



**EXPLAINING
ATHEISM**



Centre d'études
en sciences sociales
du religieux

Call for Papers

Communist Perspectives on Atheism in the 20th Century
International conference, Paris, 13-14 November 2023

In recent years, scholars in historical and secular studies have become increasingly interested in communist attitudes towards religion, communist regimes' efforts to uproot religion (Smolkin 2018), and interactions between Marxists and Christians (most recently Ramšak/Mithans/Režek 2023) (Burchardt/Wohlrab-Sahr/Middell 2015). Sponsored by the Explaining Atheism programme, this conference will explore transnational communist perspectives on atheism in the twentieth century and Marxist-inspired attempts to explain and influence the evolution of atheism. Building on work on “scientific atheism” (Thrower 1983, Kääriäinen 1989 and 1993, Guigo-Patzelt 2021), “atheist establishments” (Smolkin 2018) and “thought collectives” (Tesař 2019), the conference explores differences and commonalities within the Soviet bloc – within which scholarly debates on atheism took place in what might be called a limited international scientific community.

The conference explores three broad themes:

- 1) It examines actors' diverse understandings of atheism and investigates how communists conceptualised different kinds of non-belief in general and Marxist-Leninist atheism in particular; how they sought to create and spread a “positive” atheist vision; and how they tried to explain atheism and its causes at individual and societal levels and in specific national and religious contexts.
- 2) While the efficacy of initiatives such as the Soviet League of the Militant Godless has been called into question (Peris 1998, Gleixner 2022), the conference addresses significant outstanding questions about the role of formal and organised initiatives in processes of atheisation in communist states, including the impact of antireligious education, atheist rituals, and mass media.
- 3) The conference will examine the effects of non-belief, atheism and agnosticism on individuals and societies under communist rule, to provide new insight into the history of these countries as well as general mechanisms of worldview change.

Philosophical questions about the place of atheism within Marxism, while interesting in themselves, are beyond the scope of this conference.

We welcome contributions on communist regimes in Central and Eastern Europe, the Soviet Union as well as Africa, America and Asia during the 20th century. The scope can be extended to theoretical developments within communist movements outside communist ruled countries (Pettinaroli 2021).

Academic committee

Pierre-Antoine Fabre, Directeur d'études at EHESS, Deputy Director of Césor

Eva Guigo-Patzelt, Associate member of Césor

Dr. Jonathan Lanman, Queen's University Belfast, Project Lead Explaining Atheism

Lois Lee, Senior Lecturer at University of Kent

Organiser: Eva Guigo-Patzelt, Associate member of CéSor (Centre d'études en sciences sociales du religieux, EHESS/CNRS, Paris)

The conference will take place in English. It is funded by the Explaining Atheism programme (www.explainingatheism.org), and travel costs and accommodation for speakers will be provided. Further details of an open-access publication being developed in relation to this conference will be shared at the meeting.

Please submit a paper title, an abstract of max. 400 words and a CV by 15 July 2023 to Eva Guigo-Patzelt: eva.patzelt@sciencespo.fr

Works cited

- Burchardt, M., Wohlrab-Sahr, M., Middell, M. (ed) (2015). *Multiple Secularities Beyond the West. Religion and Modernity in the Global Age*. Boston/Berlin/Munich: De Gruyter
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- Guigo-Patzelt, E. (2021). *Du conflit au dialogue : L'athéisme scientifique en RDA (1963-1990)*. PhD thesis, Sorbonne University Paris
- Kääriäinen, K. (1989). *Discussion on Scientific Atheism as a Soviet science 1960-1985*. Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia
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- Peris, D. (1998). *Storming the heavens. The Soviet League of the Militant Godless*. Ithaca/London: Cornell University Press
- Pettinaroli, L. (2021). *Sans Dieu ! Une histoire transnationale de la libre pensée prolétarienne entre Europe et URSS (années 1920-1930)*. Habilitation thesis, Institut d'études politiques de Paris
- Ramšak, J., Mithans, G., Režek, M. (ed) (2023). *Christian Modernity and Marxist Secularism in East Central Europe: Between Conflict and Cooperation*. Zagreb: Srednja Europa
- Smolkin, V. (2018). *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty. A History of Soviet Atheism*. Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press
- Tesař, J. (2019). *The History of Scientific Atheism. A Comparative Study of Czechoslovakia and Soviet Union (1954-1991)*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht
- Thrower, J. (1983). *Marxist-Leninist "scientific atheism" and the study of religion and atheism in the UdSSR*. Berlin/New York/Amsterdam: Mouton Publisher
- On the Explaining Atheism Programme, see: <https://www.explainingatheism.org/>