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## Religion as Memory: The Urge to Remember as a Vehicle of Religious Revival

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## **Religion as Memory:**

### **The Urge to Remember as a Vehicle of Religious Revival**

*Danny Blinderman*

Too often, the debate about the relationship between religion, secularism and modernity restricts itself to the role of G-D in human affairs. Religion and secularization are both defined in terms of the strength of human belief in G-D, and the role of such beliefs in our society. Lost in this debate is the fundamental truth that religion is as much a relationship with one's past as it is with one's deity. The role of religion as a vehicle for the transmission of memory is one that can aid in understanding religion, and its rise and fall in the modern world. Understanding what developments cause people to either forget or hold tightly to these portions of their past is vital in order to understand the direction of religious development. Britain's success, and the Soviet Union's failure, in inhibiting the ability of religious communities to transmit memories and traditions from one generation to the next can help to explain the secularism of the former and the religious revival that is taking place in some parts of the latter.

If there is one thing that the various warring sides in the secularization debate seem to agree on, it is the definition of religion itself. Steve Bruce and Rodney Stark may disagree on almost every issue, but they define religion in surprisingly similar ways. Bruce, a noted scholar of secularization and the author of *G-D is Dead: Secularization in the West*, describes religion as "beliefs, actions, and institutions predicated on the existence of entities with powers of agency [that is, gods]." <sup>1</sup> Stark, a skeptic of the secularization paradigm defines the predictions of religion's demise in *Secularization RIP* as the contention that humanity will outgrow "belief in the supernatural." <sup>2</sup> There is nothing wrong, per se, with these definitions, but they are

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<sup>1</sup> Steve Bruce, *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford, 2002), 2.

<sup>2</sup> Rodney Stark, "Secularization, R.I.P.," *Sociology of Religion* 60 (1999): 1.

insufficient. To reduce religion to simply a relationship between humanity and G-D is to forget that religion also serves as a bridge between communities and their past. Integral to religion is the ability to create a link between generations that enables individuals and groups to pass down their history and construct meaningful identities. In *Communities of the Converted*, Catherine Wanner makes this point powerfully when she argues that religion can function as a “chain of memory that links generations.”<sup>3</sup> In this context, secularization can be understood as the rupture of these generational bonds, and the amnesia that comes with it. However erasure is not the end, because a lack of knowledge does not merely leave a blank slate. Unless the chain of memory is replaced with something sufficiently compelling, the itch to remember and rediscover remains, possibly providing the seeds of religious revival. Yuri Slezkine, in *The Jewish Century*, describes how Lev Kopelev was hardly alone amongst Soviet Jews in the 1930s when he chose to identify as Jewish on his internal passport, despite being thoroughly disconnected from his religious heritage. He did so because he “understood the language of memory” and felt that to identify, as something else would be a “desecration” of the graves of his parents.<sup>4</sup> In 1948, with the full scope of broken Soviet promises ever more evident, thousands of Soviet Jews, many of whom had never set foot in a synagogue, followed Golda Meir, the new Israeli foreign minister, around Moscow chanting “Next year in Jerusalem.”<sup>5</sup>

An alternate way of understanding Britain’s religious trajectory is that it involved the breaking of these bonds of memory and the construction of a system that was capable of offering a sufficiently strong and compelling replacement. There is little doubt that religion, both as an institution and a personal belief system, weakened over the course of the twentieth century. In his comprehensive work *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s*, Hugh McLeod documented this

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<sup>3</sup> Catherine Wanner, *Communities of the Converted: Ukrainians and Global Evangelism* (Cornell, 2007), 53.

<sup>4</sup> Yuri Slezkine, “The Jewish Century” (Princeton University Press, Princeton 2004), 285.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, 297

transition. The percentage of children enrolled in Sunday school plummeted from 55% in 1900 to just 4% in 2000, representing a drastic reduction in memory transmission and religious socialization.<sup>6</sup> Membership in Christian youth clubs of all denominations, vital tools in instilling a sense of Christian identity and continuity, peaked in the late 1950s and then began to rapidly decline all across Britain.<sup>7</sup> Yet more important than erasure was the ability of post-war Britain to construct a society that was sufficiently compelling to quench the desire for re-discovery and the search for existential meaning. Postwar Britain promised and delivered both prosperity and a greater measure of human freedom and dignity. Starting in 1953 real wages rose steadily in Britain, prompting British Prime Minister Macmillan's famous remark that "most of our people have never had it so good". In the three decades after the Second World War home ownership doubled and the proportion of the population that owned a telephone jumped from one fifth to one half.<sup>8</sup> On top of this, a slew of legislative reforms vastly expanded the freedoms and rights available in British society. During the 1960s the death penalty was suspended, gay sex decriminalized and various lingering forms of censorship were abolished.<sup>9</sup> The religious chain of memory had been broken, but what ensured its continued decay was British society's construction of a new understanding of one's relationship with the past and future. This linkage involved increasing material achievement and a narrative of ever increasing human freedom achieved through the collective work of one generation to be bestowed on the next.

It is tempting to hold the United States up as a counter-example, a state that delivered on its founding promises of equality and prosperity and yet failed to break the bonds of religious memory. Rates of church attendance in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s hovered around

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<sup>6</sup> Steve Bruce, *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford, 2002), 68.

<sup>7</sup> Hugh McLeod, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford, 2007, 2010), 105.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 218.

40%, not substantially lower than what they had been prior to the Second World War and significantly higher than other countries in the western world.<sup>10</sup> However, it would be a mistake to assume such a high degree of similarity between the United States and Great Britain. The American narrative of increasing liberty and prosperity is inextricably linked with a flight from religious persecution, whether in the form of the Pilgrims or in the narratives of Catholics and Jews, in a way that Britain's narrative is not. In the case of the United States, bonds of intergenerational memory based on freedom and prosperity also include the idea that these new freedoms are to be utilized to safeguard the exercise of religious freedom. As compared to Britain, other societies may have had similar success in severing the religious chain, but fell short in their ability to construct a meaningful alternative.

The revitalization of Ukrainian Christianity is best understood as the general failure to construct a viable alternative chain of memory. The power of the Soviet State allowed it to weaken religious memory with great success. Laws passed in 1929 seized all religious property for the state, and criminalized "unregistered" religious activity.<sup>11</sup> Partly as a result, during one five-year stretch, the Russian Orthodox Church and Baptists lost 40% and 22% of their churches respectively.<sup>12</sup> However, despite one of the most militant campaigns against religious practice in the history of the modern world religious belief, even shorn of any knowledge of memory, remained. In 1937, 57% of the population 16 and older declared themselves to be a "believer."<sup>13</sup> After the fall of communism, religious practice and institutions returned with breathtaking speed. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, in southeastern Ukraine the number of protestant churches has risen to near parity with the number of orthodox churches. A mega-church founded in 1994 now

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<sup>10</sup> Steve Bruce, *God Is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford, 2002), 205.

<sup>11</sup> Catherine Wanner, *Communities of the Converted: Ukrainians and Global Evangelism* (Cornell, 2007), 40.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 59.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 54.

has over 25,000 members.<sup>14</sup> One explanation for the continued existence of these religious predilections is that the Soviet Union failed to construct a society that was sufficiently compelling so as to appease the desire for memory and meaning. Soviet promises of self-fulfillment and material well being went tragically unrealized, a fact that is discernable in the conversion narratives of several Christian converts. One individual cites his experience of going to prison for attempting threaten an individual into repaying a loan as integral to his conversion.<sup>15</sup> In his experience, we can see the broken promises of Soviet society, whether they are the false promises of material prosperity and a new solidarity, or the chaos that led so many to be thrown into prison. Moreover, the Soviet attempts to sell its citizens on its narrative were wildly unsuccessful. Debates set up between scientists and religious leaders, meant to showcase the superiority of rational knowledge over superstition, often ended in victory for the religious leaders and moved the crowds to sympathize with the clergymen's viewpoint. All of these things contributed to the failure of the Soviet Union to construct a compelling alternative narrative that would ultimately extinguish the desire for meaning and memory that would eventually prompt the Ukrainian religious revival.

Religion is so much more than just a belief in deities, and secularization is far more complicated than a simple measure of how much this belief has waxed and waned. Religion is both a source of existential meaning, and also way of understanding one's own personal arc of history. Religion acts as a powerful vehicle for interacting with past generations, and finding meaning through a grand direction. The differences in the degree and extent of religiosity in Britain and Ukraine can be partially explained by Britain's success, and the Soviet Union's failure, in constructing a compelling alternative narrative of intergenerational relationships. The

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid,153.

repression of the Soviet Union may have been successful at impeding religious practice, but its broken promises left individuals searching for meaning, a gap that religion would be able to step back into and fill.

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