

Soviet and Post-Soviet Religiosity and the Nostalgia toward the Past in the Soviet and post-Soviet Georgia and Russia

The PhD research focuses on the patterns of religious life in the Soviet and post-Soviet Georgia and Russia and seeks to explore the changes and continuities in the religious domain in mentioned post-Soviet states. Patterns of religious life are observed on three levels: individual level, power/authority level and the state level.

On an individual level, research aims to uncover the change in religious values, and tries to understand what the notion of a “proper religiosity” means, and what it means to “properly observe and practice” religion in different periods of the Soviet governance. It is related to the changes in understanding of supernatural, and changes in different religious practices such is baptism, and those secular ceremonies such are wedding and burial ceremonies which on the other hand are heavily loaded with religious meaning.

On the power/authority level the research is focused to explore who has the authority to define, teach and communicate information about the religion to the society/religious groups in line with the changing roles of the clergy in a society.

On the state level, the research is focused on state-sponsored policies in regard with the construction of the religious memory, collective memory and representation of religion through specific narratives and discourses in institutions such as museums and other memory/religious sites.

In analyzing Soviet and post-Soviet religiosity in post-Soviet Georgia and Russia, study examines the concept of nostalgia and seeks to build a theory about interrelationship between religion, memory and nostalgia in the above mentioned states. Namely, in regard to the concept of nostalgia, the study asks the following questions: 1) how nostalgia is integrated as one of the aspects of religiosity in post-Soviet Georgia and Russia, 2) what role does nostalgia play in the construction of collective memory and 3) how nostalgia fuels the religious revival and, on the other hand, how religious institutions use nostalgia to affect collective memory, and strengthen social function of religion in the post-Soviet Georgia and Russia and affect the collective memory of these societies.

Thesis

The research examines religion in its changes and continuities in the context of socio-political and anti-religious policy dynamics in the period from 1950s-1960s to the present. To achieve its goals the research uses oral history methodology, qualitative and semi-structured interviews with specific target groups, as well as archival and secondary materials.

In frames of the research oral history interviews are recorded with ordinary Georgian and Russian citizens born in the period of 1930s-1960s. Also, research uses oral history interviews recorded with members of other social groups such is representatives of the state/national museums, mainly curators who used to work in religious and historical memory sites (state/national museums and religious sites) during the Soviet governance.

The research project studies patterns of religious life in Soviet and post-Soviet religiosity in post-Soviet Georgia and Russia and tries to explore its roots by the analysis of historical changes and continuities in religious and social dynamics on three levels – individual, power/authority and state levels.

Particularly, the research attempts to explore dynamics of change in religious values and practices of a lived religion on individual level, power/authority issues in times when authority of the Church and the clergy are challenged, and construction of collective religious memory on institutional level. As religion is not isolated phenomenon and it is always closely related to other socio-political domains, the research project studies changes in religious domain in the broad context of historical socio-political changes from the period of 1950s-1960s to the present. The result of secularization processes which were actively, sometimes forcefully encouraged by the Soviet state was not a loss of religion but the religious change (Wanner, 2012). Thus, the political and religious ruptures and changes are better understood against a backdrop of continuity between the two periods.

The study tries to propose a new perspective on the Soviet and post-Soviet religiosity as not normative and a new paradigm. The proposed research attempts to study the forms of religiosity in post-Soviet period through the lens of the Soviet period's lived religiosity, religious memory and the nostalgia towards the irreversible past (Boym 2001, Davis 1979).

Methodology

The study uses interdisciplinary methods of combining historical and sociological research, in particular qualitative interviewing, oral history interviews, archival source analysis and literature analysis. The research attempts to explain the bridge between the different historical periods.

The interpretation of micro-level qualitative data within the wider historical frame gives not only descriptive, but also analytical depths of the problem. Theories and research methodologies taken from the fields of memory, communicative memory, nostalgia, narrative and discourse analysis, and structures of narrative help to interpret and understand the subjective qualitative data (Kuzio 2002, Mitrou 2015, Maier 2013, Olick & Robbins 1998, Leavy 2011, Wertsch 2002).

The research looks on the Soviet and post-Soviet religion and religious change from three perspectives.

On the individual level, asking on the religious values and practices of believe, the research is based on oral history interviews recorded with people born in the period of 1930s to 1960s who remember experiences of religious socialization in their Soviet childhood, their religious or anti-religious lived experiences during Soviet time and their post-Soviet religious experiences. The respondents are from Russia and Georgia. I plan to collect about 60 in-depth interviews.

These interviews reveal vernacular memories (Kovtyak, 2018) about religious socialization and lived religious and social experiences during the Soviet Union, and depict the narratives which are more nuanced and detailed in remembering peculiarities of religious life in the reality of the Soviet Union, than the official state and religious organizations' discourses narrate about secular and religious life in the Soviet past. Furthermore, analysis of oral histories demonstrates how the religious socialization, religious and social experiences during Soviet period are reflected and continued in the post-Soviet religiosity, and how modern nostalgia towards the Soviet past is integrated as one of the aspects of the post-Soviet religiosity.

On power/authority level, the main task of the research is to understand how the power relations are changed in the religious domain, and who has the authority to define, teach and communicate the knowledge about religion in different periods of Soviet governance. Mainly, the focus is on the changed social roles and functions of the clergy in the context of challenges they face in the Soviet Union. Also, Therefore, in this regard, the research is interested in the intergenerational transmission of religious values, traditions and practices in the context of state-forced secularization policy in the Soviet regime

(Vrublevskaya et al. 2019, Dubrov and Tatarko 2018, Schwarz 2014). Using this understanding, the research attempts to understand the roles of parents, grandparents and large kinship in teaching and communicating the religious values, traditions and practices of belief to their offspring.

On the state level, the research is interested in the state-sponsored policies with regard to the representation of the religiosity. On this level, the research asks about the role of the state and state-controlled institutions in constructing collective religious and historical memory. The research tries to explore the representations of religion, history of religion, religious values, and religious symbols through institutions such as state museums and state-controlled religious/memory sites. On this level, the research asks at what level (if) the anti-religious propaganda worked and what was the role of state museums and other religious/memory-sites in disseminating these discourses and narratives in the society.

Finally, the study tries to uncover the interrelationship between religion, memory and nostalgia. Study makes an assumption that nostalgia which “goes beyond individual psychology” stands between individual and collective memory (Boym, 2001), is a connecting force between these two and therefore it is also a significant aspect of the memory about religion.