mid-2000s not only larger numbers of old men but especially many young men and boys would come to the Friday prayers and the study sessions organized by Imam Talant. He also tried to convince middle-aged men to pray, but they turned out to be insensitive to his arguments. As the imam complained in a conversation with me: “The problem is that they still have an atheist mind-set. They always have excuses, and they always think that they know it better, telling me that the Kyrgyz had never prayed in mosques. But this is not about being Kyrgyz, this is about Islam. Islam is one and Kyrgyz is another.”

Imam Talant was not the only one who attempted to disentangle religion and culture, and thus to undo a connection that had been reinforced under Soviet rule. Local Tablighi circles became increasingly active in the 2000s. They not only invited inhabitants to start praying, but also addressed false conceptions of Islam in their teachings, and criticized, for example, funerals and weddings, which were deemed un-Islamic. These issues were reported across the region. McBrien, for example, documents how newly pious Muslims started to transform life-cycle rituals into “religiously pure” events in the nearby town of Bazar-Korgon. By abolishing “traditional” wedding parties, prohibiting serving alcohol, reinforcing gender segregation, and inviting wedding speakers, these newly pious Muslims challenged the formerly agreed-on notions of what was Islamic and what was not (McBrien 2006). Such innovations worked to disconnect being Muslim from being Kyrgyz, stressing the supranational character of Islam rather than its relation to culture and national identity. But although such newly pious assertions made significant headway in several settlements, in Kok-jangak it was still a relatively marginal phenomenon. Residents explained this by referring to the town’s history as a mining town—a former beacon
of socialist modernity—and that therefore the mind-set of its inhabitants was more “cultured” and modern. For example, they pointed out that whereas they had been to “Islamic” funerals in other settlements, in Kokjangak such funerals had taken place only a couple of times, and these had been talked badly about.

One important legacy of “atheism” is that it provided citizens with a vocabulary to respond to religious authorities. My acquaintances drew on a repertoire of received wisdom, much of which had its roots in Soviet times. Kadyr, for example, several times quoted the Kyrgyz saying that “one should listen to what the mullah says, but not do as he does” as a way to underline that a lot of this self-avowed religiosity was simple pretense. At other times he pointed at one of the first post-Soviet imams, who had received money to build a mosque through a foreign charity, but instead used it to furnish his own house. This atheist vocabulary was also evident in the usage of terms such as “sects” and “fanatics” to refer to unhealthy forms of religiosity. In this way, they were trying to restore the boundary between the religious and the secular, which in their view had been trespassed by unwelcome assertions of religiosity in the public sphere.

Kadyr’s weariness about new religiosity was also informed by developments across the border in Uzbekistan. On more than one occasion he told me that in his opinion Uzbekistan’s president, Islom Karimov, was doing the right thing in repressing religion. “If Karimov would not repress the fanatics, then those Uzbeks would reinstate sharia in no time, and we would have an Islamic state as a neighbor within no time.” Kadyr felt the situation was a bit better in Kyrgyzstan: “Of course, our people are less fanatic than Uzbeks . . . but still.” Such fears may have been informed by negative ethnic stereotyping, but the fear was real enough. Kadyr was convinced that religion should be controlled, and he opposed the idea of freedom of religion. “Maybe such freedom is a good thing in Western Europe, but here it is dangerous. Our people are not suited for it.” He continued by criticizing the presence of the small group of Tablighis in town, asserting that “they don’t work and they can only think about religion—they always tell you the same thing.”

Kadyr’s negative feelings about excessive religiosity intensified particularly when his two sons (twins who were twelve years old in 2008) started to display interest in Islam, and secretly joined some of the other boys from
the neighborhood in meetings organized at the mosque by the imam and several Tablighis. When Kadyr found out about this, he gave his sons a stern lecture and forbade them to go again; but sensing this might not be sufficient (at least for the twin who was most intrigued), he made sure to keep his sons busy with domestic tasks when the Tablighi meetings were taking place.

Inhabitants like Kadyr who saw themselves as “not religious” were clearly disturbed by new assertions of devotion. In conversation they would often express opinions similar to those of Kadyr, and stereotype the Tablighis—as well as other new religious groups such as Pentecostals—as zombies, fanatics, and extremists. It was also clear that the encounters with the imam and with Tablighis were discomforting precisely because “the truth” had become instable. With antireligious discourse having lost the institutional backing it had enjoyed during Soviet times, attempts to discredit the authoritative basis of newly active religious movements had become even more important. For example, “not religious” inhabitants insisted that leaders of new religious movements used brainwashing techniques and offered payments to attract followers. McBrien offers some valuable observations from the aforementioned town of Bazar-Korgon. Toward the end of Ramadan 2003, members of the Islamist group Hizb ut-Tahrir put up fliers around town that invited Muslims to follow the “true path.” McBrien discussed the episode with a fifty-year-old schoolteacher, who denounced the messages and aims of the group. “He called the group ‘bad’ and ‘dangerous,’ and labeled its members ‘extremists.’ At the end of his diatribe [he] furiously remarked that those who had physically tacked the signs up around town must have been paid to do so. Why else would they have been involved in such activities, he mused aloud” (McBrien and Pelkmans 2008, 92). What is clear from these examples is that people who depicted themselves as “not religious” became infused with “atheist” energy when confronted with a new adversary.

Further Reflections

Atheism, to the extent it had existed during Soviet times, lost the institutional backing it once enjoyed. Even the term itself tended to be avoided by those who defined themselves as “not religious.” But this does not mean that atheist ideas completely evaporated. Remnants of atheism continued to exist, and lent force to a contrarian position, either to discredit religious
groups or to doubt and ridicule religious claims. As I will discuss in sub-
sequent chapters, many of the faith-driven movements continued to wage
discursive battles, not so much against atheism as an ideology, but against
the notions that emerged in its wake.

In this chapter I focused on inhabitants who referred to themselves as
being “not close to religion” or as “not religious” Muslims. On the one
hand they denounced Soviet atheism, but this was accompanied by a fear
of what was seen as excessive religiosity, something they identified in many
of the “new” religious currents gaining ground in the country starting in
the late 1990s. Their criticisms of “excessive religiosity” inadvertently
linked back to Soviet atheist ideology, as was already evident in Svetlana’s,
at least partly affirmative, allusion to “the opium of the people.”

In a previous cowritten publication (McBrien and Pelkmans 2008,
98–99) I used an example that I still find telling. In 2002 Kyrgyzstan’s daily
newspaper Vechernii Bishkek published a series of articles on the presumed
detrimental effects of both Christian and Islamic “extremism.” One of
these articles (March 19, 2002) incorrectly cited Marx: “Karl Marx was
right after all when he announced: ‘Religion is the opium of the people!
Sweet, intoxicating, and mysterious. In small quantities it is medicine.
In large quantities it is poison.’” Clearly the newspaper’s editors viewed
the success of new religious movements as an undesirable and dangerous
development, one that poisoned the youth and turned them into spiri-
tual drug addicts. Marx of course never made a distinction between the
curative small dose and the addictive large dose of religion. Instead he
criticized the soothing quality of much institutionalized religion, while
acknowledging the transformative potential of religious movements such
as, for example, Lutheranism. Oblivious to such nuances, the newspaper
twisted Marx’s views through their drug metaphor in order to defend
what was called “folk” or “liberal” Islam, while depicting the new re-
ligious movements as dangerous and detrimental. The views presented
in this chapter revealed a similar logic. Clearly, the “not religious” were
afraid of the transformative potential of religion, and their responses were
stark instances of the need to distance oneself from the new religiosity.
Marx had returned with a twist.

In a further play on the drug metaphor one could even postulate that the
“not religious” feared that these religions were in fact not a “downer” that
relaxes and pacifies as opium does, but rather an “upper” that energizes
and emboldens; in essence, they worried that “religion is the cocaine of the people.” By contrast, Soviet “atheism” always had difficulties in becoming an upper, and lacked the energizing potential of cocaine. It was only in response to an adversary that atheist thought gained momentum. This need for an adversary is, as we will see in later chapters, also present in other ideologies. But because it lacked a utopian dimension, the tendency was particularly pronounced in the case of scientific atheism.

To recall, Althusser argued that ideology obtains part of its strength from a double-mirror connection in which subjects are pulled in by the “voice of ideology” in a process of mutual recognition. But because this “voice” was compromised in the case of Soviet atheism, it started to disintegrate and erode while it was hegemonic, yet gained momentum when the mirror was directed not toward the (here nonexistent) unique Subject, but toward the external “Object,” a process not of identification but of differentiation. Using Yurchak’s terms, when the “hegemony of form” collapsed, elements of atheist content, parts of its constative meaning, reappeared. Or, as an earlier presented voice from Kokjangak suggested in less abstract terms: “Much of what the communists told us was right, but at the time we did not appreciate it.”

This suggests that the legacy of the atheist project and the continued existence of unbelief should not be brushed under the rug. The remnants of atheism continued to be found in the ways in which those who are “not religious” approached the world. But they did so hesitantly, as they were struggling to find a position between the extremes of Soviet atheism and new religiosity. For those who were “not religious,” uncertainty remained about what is true, about what is fact and what is fantasy.