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van Ree, E.

DOI

[10.1080/21567689.2016.1187600](https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2016.1187600)

Publication date

2016

Document Version

Final published version

Published in

Politics, Religion and Ideology

License

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[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

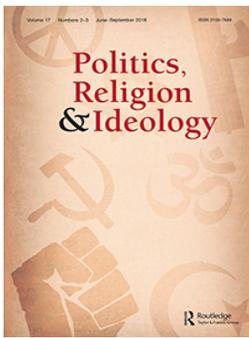
van Ree, E. (2016). Stalinist ritual and belief system: Reflections on "political religion". *Politics, Religion and Ideology*, 17(2-3), 143-161.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2016.1187600>

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To cite this article: Erik van Ree (2016) Stalinist Ritual and Belief System: Reflections on 'Political Religion', *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, 17:2-3, 143-161, DOI: [10.1080/21567689.2016.1187600](https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2016.1187600)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2016.1187600>



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Published online: 02 Jun 2016.



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Stalinist Ritual and Belief System: Reflections on ‘Political Religion’

Erik van Ree

University of Amsterdam, Netherlands

ABSTRACT

This article offers a critical assessment of the Political Religion Theory on the basis of a comparative analysis of the Orthodox and Stalinist belief systems and ritual. The theory works under the assumption that sacralisation of secular objects endows these objects with a transcendental, divine aura. This article argues that the theory fails properly to distinguish between the sacred on one hand and the transcendental and divine on the other. Heroic belief systems such as Stalinism do not deify their leaders, which is why they should not be classified as political religions. Also, the belief systems and rituals spawned by heroic, innerworldly sacralisation differ fundamentally from those emerging in a religious context. The Stalinist leader cult spawned loyalty rituals rather than the kind of rituals of communion that are at the heart of Orthodoxy. Stalinist ideology represented a faith-evidence hybrid rather than a purely faith-based system.

The so-called ‘political religion’ theory (PRT) traces its origins to the interbellum, most importantly to Erich Voegelin’s 1938 *Die Politischen Religionen*.¹ The theory holds that ideologies like fascism, Nazism and Stalinism functioned like religions. The thesis has a strong surface plausibility. Fascist and communist utopias were deficient in terms of empirical evidence and had to be accepted on faith, which faith was moreover highly dogmatised. These movements generated a sense of devotion and sacrifice reminiscent of religious zeal. The ritualisation of the political process and leader cults completed the striking similarity with the veneration of the divine.

The PRT enjoys considerable popularity. For some time now, Emilio Gentile, Michael Burleigh, Roger Griffin, Stanley Payne, Klaus Vondung and other scholars have been engaging in efforts to breathe new life into it.² The theory has attracted more followers among

CONTACT Erik van Ree  E.vanRee@uva.nl

¹Erich Voegelin, *Die Politischen Religionen* (Wien: Bermann–Fischer Verlag, 1938).

²For a small sample of the most important recent publications about political religion, see: Emilio Gentile, *The Sacralization of Politics in Fascist Italy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996); Klaus Vondung, ‘Die Apokalypse des Nationalsozialismus’ in Michael Ley and Julius H. Schoeps (eds) *Der Nationalsozialismus als politische Religion* (Bodenheim b. Mainz: Philo Verlagsgesellschaft, 1997), pp. 33–52; Michael Burleigh, ‘National Socialism as a Political Religion’, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 1:2 (2000), pp. 1–26; Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich: A New History* (London: MacMillan, 2000); Roger Griffin, ‘Introduction: God’s Counterfeiters? Investigating the Triad of Fascism, Totalitarianism and (Political) Religion’, *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 5:3 (2004): 291–325; Roger Griffin (ed.), *Fascism, Totalitarianism*

students of Italian fascism and national socialism than in the field of Stalin studies, though. At present, the theory is not held in particularly high regard among students of Stalinism.³ Even so, there was a time when it was common enough to explore the bolshevik phenomenon from a religious angle. The accent in such older works mostly lay more on bolshevism's dogmatic, faith-like, heresy-hunting and messianic qualities than on its ritualistic aspects.⁴ From the early 1960s, Robert Tucker's and Robert Daniels's works must be mentioned.⁵ Some scholars continue to be interested in the parallels between bolshevism/Stalinism as messianic faith on one hand, and religion on the other.⁶ A small number of scholars even find use for political religion as a master concept.⁷

and *Political Religion* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2005); Klaus Vondung, 'National Socialism as a Political Religion: Potentials and Limits of an Analytical Concept', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 6:1 (2005), pp. 87–95; Stanley G. Payne, 'On the Heuristic Value of the Concept of Political Religion and its Application', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 6:2 (2005), pp. 163–174; Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Michael Burleigh, *Sacred Causes: Religion and Politics from the European Dictators to Al Qaeda* (London: HarperPress, 2006); Roger Griffin, *Modernism and Fascism: The Sense of a Beginning under Mussolini and Hitler* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007); Klaus Vondung, 'What Insights Do We Gain From Interpreting National Socialism As A Political Religion?' in Roger Griffin, Robert Mallett and John Tortorice (eds) *The Sacred in Twentieth-Century Politics: Essays in Honour of Professor Stanley G. Payne* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 106–118.

³For some of the most important recent literature about the Stalin cult: Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia. Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934–1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), chs 9–10; E.A. Rees, 'Leader Cults: Varieties, Preconditions and Functions' in Balázs Apor et al. (eds) *The Leader Cult in Communist Dictatorships. Stalin and the Eastern Bloc* (Basingstoke: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004), pp. 3–26; Sarah Davies, 'Stalin and the Making of the Leader Cult in the 1930s' in *ibid.*, pp. 29–46; Jan Plamper, 'Introduction' in Klaus Heller and Jan Plamper (eds) *Personality Cults in Stalinism: Personenkulte im Stalinismus* (Göttingen: V&R unipress, 2004), pp. 13–42; Benno Ennker, 'Struggling for Stalin's Soul': The Leader Cult and the Balance of Social Power in Stalin's Inner Circle' in *ibid.*, pp. 161–195; Malte Rolf, 'The Leader's many bodies: leader cults and mass festivals in Voronezh, Novosibirsk, and Kemerovo in the 1930s' in *ibid.*, pp. 197–206; David Brandenberger, 'Stalin as Symbol: A Case Study of the Personality Cult and its Construction' in Sarah Davies and James Harris (eds) *Stalin: A New History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 249–270; Yves Cohen, 'The Cult of Number One in an Age of Leaders', *Kritika*, 8:3 (2007), pp. 597–634; Claude Pannetier and Bernard Pudal, 'Stalinism: Workers' Cult and Cult of Leaders', *Twentieth Century Communism*, 1 (2009), pp. 20–29; Heidi Hein-Kircher, 'Führerkult und Führermythos. Theoretische Reflexionen zur Einführung' in Benno Ennker and Heidi Hein-Kircher (eds) *Der Führer im Europa des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Marburg: Herder Institut, 2010), pp. 3–23; Jan Plamper, *The Stalin Cult: A Study in the Alchemy of Power* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2012); Sarah Davies and James Harris, *Stalin's World: Dictating the Soviet Order* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), ch. 4.

⁴See for example Bertrand Russell, *The Practice and Theory of Bolshevism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1951), pp. 9–10, 17–18; René Fülöp-Miller, *Geist und Gesicht des Bolschewismus: Darstellung und Kritik des kulturellen Lebens in Sowjet-Russland* (Zürich: Amalthea-Verlag, 1926), pp. 9, 20, 32–68, 100–105, 120–121; Waldemar Gurian, *Der Bolschewismus: Einführung in Geschichte und Lehre* (Freiburg im Breisgau: Herder & Co, 1931), pp. 179–181; Adolf Keller, *Church and State on the European Continent: The Social Service Lecture, 1936* (London: The Epworth Press, 1936), pp. 68–69, 75–76; Nicolas Berdyaev, *The Origins of Russian Communism* (London: The University of Glasgow Press, 1948), chs 7–8; Arthur Koestler, in Arthur Koestler et al., *The God that Failed. Six Studies in Communism* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1950), pp. 25–82; Gustav A. Wetter, *Der dialektische Materialismus: Seine Geschichte und sein System in der Sowjetunion* (Freiburg: Verlag Herder, 1952), pp. 567–579; Raymond Aron, *The Opium of the Intellectuals* (New York: Norton, 1962), ch. 9.

⁵Robert C. Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), pp. 11–27; Robert V. Daniels, *The Nature of Communism* (New York: Random House, 1962), ch. 9.

⁶For example: James Thrower, *Marxism-Leninism as the Civil Religion of Soviet Society: God's Commissar* (Lewiston: The Edwin Mellen Press, 1992); Oleg Kharkhordin, *The Collective and the Individual in Russia: A Study of Practices* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), ch. 2; Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000); Rees, *op. cit.*, p. 7; Nanci Adler, *Keeping Faith with the Party: Communist Believers Return from the Gulag* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2012), pp. 8–13; James Ryan, 'The Sacralization of Violence: Bolshevik Justifications for Violence and Terror during the Civil War', *Slavic Review*, 74:4 (2015), pp. 808–831, esp. 818–825. See also Jules Monnerot, *Sociologie du communisme: Eché d'une tentative religieuse au XXe siècle* (Paris: Editions libres-Hallier, 1979), ch. 3.II; Roy A. Medvedev, *Let History Judge: The Origins and Consequences of Stalinism* (London: MacMillan, 1972), pp. 362–366; Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: Its Origin, Growth, and Dissolution*, vol.3, *The Breakdown* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), 525–526; Alexander Yakovlev, *The Fate of Marxism in Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 43–44; Mikhail Vaiskopf, *Pisatel' Stalin* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2002), pp. 40, 132–134; Plamper, *Stalin Cult*, *op. cit.*, pp. xv–xvii.

⁷Arthur Jay Klinghoffer, *Red Apocalypse: The Religious Evolution of Soviet Communism* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1996); Klaus-Georg Riegel, 'Marxism-Leninism as a Political Religion', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 6:1

The PRT claims that the surface similarities between religions and secular leader cults reflect a likeness at the core of these systems. It is assumed that under the surface of ritual and belief the same process is going on: *sacralisation*, which is the theory's key concept. It is regarded as being of secondary importance to what is being sacralised – as long as something is. Even if it concerns a secular entity such as state, party, nation, race, class or leader, the dynamic of sacralisation guarantees that essentially the same 'religious' universe of devotion, belief, cult and ritual will be generated.⁸

It is the great merit of the PRT to have pointed out that secular leader cults share the sacralising impulse that characterises religions. But it will be argued in what follows that the theory fails to subject its own key concept of sacralisation to sufficiently critical examination. The theory takes insufficiently into account that the sacralising process has its modalities: secular philosophies do not allow sacralisation to develop to the point of 'deifying' the sacralised objects. This is the main reason why it is inappropriate to classify secular cults as political religions.

My argument combines an overall critique of the PRT, centring on what I regard as its flawed handling of the concept of sacralisation, with a single case study to flesh out the point. The first section of the article discusses some of the basic assumptions about sacralisation made by the PRT. Then follows a comparison between Stalinism and Russian Orthodoxy, the dominant religion before the Bolsheviks seized power.

My point is not merely to show that Stalinism differed in many ways from Orthodoxy. The fact that Stalin did not copy and paste Orthodox practices is hardly a spectacular conclusion. What I hope to show is that Stalinism, in its ritual practices as well as in its belief system, differed so fundamentally from Orthodoxy that it serves no good purpose to treat it as a variety of the religious phenomenon. Stalinist ritual practice lacked the transcendental dimension, and its belief system remained for an important part evidence-based. These differences can be attributed to the fact that Stalinist sacralisation did not involve deification of the revered object.

I realise, of course, that the case against the PRT cannot be made conclusively at the hand of one case study. Bringing in Mussolini's fascism against the background of Roman Catholic theology would surely have somewhat nuanced the conclusions. Mao, Adolf Hitler, the bizarre Kim dynasty, or a comparative analysis of Theravada Buddhism and Pol Pot, would have further complicated things. Religions that originated in India and China nurture conceptions of the transcendental, divine principle and of the human predicament quite distinct from those dominating the West-Asian monotheistic religions. All the same, the general discussion of sacralisation and deification presented here is not specifically attuned to Stalinism. It will hopefully serve to illustrate some of the fatal weaknesses in the PRT.

The Sacred, the Divine and the Heroic

What political-religion theorists are most eager to spell out, the point they regard as their own most significant analytical contribution, is that it is not the privilege of gods and

(2005), pp. 97–126; Anatoly M. Khazanov, 'Marxism-Leninism as a Secular Religion' in Griffin, Mallett and Tortorice, op. cit., pp. 119–142.

⁸This key idea has been expounded most systematically by Gentile, *Sacralization*, op. cit., pp. ix, 153–158; *Politics*, op. cit., 'Introduction'.

transcendental powers and forces to be made subject to sacralisation. As the argument goes, political concepts, collectives and leaders may just as well be crowned with a sacred aura. The next crucial step in the argumentation is that the sacralisation of such secular objects amounts to their being invested with something close to a divine aura. That is, of course, why the term ‘political religion’ is used in the first place.

It seems to me that this argumentation suffers from conceptual confusion. It bears observing, first of all, that the process of deifying secular objects is not specifically tied to modern secular ideologies, but is as old as religion itself. It has been happening all the time, long before any of the supposedly political religions arrived on the scene.

Most ironically, investing secular objects with the divine happens much more routinely and more often in ‘real’ religions than in the so-called ‘political’ ones. The rock charged with the impersonal divine force described in Durkheim’s classic study of religion is just such a deified secular object made available for religious veneration.⁹ The greatest ‘secular religion’ of all is Christianity. It belongs to the core business of this faith to imbue secular objects, people, with a divine dimension, the first and most spectacular example being Jesus of Nazareth. He was followed by the long line of saints, human beings shot up with an unusually large dose of the divine Holy Spirit.

For the idea of ‘political religion’ to make sense, political leaders would have to be made subject to deification, the very process to be observed in Christianity and some other religions. If, for example, the North Korean communists were metaphysically serious when they reconfirmed the deceased Kim Il Sung as their president – then and only then the concept of ‘political religion’ would begin to be helpful.¹⁰

The question is not only whether the object that is being sacralised belongs to this world or to the transcendental sphere. Not only what is being sacralised matters, but also what sacralisation in each case is supposed to mean.

The fundamental flaw of the PRT lies in not clearly distinguishing the sacred from the divine. In my ‘substantive’ definition, religion refers to a system of beliefs and rituals centring on the transcendental or the supernatural.¹¹ Religion overlaps with the sacred but is not identical with it: whereas the religious is always sacred, the opposite thesis does not hold. Sacralisation means for something to be set apart as an elevated, untouchable category

⁹Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: The Free Press, 1995), pp. 35, 191, 202, 207, 230.

¹⁰Claus-Ekkehard Bärsch argues that national socialism was a political religion precisely because it included God: *Die politische Religion des Nationalsozialismus. Die religiösen Dimensionen der NS-Ideologie in den Schriften von Dietrich Eckart, Joseph Goebbels, Alfred Rosenberg und Adolf Hitler. 2., vollst. überarb. Aufl.* (München: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2002). Deification of the ruler in ancient Egypt and in the Roman Empire would represent instances of genuine political religion. Yet, in the latter case, only in the Eastern provinces emperors were deified during their lifetimes. And even there they were mostly not prayed or sacrificed to. See S.R.F. Price, *Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984); Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome*, vol. 1, *A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Valerie M. Warrior, *Roman Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006); James B. Rives, *Religion in the Roman Empire* (Malden: Blackwell, 2007). Assigning divine attributes to living people was always a difficult option.

¹¹For substantive definitions, see for example Paul M. Gustafson and William H. Swatos, ‘Introduction: Max Weber and Comparative Religions’ in William H. Swatos (ed.), *Time, Place, and Circumstance: Neo-Weberian Studies in Comparative Religious History* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1990), p. 10; Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge, ‘Of Churches, Sects, and Cults: Preliminary Concepts for a Theory of Religious Movements’, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 18:2 (1996), p. 39. In the alternative, ‘functional’ approach, any belief system providing its followers with an object of devotion and ultimate aims, must be classified as a religion. There is a vast literature about the two approaches. For overviews of this debate, see for example Anthony J. Blasi, ‘Definition of Religion’ in William H. Swatos (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Religion and Society* (Lanham: AltaMira Press, 1998), <http://hrr.hartsem.edu/ency/defreligion.htm> (accessed 5 June 2015); Andrew M. McKinnon, ‘Sociological Definitions, Language Games, and the “Essence” of Religion’, *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 14 (2002), pp. 61–83.

and to be turned into an object of veneration. In 1912 Émile Durkheim classically defined the sacred as ‘*things set apart and forbidden*’.¹² The sacred represents the extraordinary, a sphere removed from ‘profane’ ordinary life. Removed from ordinary circulation and critique, it is made inviolable. In his *Das Heilige*, originally published in 1917, Rudolf Otto explores the range of emotions that the sacred instils, a sense of awe that is expressed both in fear of the ominous and in a fascination with majesty and the mysterious.¹³

Mircea Eliade as well as Durkheim and Otto tend to identify the sacred with the transcendental, a supernatural or divine force or entity not seldom manifesting itself in this-worldly objects.¹⁴ But sacralisation does not necessarily entail transcendental investment. To be sure, imbuing a secular object with transcendental qualities represents the most thorough way for it to be set ‘apart’ from the rest of the world. But it is not the only way. The sacred can refer to any mysterious or awesome power “sticking out” from the normal routines of everyday life’.¹⁵ In Edward Shils’s interpretation, political centres become subject to sacralisation and are fitted out with awesome, extraordinary qualities, without necessarily becoming endowed with a divine or transcendental dimension.¹⁶ In the scenario of ‘innerworldly sacralisation’ a secular object is being invested with extraordinary qualities that are however *not* associated with the supernatural. The object is being redefined as an elevated category, while all the time remaining *within* the natural order of things rather than to be soaring above it.

Stalinism represents the near perfect projection of a sacred that is never charged with the transcendental. Stalin and the other Bolshevik leaders did everything in their power to elevate themselves above the everyday and to fit themselves out with a sacred aura. They radiated majesty and inspired awe in full measure. Stalin almost *defined* himself and his comrades as a breed set apart and out of the ordinary. Revealingly, more or less the first thing he said at his 26 January 1924 Lenin memorial speech was: ‘We, communists, are people of a special mould. We are cut out of special material.’¹⁷

But, if we define deification as the partaking of an object in a transcendental dimension and the attribution of supernatural attributes to it, Stalin was never turned into a god. To be sure, the claim that he and his deceased predecessor *were* assigned such attributes and that they were made subject to some sort of deification or semi- or quasi-deification is widely made in the literature.¹⁸ But it is crucial for my argument that the powers Stalin was believed to possess, though unique and extraordinary, never overstepped the human range.

¹²Durkheim, op. cit., p. 44.

¹³Rudolf Otto, *Das Heilige: Über das Irrationale in der Idee des Göttlichen und sein Verhältnis zum Rationalen* (München: Biederstein Verlag, 1947).

¹⁴Mircea Eliade, *Das Heilige und das Profane. Vom Wesen des Religiösen* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1957).

¹⁵Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy. Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Doubleday, 1967), p. 26.

¹⁶Edward Shils, *Center and Periphery: Essays in Macrosociology* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1975), chs 7, 8, 9, 15. See also Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff, ‘Introduction: Secular Ritual: Forms and Meanings’ in Sally F. Moore and Barbara G. Myerhoff (eds) *Secular Ritual* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1977), pp. 3–4. For Harald Wydra the sacred is a phenomenon of transcendence, triggered by threshold experiences, but it comes in many varieties. These varieties have in common that they are about extraordinary, higher meaning and that which provokes awe; the sacred need not *per se* be otherworldly, though: *Politics and the Sacred* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), e.g. 43, 226.

¹⁷I.V. Stalin, *Sochineniia*, vol. 6, 1924 (Moscow: OGIZ, Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo politicheskoi literatury, 1947), p. 46. Volumes 1–13 were published in Moscow in 1946–1951. Volumes 14–18 were published by various publishing houses in Tver’ and Moscow between 2004 and 2011. Volumes 1[xiv]–3[xvi] were published by the Hoover Institution on War, Revolution, and Peace (Stanford) in 1967. All of these volumes will be referred to hereinafter as *Sochineniia* (Works).

¹⁸For example: Boris Souvarine, *Stalin: A Critical Survey of Bolshevism* (n.p.: Alliance Book Corporation, 1939), pp. 351–356, 510; Christopher A.P. Binns, ‘The Changing Face Of Power: Revolution and Accommodation in the Development of the

Stalin was pictured as a man of extraordinary genius. He was assigned outstandingly superior knowledge in more fields than any person could reasonably oversee; but this should not allow us to lose sight of the fact that the capabilities assigned to him remained within the range of the natural. The Soviet leader surely promoted his own cult of excessive proportions, but it would have made him furious had his followers overstepped the line by portraying him – ridiculously – as omniscient, omnipotent or omnipresent. Except in poetry and in paeans obviously meant to be read metaphorically, Stalin was not fitted out with any *truly* miraculous powers. He couldn't make the trees weep, nor could he make the sun stand still, and nobody, Stalin himself least of all, for a moment doubted that poison and bullets could kill him. The Great Leader, Teacher of Genius, Victorious Generalissimo, Coryphaeus of Science, and Hero of History fell short of the supernatural dimension. Briefly, Stalin was just *not* deified.

The PRT does not adequately deal with this problem of the sacred and the divine. Gentile essentially ignores it, suggesting as he does that sacralisation tends to shade off into deification.¹⁹ Other scholars, in contrast, acknowledge that the sacralisation exhibited by political religions lacked the divine, transcendental dimension.²⁰ But these authors do not answer the tough question which then arises, i.e. of why call a movement a political *religion* if it sacralises yet does not deify the objects it reveres.

The main point I want to make here is that the sacred comes in two tastes. Deification of secular objects, of which Jesus is the classical case, is only the most extreme variety. There is also the innerworldly option, classically applying in the case of Joseph Stalin, when the secular object is being promoted to the extraordinary, untouchable category of the revered, but all the same remains within the secular sphere. The term that best captures the innerworldly option is *heroisation*. Heroisation is a fundamentally more modest proposition than deification. However excessively heroes such as Stalin are being adulated, they are still adulated as human beings. Even the most venerated secular hero remains locked in the same natural order his or her followers inhabit.²¹

Soviet Ceremonial System: Part 1', *Man*, New Series, 14:4 (1979), p. 598; Thrower, op. cit., pp. 83–84; Davies, *Popular Opinion*, op. cit., pp. 151–152; Victoria E. Bonnell, *Iconography of Power: Soviet Political Posters under Lenin and Stalin* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 161, 258; Jeffrey Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 66; Karen Petrone, *Life Has Become More Joyous, Comrades: Celebrations in the Time of Stalin* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000), p. 13; Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, *New Myth, New World: From Nietzsche to Stalinism* (University Park PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), pp. 372–374, 381; Rees, op. cit., p. 7; Khazanov, op. cit., p. 125; Hein-Kircher, op. cit., p. 14. Philosophically, the claim is embedded in the thesis that Marxist communism emerged from the supposed death of God, which would have triggered the self-deification of mankind. See for example Kolakowski, op. cit., p. 530; Plamper, 'Introduction', op. cit., p. 19; Plamper, *Stalin Cult*, op. cit., p. 24. In Tucker's (*Philosophy*, op. cit., p. 22) interpretation, man replaced God as supreme being, but not as a new god. Halfin (op. cit., pp. 43, 76) argues that Man not God was the highest principle in Marxism, but insofar as Man was conceived as an abstract principle, not as empirical people, it was 'just another term for God or Spirit'.

¹⁹Gentile, *Politics*, op. cit., pp. xiv, xvii–xviii. For a similar approach: Angela Astoria Kurtz, 'God, not Caesar: Revisiting National Socialism as "Political Religion"', *History of European Ideas*, 35:2 (2009), p. 240.

²⁰See for example Griffin, 'Introduction', op. cit., pp. 305–306; Juan J. Linz, 'Der religiöse Gebrauch der Politik und/oder der politische Gebrauch der Religion. Ersatz-Ideologie gegen Ersatz-Religion' in Hans Maier (ed.) *"Totalitarismus" und "Politische Religionen". Konzepte des Diktaturvergleichs* (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1996), p. 130; Vondung, 'Apokalypse', op. cit., pp. 36–37.

²¹For the argument that there is no point in speaking of political religions in the absence of proper deification of the leaders: Wolfgang Hardtwig, 'Political Religion in Modern Germany: Reflections on Nationalism, Socialism, and National Socialism', *GHI Bulletin* 28 (2001), pp. 3–23 (www.ghi-dc.org/files/publications/bulletin/028/b28hardtwigframe.html) (accessed 24 June 2015); Roger Eatwell, 'Reflections on Fascism and Religion', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 4:3 (2003), pp. 145–166; Richard J. Evans, 'Nazism, Christianity and Political Religion: A Debate', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 42:1 (2007), pp. 5–7; Stanley Stowers, 'The Concept of "Religion", "Political Religion" and the Study of

Orthodox Ritual: Communion

That the Leader was regarded as a mere exalted human being, a hero not god, significantly impacted on the kind of rituals that emerged to venerate him. Secular leader cults generate rituals that differ importantly from those spawned by religious ideologies.

Ritual is a specific form of behaviour. One possible definition is ‘repetitious and stylized symbolic bodily actions’.²² Its diversity is potentially endless. Religious rituals such as prayer and sacrifice are characterised by their interactive quality. The believers are under the impression that they are actually accessing the divine, contacting it and achieving supernatural communion with the transcendental sphere. Catherine Bell classifies such rituals as ‘rites of exchange and communion’. Importantly, *communion* thus defined does not refer to the idea of a *community* of believers, but to the human-divine interaction itself. The communion we are dealing with here concerns the supposed direct tie between the god and the believer, even if he or she were a mere individual.²³

Both Orthodox private prayer and public, community worship (the liturgy) belong in this category of ritual communion.²⁴ A whole complex of rituals of communion, the sacraments, allow the individual believer to receive the Holy Spirit, which is being magically conveyed through material objects that are brought into play by the priest.²⁵

Orthodoxy’s exclusive focus on God is illustrated by the yearly festivals, which mostly commemorate events in the life of God’s earthly incarnation. The main occasion, Easter, commemorates the resurrection. The other 12 great feasts either commemorate other events in Christ’s earthly life or, a minority, events in the life of his mother. The festival of Pentecost commemorates the descent of the Holy Spirit onto the apostles.²⁶

Stalinist Ritual: Loyalty

Stalin never obtained the centrality in Soviet rituals that God had in the Orthodox ones. A quick glance at the revolutionary calendar of Soviet state holidays, which can be regarded as the counterpart of the Orthodox festivals, is revealing.

As we saw, Orthodox festivals mostly commemorate events in the life of Jesus. Stalin-era Soviet festivals, with only a single exception (Lenin’s dying day), did *not* commemorate events from the life of the leader. The main Soviet holidays celebrated the October Revolution, 1 May and 21 January (the day Lenin passed away). Other important festivities included Victory Day, Constitution Day, International Women’s Day, Red Army Day, the Day of the Bolshevik Press, the Day of Physical Culturalists, and a

Nazism’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 42:1 (2007), pp. 9–24. See also Hans Mommsen, ‘Nationalsozialismus als politische Religion’ in Hans Maier and Michael Schäfer (eds) *“Totalitarismus” und “Politische Religionen”. Konzepte des Diktaturvergleichs*, vol. 2 (Paderborn: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1997), pp. 173–181; Mathias Behrens, ‘“Politische Religion” – eine Religion? Bemerkungen zum Religionsbegriff’ in *ibid.*, pp. 249–269.

²²Evan M. Zuesse, ‘Ritual’, in Mircea Eliade (ed.) *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 12 (New York: MacMillan, 1987), p. 405.

²³Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 94; also pp. 108–114.

²⁴For the Orthodox liturgy and its interpretation, see Alexander Schmemmann, *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (London: The Faith Press & Maine: The American Orthodox Press, 1966); Thomas Hopko, *The Orthodox Faith*, vol. 2, *Worship* (New York: Department of Christian Education of the Orthodox Church in America, 1981); John Meyendorff, *Byzantine Theology: Historical Trends & Doctrinal Themes* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1983), ch. 16; Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church* (London: Penguin Books, 1983), pp. 286–295; Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom* (New York: St Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1988); Michael Kunzler, *Wir haben das wahre Licht gesehen: Einführung in Geist und Gestalt der byzantinischen Liturgie* (Trier: Paulinus-Verlag, 1991).

²⁵For the Orthodox sacraments: Meyendorff, *op. cit.*, ch. 15; Ware, *op. cit.*, pp. 281–303.

²⁶Ware, *op. cit.*, ch. 15.

series of days celebrating particular branches of the armed forces such as the Day of the Tank Forces, Navy Day and Air Force Day.²⁷

One cannot help to be struck by the great contrast. Whereas Orthodox festivals straightforwardly represented ritual worship of God, the Bolshevik festivals were *not* dedicated to the celebration of their supposedly 'deified' leader. The deceased Lenin was fortunate to have at least one festival specifically dedicated to him, but Stalin did not even have that. Only party and state leaders' round-number birthdays were publicly celebrated, in Stalin's case his 1929, 1939 and 1949 birthdays.²⁸ The latter occasion was celebrated with magnificent pomp, but the Stalin birthdays never became official holidays. The leader's birthday was not included in the revolutionary calendar of festivals – let alone other noteworthy events from his life. Let me add for good measure that, if Stalin was not 'deified', neither were the collective objects such as the working class or the party that received heroic honours at the yearly festivals.

Soviet festivals would mostly begin on the evening before with a festive meeting for a selected audience. Highlights would be high officials' political speeches. At the actual festival day, there would be a parade of Red Army units, to be followed by a demonstration of representatives of various organisations and selected sections of the population. The party and state leaders inspecting the parades and demonstrations would be standing on a rostrum. In Moscow, the very highest leaders of the country would stand on top of the Lenin Mausoleum. In other cities, local leaders would have the honour of elevating themselves. For the rest of the day, and sometimes for another day, the population would be treated to all kinds of merrymaking. Many of the smaller festivals confined themselves to meetings and omitted the demonstrations and parades.²⁹

The festivals symbolically celebrated the community in its various segments and qualities. In Karen Petrone's fortunate expression, the marching masses were 'Parading the nation'.³⁰ The parades and demonstrations also provided the opportunity to pay allegiance and homage to the leaders.³¹ They represented a platform for what can be called 'loyalty rituals'. The leaders literally set themselves apart, elevated above the masses, to create a separate category of the revered. The heroes received oaths of allegiance, and were saluted by the troops. Marchers waved their hands and shouted laudations. Not unlike Orthodox processions carrying banners with portraits of the saints, the marchers carried along portraits of the leaders.³²

Mass meetings were the other main site of Stalinist loyalty rituals. These rituals included the thunderous ovations Stalin received each time he appeared on a podium,

²⁷Petrone, op. cit., pp. 13–15; Malte Rolf, *Das sowjetische Massenfest* (Hamburg: Hamburger Edition, 2006), pp. 121, 135–145, 324–328; Plamper, *Stalin Cult*, op. cit., pp. 60–75. See also Jennifer McDowell, 'Soviet Civil Ceremonies', *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 13:3 (1974), pp. 269–270; Binns, op. cit., pp. 588, 602; Christel Lane, *The Rites of Rulers: Ritual in Industrial Society – The Soviet Case* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 143–150, 154; V.V. Glebkin, *Ritual v sovetskoi kul'ture* (Moscow: Ianus-K, 1998), pp. 74–75; Graeme Gill, *Symbols and Legitimacy in Soviet Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), p. 74.

²⁸Plamper, *Stalin Cult*, op. cit., pp. 48, 253; Serhy Yekelchuk, *Stalin's Citizens: Everyday Politics in the Wake of Total War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), pp. 45, 131.

²⁹For the format of the Soviet mass festival: Rolf, *Massenfest*, op. cit., pp. 120–134. See also: Binns, op. cit., pp. 597–598; Lane, op. cit., pp. 156–158; Glebkin, op. cit., pp. 98–99; Petrone, op. cit., p. 15; Gill, op. cit., pp. 135–140; Yekelchuk, op. cit., ch. 2.

³⁰Petrone, op. cit., p. 23.

³¹See Petrone, op. cit., p. 23; Rolf, *Massenfest*, op. cit., p. 156.

³²See Lane, op. cit., p. 156; Rolf, 'The Leader's', op. cit., p. 199; Binns, op. cit., pp. 598–601.

or even when his name was only mentioned; his and his close comrades' being elected to 'honorary presidia' in meetings where they were not even present; and the collective letters and salutations routinely sent to Stalin by meetings and conferences in praise of him and to pledge loyalty and fulfilment of duty.³³ As the years went by, loyalty to the heroic leader was ever more frequently couched in the paternalistic terms of 'gratitude'. Workers' meetings sent 'letters of gratitude' to thank Stalin for the gifts he supposedly showered them with. As their return gift to him, they would commit themselves to over-fulfil production plans.³⁴ Soviet elections functioned as another nation-wide Stalin loyalty ritual.³⁵ As participants identified with the heroic leaders, such rituals often would have triggered powerful rapturous emotions, but the participants would never have been under the impression that they were mystically accessing their objects of adoration, as in religious rituals of communion.³⁶

Loyalty was also massively displayed through the ubiquitous posting of Stalin's images on public buildings and in private homes, in journals and newspapers, in the theatre and in the cinema. But it was not the posting of Stalin's portraits as such but solemn acts performed in front of these portraits that would have created a ritual. Such performances were however never staged. The absence of the supernatural dimension made it impossible for rituals of communion to be performed with any degree of credibility.

It is not uncommon to compare images of Stalin and other Soviet leaders with icons.³⁷ But unlike icons these images were not regarded as devices to address the one being portrayed or to encourage him or her to miraculous intervention. Stalin was therefore not prayed or sacrificed to, no incense was burnt, people were not supposed to fold their hands or to bow before his image.³⁸ There was no Stalinist liturgy, nothing that even remotely resembled the great Orthodox ritual. And without this type of devotional rituals there was no need for buildings specifically designed for the purpose of staging them: there were no Stalinist churches or temples.³⁹

³³Rolf, 'The Leader's', op. cit., p. 199; Rolf, *Massenfest*, op. cit., p. 123; Gill, op. cit., p. 138; Ennker, 'Struggling', op. cit., pp. 167–169.

³⁴Brooks, *Thank You*, op. cit., esp. ch. 4; see also Cohen, op. cit., pp. 612–614; Yekelchik, op. cit., ch. 2, pp. 129–140, 163–180.

³⁵See Yekelchik, op. cit., ch. 6.

³⁶Peter Berghoff's concept of 'profane transcendency' might be helpful here: *Der Tod des politischen Kollektivs. Politische Religion und das Sterben und Töten für Volk, Nation und Rasse* (Berlin: Akademie verlag, 1997), pp. 94, 133–147. See also Victor W. Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), ch. 3. Turner's concept of 'liminality' applies for states of rapture aroused by innerworldly as well as transcendental sacralisation. For a recent discussion of political intoxication, see Árpád von Klimó and Malte Rolf, 'Rausch und Diktatur: Emotionen, Erfahrungen und Inszenierungen totalitärer Herrschaft' in: Árpád von Klimó and Malte Rolf (eds) *Rausch und Diktatur. Inszenierung, Mobilisierung und Kontrolle in totalitären Systemen* (Frankfurt M: Campus Verlag, 2006), pp. 11–43.

³⁷See for example Bonnell, op. cit., pp. 3–4, 258.

³⁸Reinhard Löhmann notes that the Stalin cult mainly was expressed in verbal forms and images. More 'traditional forms of cult', such as crossing oneself, were observed only on the part of peasants: *Der Stalinmythos. Studien zur Sozialgeschichte des Personenkultes in der Sowjetunion (1929–1935)* (Münster: Lit, 1988), p. 10. When, occasionally, people did pray to the portrait, this was officially disapproved of: see Davies, *Popular Opinion*, op. cit., p. 163. Plamper (*Stalin Cult*, op. cit., p. xvi) suggests that some people experienced Stalin images as performative. That, however, was never the officially approved view.

³⁹Roman Redlikh argues that, without transcendentalism, Stalinist cult ritual inevitably remained exceedingly thin. There were no real, full-blooded rituals comparable to Orthodox prayer and liturgy, and no churches either. Redlikh insists: 'The communist pseudo-religion was essentially no more than dogmatics': *Stalinshchina kak dukhovnyi fenomen. (Ocherki bolshevizmovedeniia*, book 1) (Frankfurt M: Posev, 1971), p. 44.

The same goes for the way Lenin's image was handled.⁴⁰ The deceased leader's image was put on display in the 'Lenin Corners' located in public buildings and enterprises.⁴¹ But even if these corners were modelled after the places where icons were kept, one was not supposed to perform any kind of ritual acts in front of the image. The atmosphere need not even be solemn: Lenin Corners might have accordions and tables to play games. People might have had their lunch or even have taken a nap in these spaces.⁴² Even the greatest Stalinist image of all – the mummy – did not spawn ritual activity: one was merely supposed to walk past it in respectful silence. The Lenin mausoleum, whose inhabitant could not be aroused to perform miracles, had no cult attached to it.⁴³

The Stalinists did not reproduce sacramentalism either. After the Civil War, the Soviet authorities introduced new private ceremonies: 'red baptisms', 'red weddings' and 'red funerals'. But such ceremonies had withered away by the early 1930s, to be restored only after Stalin's death.⁴⁴ The heart of these rituals was made up by speeches of Soviet officials.⁴⁵ Material objects held sacred – a red flag or a red kerchief, a party book or a Lenin bust – would have been present, but it would have been considered superstitious to provide them with magical agency. Thus, the element of magical communion was not redefined but cut.

Faith-Evidence Hybrid

The other important characteristic Stalinism supposedly shared with religions is that it rested on faith not facts. Stalinist philosophy supposedly mirrored religious mythology and dogma in offering a closed, coherent belief system explaining the whole world and in being unverifiable and unsubstantiated by scientific testing. The leader demanded no less than blind faith from his followers, who were forbidden to check against the available evidence what he told them to believe. Stalin's formulas were no more allowed to be subjected to critique than the unassailable dogmas of the Orthodox church. Even without God, Stalinism is therefore supposed to have been a belief system of the religious type. I hope to show that, for all their *prima facie* plausibility, these conclusions once again do not hold up to scrutiny.

Does heroic utopianism depend on the impulses of faith and hope, much like religions do? In some fundamental respects: yes. The Marxist project of the Kingdom of Labour is only slightly less fantastic than its Christian counterpart of the Kingdom of God. Communism foresees a giant leap to a fundamentally renewed, aggrandised human condition. Except for the frailness of our bodies and our mortality, human misery – exploitation,

⁴⁰On the Lenin cult, see Souvarine, op. cit., pp. 350–356; I. Deutscher, *Stalin. A Political Biography* (London: Oxford University Press, 1949), pp. 269–272; Edward Hallett Carr, *The Interregnum, 1923–1924* (London: MacMillan & New York: St Martin's Press, 1954), pp. 347–348; Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin as Revolutionary, 1879–1929: A Study in History and Personality* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1974), pp. 279–288; Lane, op. cit., pp. 210–213; Nina Tumarkin, *Lenin Lives! The Lenin Cult in Soviet Russia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983); Benno Ennker, *Die Anfänge des Lenin-Kults in der Sowjetunion* (Köln: Böhlau Verlag, 1997).

⁴¹Tumarkin, op. cit., p. 3. See also Tumarkin, op.cit., pp. 221–224; Bonnell, op. cit., p. 148.

⁴²Tumarkin, op. cit., pp. 126–127; Yekelchik, op. cit., pp. 88, 95.

⁴³Ennker (*Anfänge*, op. cit., pp. 320–321) suggests that the embalming of Lenin's body precisely indicates that the Orthodox tradition was *not* being referred to here. A body that needs embalming in order to remain intact falls short of the miraculous. Ironically, in the Orthodox context this would prove that we are *not* dealing with a saint.

⁴⁴See McDowell, op. cit., p. 267.

⁴⁵*Ibid.*, pp. 272–276.

oppression and alienation – will come to an end. Marx and Engels offered scientific arguments to substantiate this incredible dream, but these were never realistically convincing. Contrary to their own claims,⁴⁶ they were in fact peddling a purely utopian project of salvation resting on hope rather than on testable evidence.⁴⁷

But this is not the whole story. Heroic ideologies conceptualise the question of agency very differently from their religious counterparts. In the case of the Kingdom of God, agency is completely concentrated in the hands of its founder, the divine agent. This Kingdom will not be built by human hands.⁴⁸ In contrast, the establishment of the heroic-utopian order is not made dependent on God's or any other supernatural intervention but solely on humanity's own efforts.⁴⁹

And that changes everything. Innerworldly, heroic belief systems are best to be conceptualised as faith-evidence hybrids. Whereas the communist utopian goal was a faith-driven fantasy, the process of constructing the new order was not. The new society was being built in the real world, with human hands, and there was nothing otherworldly about these constructive efforts. Heroic belief systems cannot survive on a diet of faith alone. Evidence-based knowledge, science, must be brought into the equation in large doses. The very survival of the revolutionary state depends on it. If they would have allowed themselves to drift off into a fairyland of fantasies, the Bolsheviks wouldn't have lasted more than a few months.⁵⁰

Soviet communist construction required reliable knowledge, to be tested against available evidence on a daily basis. Constructing the communist society was a production process, involving economic development and technological modernisation. Difficult and very this-worldly decisions regarding the tempo of communist reform had to be taken, so as to drive society into the right direction without however precipitating an economic or social meltdown. Sustaining the new society also required a reliable body of

⁴⁶See for example, Friedrich Engels's 'Die Entwicklung des Sozialismus von der Utopie zur Wissenschaft' in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Werke*, vol. 19 (Berlin: Dietz Verlag, 1973), pp. 189–201.

⁴⁷For a Marxist take on the principle of utopian hope, see Ernst Bloch, *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, 5 vols (Frankfurt M: Suhrkamp, 1959).

⁴⁸Compare Halfin's (op. cit., ch. 1) argument concerning the agency problem in religions and secular ideologies.

⁴⁹In Jeffrey Brooks's (op. cit.) interpretation, the Stalinists cast the leader in the role of sole creator of socialism, in whose hands all agency was concentrated. Socialism was Stalin's 'gift'. He provided the people with all its many benefits, from a happy childhood to the 1936 Constitution and the victory in the Great Patriotic War. Goods and services were framed as benefits received from Stalin. See also Brooks, 'Stalin's Politics of Obligation', *Totalitarian Movements and Political Religions*, 4:1 (2003), pp. 47–68. However, the idea of socialism as Stalin's 'gift' remained embedded in a wider discourse that left the agency of the population largely intact. Even when he was glorified as the 'creator' of socialism, Stalin was never absurdly thanked for pulling it off singlehandedly, but rather for his role as leader and organiser, a formulation that presupposes a collective effort. Also, Stalin shared the honour of being thanked with agencies such as the Soviet state, the Russian people, the Motherland, the communist party, and the Red Army, all embodying the collective effort. Neither was it – superfluous to say! – left in doubt that the workers not Stalin produced the goods and services distributed by him. Altogether, the Stalinist propagandists were not seriously claiming that socialism was Stalin's personal creation.

⁵⁰Roman Redlikh (op. cit., pp. 25–29) observed that without the supernatural dimension bolshevism cannot properly be regarded as a religion. In Redlikh's conceptualisation, utopian bolshevism was 'faith-like [*veroobrazen*]', but insofar as the *realisation* of the utopia was regarded as a matter of scientific procedure, it was 'science-like [*naukoobrazen*]'. Stephen Kotkin argues that Marxism was not a 'bogus religion' and that both its scientific and utopian aspects must be taken seriously: *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 6–8. For the scientific element in Stalin's Marxism see also Thrower, op. cit., p. 123; Ethan Pollock, *Stalin and the Soviet Science Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), pp. 2–3. For a discussion of the tension between 'religious' and scientific elements in Stalinism: David Priestland, 'Stalin as Bolshevik Romantic: Ideology and Mobilisation, 1917–1939' in Davies and Harris, *Stalin: A New History*, op. cit., pp. 198–200. Compare Eatwell (op. cit., pp. 159, 161) about the scientific and faith elements in Nazism.

management techniques to win the hearts and minds of the population and to police and terrorise them into submission if necessary.

These are precisely the terms in which the Soviet leaders understood their own predicament. In 1949, Stalin was supervising the creation of a new textbook of political economy. What was so important about this project that it merited the top leader's involvement? This is what he told a high official at the party Central Committee's Propaganda and Agitation Directorate, Dmitrii Shepilov, in the latter's rendering:

Communism doesn't spring like Aphrodite from the sea foam. And no one is going to bring it to us on a platter. We must build it ourselves [...] How? On a scientific basis. To do that, our people have to have a thorough grasp of economic theory, economic laws. If they do, we'll solve all our problems. If they don't, we're finished, we'll never achieve communism.

Without 'educated Marxists to manage the economy intelligently and on a scientific basis', the leader continued, the communists would fail in the 'great battle for a new life' – 'and then death'.⁵¹

Heroic utopianism can be regarded as a vast project of social engineering. 'Scientific' theory was tied in the straightjacket of an activist agenda. Stalin always emphasised that theory did not exist for its own sake, but for practical purposes. In his favourite expression, it was 'no dogma but a guide to action'.⁵² In another expression much used by the Soviet leader, theory served to provide practice with an 'orientation [*orientirovka*]'.⁵³ In a 1 October 1938 speech he informed party propagandists that 'theory' served to help the Marxist-Leninists in organising and mobilising people and in directing the process of transforming the old society into the new.⁵⁴

The master goal of heroic utopianism spawned a very peculiar idea of what scientific laws were. In Robert Tucker's words, laws of science meant for Stalin something like 'formulas by which reality could be transformed and remolded'.⁵⁵ When he discussed what he regarded as the 'objective laws' of nature and society, the Soviet leader seems to have had something like 'best practices' in mind, rules of social and technological engineering.⁵⁶

Stalinist 'theory' resembled a set of guidelines, an ensemble of policy formulas, for example 'socialism in one country', the 'intensification of the class struggle', 'the preservation of the state under socialism', 'socialist realism', and 'national in form, socialist in content'. These policy formulas were realistic enough. There was nothing faith-like about them. From Stalin's perspective, they were meant to foster economic growth and social stability, to root out and destroy the enemy, as well as to deliver progression in the direction of the communist society.

⁵¹Dmitrii Shepilov, *The Kremlin's Scholar: A Memoir of Soviet Politics under Stalin and Khrushchev* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), pp. 25–26.

⁵²See for example: 'O sotsial-demokraticeskom uklone v nashei partii' (1 November 1926), *Sochineniia*, vol. 8, p. 249; 'Zakliuchitel'noe slovo po dokladu' (3 November 1926), *ibid.*, p. 298.

⁵³See for example: 'Ob osnovakh leninizma' (April–May 1924), *Sochineniia*, vol. 6, p. 89; 'K voprosam agrarnoi politiki v SSSR' (27 December 1929), *ibid.*, vol. 12, p. 142; 27 September 1938 speech at a meeting of Moscow and Leningrad propagandists: 'I.V. Stalin v rabote nad "Kratkim kursom istorii VKP(b)". Okonchanie', *Voprosy istorii*, 2003: 4, p. 7.

⁵⁴N.N. Maslov, 'I.V. Stalin o "Kratkom kurse istorii VKP(b)"', *Istoricheskii arkhiv*, 5 (1994), p. 14.

⁵⁵Robert C. Tucker, *The Soviet Political Mind: Stalinism and Post-Stalin Change. Revised Edition* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1972), pp. 143–144.

⁵⁶In 1952 Stalin argued that the objective 'laws of nature and society' could be dominated and tamed, to be made useful for the project at hand. Conversely, these supposedly 'objective' laws could be violated, but only at a cost: violating them would lead to failure of the project at hand: 'Ekonomichekii problemi sotsializma v SSSR' (1952), *Sochineniia*, vol. 16.2, pp. 482–485.

If, however, certain guidelines would result in instability and stagnation, or in capitalist retrogression, they would have to be discarded and replaced with better ones. New times required adaptation of theory, the formulation of new formulas.⁵⁷ This is why, in Stalin's mind, his formulas deserved to be called scientific: they were verifiable in terms of policy successes and failures. Theory, Stalin explained in the 1 October 1938 speech referred to above, has an evidential basis. It develops 'in the laboratory, or in the practice among the masses. People too are a laboratory.' It is the test of practical experience that 'signalizes that there's something wrong with a particular theory'.⁵⁸

Obviously, Marxist-Leninist science was far removed from what is ordinarily regarded as valid scientific procedure. It was, really, a caricature of science. But it was even further removed from the religious format. In the Orthodox church, the doctrinal definitions of the Ecumenical Councils are regarded as unchangeable and infallible. Dogmas will be subjected to rational exposition, but they cannot be tested against facts. At the most fundamental level they are regarded as mysteries, which cannot be approached but through faith.⁵⁹ This approach to ideological tenets would have made Stalin recoil in horror. Marxism-Leninism, in its own way, remained importantly evidence-based. To avoid collapse of the project it *had to be*.

Marxist Religion?

These conclusions seem to be undermined, though, by Stalin himself: we have it from the horse's mouth that Marxism *was* a religion! On 23 December 1946 the dictator met with a number of Soviet ideological officials who were involved in producing his and Lenin's biographies. In the course of the conversation the leader expressed his displeasure with one of his interlocutors, Georgii Aleksandrov, who had recently authored a history of West-European philosophy. Stalin observed that there was a fundamental difference between scholars like Lenin, i.e. political leaders with a mass following, and elitist philosophers who were basically writing only for themselves.

Marxism is the religion of a class. If you want to get involved with Marxism, you can't avoid involvement with classes, with the mass ... We are Leninists. What we write for ourselves will surely be for the people. For them it is a creed [*simvol very!*]

In Stalin's understanding, Marxism served as 'the doctrine of the proletarian masses, their banner. The proletarians of the world honour it and "worship [*prekloniaiutsia*]" it'.⁶⁰

Scattered through his writings and speeches, we see the former seminarian Joseph Stalin boosting Marxist communism with a religious charge. In 1920 he paraphrased Luther to declare that the world's proletarians and peasants were assisted by 'the god of history'.⁶¹

⁵⁷Through the years Stalin insisted that there were no Marxist principles fixed once and for all, that all had to be checked against the facts, and that all could in principle turn obsolete. See for example: 15 September 1925 letter to comrade Ermakov: *Sochineniia*, vol. 7, pp. 232–233; 'O sotsial-demokraticheskom uklone v nashei partii' (1 November 1926): *ibid.*, vol. 8, pp. 247–251; 9 September 1927 discussion with American workers' delegation: *ibid.*, vol. 10, pp. 92–99; 17 November 1935 speech at conference of Stakhanovites: *ibid.*, vol. 1[xiv], p. 94; 1 October 1938 speech at conference of propagandists: Maslov, *op. cit.*, pp. 11, 25; 10 October 1938 speech at Politburo: *Sochineniia*, vol. 18, pp. 160–161; 10 March 1939 report to 18th Party Congress: *ibid.*, vol. 14, pp. 433–435.

⁵⁸Maslov, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

⁵⁹See Ware, *op. cit.*, pp. 28, 205, 209–210, 252, 256–258.

⁶⁰*Sochineniia*, vol. 17, p. 636.

⁶¹'Tri goda proletarskoi diktatury' (6 November 1920), *Sochineniia*, vol.4, p. 393.

In a 27 March 1925 speech he indicated that the Bolsheviks needed always to be prepared for the revolution, which might come as unexpectedly as the Kingdom of God.⁶² At the occasion of his (alleged) 50th birthday on 21 December 1929 he implicitly compared the Communist Party, ‘the great party of the working class that gave birth to me and educated me in its own image’, to God.⁶³ In his 1 October 1938 speech Stalin called the *Communist Manifesto* the ‘Song of Songs of Marxism’.⁶⁴

By no means must Stalin’s references to Marxism as a religion be interpreted as mere figures of speech. They deserve to be taken quite seriously. The leader sensed that the masses were bound to appreciate Marxism as an instrument of salvation. In 1923 he wrote that, just like Christianity had served the slaves of the Roman Empire as their ‘sheet-anchor [*iakorem spaseniia*]’, socialism now served the oppressed nations of the world as ‘manner of liberation’.⁶⁵ In his 1924 memorial speech to Lenin, he observed that communism was an instrument of ‘deliverance [*izbavlenie*]’, to add that the toilers would found the ‘Kingdom of Labour’ not in heaven but on earth and ‘with their own efforts’.⁶⁶ Lenin’s grave would serve as a place of ‘pilgrimage’ for the workers of the world.⁶⁷

This was Stalin’s dilemma: he thought of himself as chief executive of a project that rested on solid scientific foundations, but he was afraid the common people were unable to grasp the intricacies of the Marxist science. The dictator nurtured a remarkably low view of the intellectual capabilities of the masses. In April 1934 he informed Comintern official Georgii Dimitrov that the masses had the ‘psychology of the herd’. When they lose trust in their leaders, he observed, ‘they feel powerless and as though lost’.⁶⁸ This view remained with him. Early in 1950 he was overheard to compare the common people with sheep: ‘they would follow the leading ram wherever he might go.’⁶⁹

If the common masses were incapable of understanding Marxist science, Stalin concluded, it had to be offered to them in the more accessible form of an object of devotion, something to worship. Stalin was not sleepwalking into this paternalistic approach. He knew what he was doing. In May 1935, Maria Svanidze, sister-in-law of Stalin’s first wife, recorded in her diary how her famous relative had lectured her about the ‘fetishism of popular psychology’. He had explained that the people needed a tsar, to be defined as ‘a person they can worship and in whose name they can live and work’.⁷⁰ In his 8 January 1937 discussion with the German writer, Lion Feuchtwanger, Stalin repeated that, due

⁶²*Sochineniia*, vol. 7, p. 68.

⁶³Vsem organizatsiiam i tovarishcham prislavshim privetstviia v sviazi s 50-letiem t. Stalina’, *Sochineniia*, vol. 12, p. 140.

⁶⁴Maslov, op. cit., p. 25.

⁶⁵‘Oktiabr’skaia revoliutsiia i vopros o srednikh sloiakh’ (7 November 1923), *Sochineniia*, vol. 5, p. 347.

⁶⁶*Sochineniia*, vol. 6, p. 48.

⁶⁷*Ibid.*, p. 51. See also 18 December 1925 political report to XIVth Party Congress: *ibid.*, vol. 7, p. 351.

⁶⁸Ivo Banac (ed.), *The Diary of Georgii Dimitrov, 1933–1949* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), p. 13. Earlier, Stalin had posited more than once that the masses have only their own experience, not theory, available to draw their conclusions. See for example: ‘Ob osnovakh leninizma’ (1924), *Sochineniia*, vol. 6, pp. 161–162. In his 8 January 1937 conversation with Lion Feuchtwanger, Stalin argued that it was easier for artists to influence the unconscious masses than for scientists: *ibid.*, vol. 14, p. 176. See for the limited intellectual capacities of the masses also 26 October 1932 talk at Gorky’s town house, cited in A. Kemp-Welch, *Stalin and the Literary Intelligentsia, 1928–39* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1991), pp. 129–130; 27 September 1938 speech at conference of propagandists: ‘I.V. Stalin v rabote’, op. cit., p. 9; 10 October 1938 speech at Politburo: *Sochineniia*, vol. 18, p. 167; 23 December 1946 discussion: *Sochineniia*, vol. 17, p. 631; Stalin quoted by Iu. A. Zhdanov, *Vzgliad v proshloe. Vospominaniia ochevidtsa* (Rostov-na-Donu: Feniks, 2004), p. 225.

⁶⁹This was said during the North-Korean leader, Kim Il Sung’s, March–April 1950 visit to Moscow. Cited in S.N. Goncharov, J.W. Lewis and Xue Litai, *Uncertain Partners: Stalin, Mao, and the Korean War* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), pp. 6–8.

⁷⁰Iu.G. Murin and V.N. Denisov (eds), *Iosif Stalin v ob’iatiakh sem’i (Sbornik dokumentov)* (Berlin: ‘Rodina’, edition q, 1993), pp. 176–177.

to their 'lack of culturedness', the masses attributed the achievements of socialism not to the collective effort but to his person, in whom they recognised a 'unifying [*sobiratel'noe*] concept'.⁷¹

The key to Stalin's 1946 statement lies in the fact that Marxism was the religion *of a class; the proletarian masses* would worship it; *for them* it was a creed. The Soviet leader did not for a moment believe that Marxism, a doctrine resting on a solid 'scientific basis', was a religion. His point was that this is how the masses experienced it. Marxism had to be made to look like a religion because that was the only language the uneducated understood. Marxist 'religion' was, in other words, mass psychology, a device to mobilise those of limited comprehension.⁷²

Stalin had a considerably higher regard of the mental facilities of the elite of Marxist cadres, but that is not to say that he left them in peace. On the contrary, as he consolidated his dictatorship, he subjected them to an ever stricter regime. During the factional struggle of the 1920s, the Soviet leader became increasingly intolerant of diverging opinions. He ended by demanding that other party leaders openly discard their own views, admit that they had been wrong, and support his so-called General Line. When the decade drew to a close, free debate in the Communist Party was over.

What made all this particularly suggestive of a religious turn in Marxism-Leninism is that deviating party leaders were not only expected to go through the motions, but also to 'capitulate' inwardly. The leader demanded faith in his General Line and in the positions defined by him. They had to 'believe', *verit'*. The greatest sin in his book was *neverie*, lack of faith. Stalin actually used the term 'sin' (*grekh*), a term ordinarily reserved for violations of God's rulings, to take party leaders who exhibited less than perfect belief to task.⁷³ Thus, the inner-party struggle came to be defined as a struggle between believers and those guilty of the sin of disbelief; which is to say that it began disturbingly to resemble the Orthodox treatment of heresies.

We must not make the lazy assumption that all this was mere rhetoric on Stalin's part. As far as this can be established at all, the leader spoke from the heart. But, again, that he made use of this kind of religious terminology must be seen in perspective.

In practice, Stalin's autocratic imposition of faith meant that it was no longer held acceptable for party leaders loyally to carry out the General Line while having private reservations about it. They had to be sure in their hearts. Stalin was at his most insistent during the discussion about 'socialism in one country', the queen of his policy formulas. The point was, he explained, that without *actually believing* that socialism could be built in an isolated Soviet Russia, the party leaders could never develop the *uverennost'*, the confidence and certitude, they needed to lead the people in the process of socialist reconstruction. No victory without faith.⁷⁴ In other words, faith was a device to create unified, confident and inspirational leadership.

⁷¹*Sochineniia*, vol. 14, p. 180.

⁷²See for this also: Brandenberger, op. cit., pp. 249–251.

⁷³See for example 'Oktiabr'skaia revoliutsiia i taktika' (17 December 1924), *Sochineniia*, vol. 6, p. 378; 'K itogam rabot XIV konferentsii RKP(b)' (9 May 1925), *ibid.*, vol. 7, p. 117; 'K voprosam leninizma' (25 January 1926), *ibid.*, vol. 8, pp. 65, 74–75; 'Ob oppozitsionnom bloke v VKP(b)' (24 October 1926), *ibid.*, pp. 214–215; 5 August 1927 speech at Central Committee/Central Control Commission plenum, *ibid.*, vol. 10, p. 73; 2 July 1930 closing words at XVIth Party Congress: *ibid.*, vol. 13, p. 11.

⁷⁴See for example 'K voprosam leninizma', *Sochineniia*, vol. 8, pp. 75–76; 'O sotsial-demokraticheskom uklone v nashei partii' (1 November 1926), *ibid.*, pp. 279–280.

But there was a further and more fundamental mechanism at play here. Societies that sacralise their goals, as both the Orthodox church and the Stalinist party did, naturally tend to veneration of the doctrines and principles they avow. They display a very strong unitary impulse. It is almost a matter of definition that the sacred allows no deviations: it is that which cannot be touched. Compulsion of faith follows. The most fundamental reason why Stalin used the term ‘sin’ is because, in his eyes, rivalling interpretations of Marxism amounted to a violation of a set of principles that he considered sacrosanct.

Then again, Stalinist coercion of faith was of a very different quality than the unity of faith the Orthodox church offered. Put very simply, Stalin demanded faith and understanding, not faith alone. In Orthodoxy, faith is the basis on which the whole belief system rests. But nothing could be further from Stalin’s mind than that. The reason he believed he was in a position to impose faith on his party comrades in the first place, was precisely because his policy formulas were *not* unverifiable assumptions based on faith, but rested, to his own satisfaction, on evidence and realistic argumentation and were verifiable at the hand of policy results.

In his own understanding, Stalin imposed faith but not blind faith. In the case of the masses, blind faith was, unfortunately, the best one could hope for, but the cadres would have to *understand*. To be sure, his Marxist cadres would have to believe what they were told, but they would also have to understand what they were required to believe. *Blind* faith threatened the socialist project with imminent collapse.⁷⁵

In the course of the 1930s, the dictator became increasingly anxious about the low levels of Marxist knowledge among the party’s leading officials. His anxiety reached a climax in 1938, at the appearance of the *Short Course of the History of the All-Union Communist Party (bolsheviks)*, edited by him. In three major speeches, the leader hammered on the absolute need for the party cadres to assimilate Marxist knowledge. The main function of the new party history was to help them to raise their Marxist level.⁷⁶ The evidential basis Stalin offered to substantiate his policy formulas was, of course, extremely poor and his style of argumentation was atrocious. But that did not turn these formulas into articles of faith epistemologically comparable to the mystery of the Holy Trinity.

Next to the masses and the party cadres, academia was another section of Soviet society that had to deal with Stalin’s interventions. At a 27 December 1929 conference of Marxist agricultural scientists, the leader fired away at a number of theories pertaining to agricultural policies. The speech served to remove these theories, condemned by Stalin as bourgeois, to the taboo sphere.⁷⁷ Philosophical debate, he explained at a meeting of the Party Bureau of the Department of Philosophy and the Natural Sciences of the Institute of Red Professors the next year, required soundly to ‘beat [*bit*]’ the opponent.⁷⁸ In 1931 there followed Stalin’s famous intervention with the historical journal *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia*, when he ordered a halt to a discussion about Lenin’s pre-war attitudes towards the

⁷⁵For the risks of blind obedience without understanding, see for example ‘Ob osnovakh leninizma’, *Sochineniia*, vol. 6, p. 182; 1 October 1938 speech at conference of propagandists: Maslov, op. cit., p. 12; ‘O postanovke partiinoi propagandy v sviazi s vypuskom “Kratkogo kursa istorii VKP(b)” (14 November 1938), *Sochineniia*, vol. 14, p. 740; 10 March 1939 report to 18th Party Congress: *ibid.*, vol. 14, p. 428; 23 December 1946 discussion: *ibid.*, vol. 17, pp. 632–633; Iurii Zhdanov quotes Stalin: Zhdanov, op. cit., pp. 171, 175–176.

⁷⁶I.V. Stalin v rabote’, op. cit., pp. 5–9; Maslov, op. cit.; 10 October 1938 speech at Politburo, *Sochineniia*, vol. 18, pp. 163–164, 167–168.

⁷⁷*Sochineniia*, vol. 12, pp. 143–156.

⁷⁸*Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial’no-politicheskoi istorii*: f.17, op.120, d.24, l.1.

German social-democrats' supposed deviations from Marxism. The leader decreed that 'Lenin's bolshevism' must be treated as an 'axiom'.⁷⁹ Stalin wrote in so many words that this issue was henceforth no longer allowed either to be discussed or to be checked against available archival evidence.⁸⁰

In depriving them of the right to discuss 'Lenin's bolshevism', as well as to check the idea against the facts, Stalin left historians with only one option: to believe it blindly – on faith. The Soviet leader was effectively setting up 'Lenin's bolshevism' as a dogma. It became normal practice to refer to Marx's, Engels's, Lenin's or Stalin's own pronouncements to prove a case. Without admitting it, Stalin seemed to be uploading the idea of infallible dogmas into Soviet academia.

But was he, really? There is something very odd about the way Stalin introduced the term axiom in his ferocious *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia* article. An axiom is something considered evident enough not to require proof. But Stalin was far from assuming that 'Lenin's bolshevism' could not, or even need not, be proved. He devoted a large part of the article to doing just that, by adducing the leader's record of struggle against German opportunists.⁸¹ In other words, his new 'axiom' was not regarded as beyond empirical testing – it was just no longer allowed to be tested (by others). Verification and debate were suspended rather than being denied on principle.

We can almost sympathise with Stalin's predicament. The Great Dictator wanted to impose the views that he considered sacrosanct on those around him and to stop anyone from contradicting him; but as Russia's ruler and chief executive of the project of communist construction, he was not completely free to do so. History writing under Stalin became formulaic and schematic and it abounded with deliberate omissions and falsifications. But Stalinist historians could not at one and the same time be pretending to write about the real world, and feed their readership on a diet of pure mythology. Effective propaganda, which is what Stalin's historians were supposed to provide, required that a minimum degree of truthfulness was preserved even in the most laudatory cult texts. Stalin's innerworldly mission made it impossible for him to ignore scientific procedures altogether.

Stalin just could not afford to let the sciences be overgrown by axioms and ideological fantasies to the point of becoming ineffective. Trofim Lysenko's 1948 triumph over the geneticists was the most notorious instance of a fantasy trumping sound knowledge. Genetics struck Stalin as so much 'mysticism' and 'mystery', and therefore as ineffective.⁸² Lysenkoism, he thought, promised better results in boosting agricultural production, which is why he lent the ambitious plant breeder a helping hand. However, significantly, when Lysenko failed to deliver results, in 1951–1952 Stalin began to reconsider his support for him.⁸³ The fact that relativity theory and quantum mechanics were essential in

⁷⁹'O nekotorykh voprosakh istorii bol'shevizma' (published in *Proletarskaia revoliutsiia*, 1931, no.6), *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, p. 85.

⁸⁰*Ibid.*, pp. 96–97. For the letter see: John Barber, 'Stalin's letter to the editors of *Proletarskaya Revolyutsiya*', *Soviet Studies*, xxviii: 1 (1976), pp. 21–41; John Barber, *Soviet Historians in Crisis, 1928–1932* (Basingstoke: MacMillan, 1981), ch. 10; Robert C. Tucker, *Stalin in Power: The Revolutionary from Above, 1928–1941* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1990), pp. 155–156.

⁸¹'O nekotorykh voprosakh istorii bol'shevizma', *Sochineniia*, vol. 13, pp. 86–95.

⁸²Stalin cited by Andrei Zhdanov in Nikolai Kremontsov, *Stalinist Science* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 167.

⁸³See: Pollock, *op. cit.*, pp. 216–218; Nils Roll-Hansen, 'On the Philosophical Roots of Today's Science Policy: Any Lessons from the "Lysenko Affair"?', *Studies in East-European Thought*, 67 (2015), p. 104.

producing an atomic bomb most likely played a role in the Soviet authorities' decision to cancel a 1949 conference planned to subject these theories to philosophical critique.⁸⁴

During the last years of his life, Stalin became increasingly anxious that scientific debate was stifled too much. Between 1947 and 1952 six science discussions, extensively analysed in the works of Ethan Pollock, Nikolai Krementsov and Alexei Kojevnikov, rocked Soviet academia.⁸⁵ In June 1950 Stalin famously turned against the 'Arakcheev regime' that had been established in linguistics in order to defend a monopoly position for the theories of Nikolai Marr. Thundered the leader: 'no science can develop and thrive without the struggle of opinions and freedom of critique.'⁸⁶

Predictably, Stalin never allowed any really free scientific debate to emerge. The schools and positions he preferred remained leading and untouchable. But he did accept that it was inevitable for at least some channels of relatively free academic discussion to be reopened. The alternative was for Marxism and the sciences to become too calcified to be of any practical use for Soviet technical, economic and political development. That was something Stalin could not afford to allow to happen.⁸⁷

Stalin's pragmatic temper made it impossible for him to allow the Soviet sciences to spiral away into fantasy and faith. In the end, practical results counted, which is why he had no other choice but to see to it that evidence-based science was preserved to a significant degree. Fantasy and faith made many serious inroads into the Soviet sciences, and great harm was done, but the groundworks of factual substantiation were preserved. Rather than turning into a pure faith-based system, Stalin's hybrid Marxism always preserved a balance of faith and evidence.

Conclusion

The attractiveness of the PRT rests on the undeniable fact that ideological systems such as Stalinism spawn a whole universe of sacralisation and ritualisation. The leader, the party, the class, the doctrine are made sacrosanct. They are set apart from the ordinary world to be revered through ritual. To deny that there is something religious about this seems counterintuitive. But there is a fatal flaw at the heart of the PRT: whereas Stalinism's sacralising proclivities allow the conclusion that it shares something very essential with religions, it does *not* follow logically that it can therefore be regarded as some kind of religious phenomenon. The Achilles' heel of the PRT is its assumption that sacralisation gives us religion.

Modern heroic leaders are made subject to sacralisation and are being adulated in the most excessive ways, but they are mostly not endowed with miraculous, supernatural powers. Sacralisation remains innerworldly. For all the magnificent rhetorical flourish of the praise they received, the heroes of Stalinism – from Karl Marx to Joseph Stalin himself and his comrades-in-arms – were framed as no more than particularly excellent, courageous and insightful people. They couldn't compare to the miracle-working saints, let alone to gods. This is enough to reject classification of Stalinism as a political religion:

⁸⁴See Pollock, *op. cit.*, pp. 91–93.

⁸⁵Krementsov, *op. cit.*; Alexei Kojevnikov, 'Rituals of Stalinist Culture At Work: Science and the Games of Intraparty Democracy circa 1948', *The Russian Review*, 57:1 (1998), pp. 25–52; Pollock, *op. cit.*

⁸⁶'Marksizm i voprosy iazykoznanii' (1950), *Sochineniia*, vol. 16.2, pp. 243–244.

⁸⁷See for this interpretation also: Pollock, *op. cit.*, pp. 216–218.

without deifying the political it makes no sense to speak of a religion of the political. Sacralisation doesn't do the trick.

The second point I have been trying to make in this article is that all this is not a mere matter of definition. Whether a system practises sacralisation of the heroic, innerworldly or of the religious, transcendental type *matters*. It makes all the difference in the world for the kind of rituals that it spawns and for the epistemological structure of its belief system. The PRT takes insufficient account of such differences.

The heroic ritual landscape differs fundamentally from the religious. Stalin's leadership was underscored by loyalty rituals, but the prayer and liturgical rituals of communion that were at the heart of Orthodoxy, and the churches to come with them, were missing altogether. Rituals of communion, the type that dominates Orthodoxy, rest on the assumption that higher powers not materially present can be actually accessed through symbolic acts. Stalinism lacked the transcendental metaphysical basis credibly to recreate a secularised version of such rituals. Stalinist loyalty rituals were not about communion but about public allegiance.

The difference is thrown into starker relief when we realise that, whereas rituals of communion can very well be performed without any witnesses present, in a purely private ceremony, this would make no sense whatsoever in a Stalinist context. The very idea of a private ritual was alien to Stalinism. Loyalty rituals must always be performed in public, for that is what they are all about.

Finally, Stalinist heroism was importantly faith-based, in that it sported a utopian goal completely outside the realm of the possible, resting, really, on hope and longing, and which generated a spirit of dedication and sacrifice quite comparable to the religious spirit. Also, Stalinist doctrine was declared sacrosanct and made untouchable. Faith became compulsory and dissidence was persecuted. But the Stalinist belief system was never allowed completely to denature into faith and to turn into mystery. To ensure the success of their this-worldly transformative mission, heroic belief systems must preserve a substantial component of evidence-based realism. They must combine their faith-based ideal with an evidence-based effort, which effectively prevents them from taking the religious turn.

Acknowledgements

The author wants to thank Roger Griffin, Malte Rolf and Ian Thatcher for their very useful comments on an earlier version of this article, and Hans van Rossum for the insights in Roman religion that he shared with me. I am also very grateful to the three anonymous reviewers, who have helped me sharpen my argument.

Notes on Contributor

Erik van Ree is an assistant professor at the Institute of European Studies of the University of Amsterdam. Main fields of interest: Stalinism, communism. He contributed numerous articles to scholarly journals. His latest book: "Boundaries of Utopia - Imagining Communism from Plato to Stalin" (Routledge, 2015).