Studia Philosophiae Christianae
UKSW
62(2026)1

JĘDRZEJ PIEKARA

SOVIET SOCIALISM AS POLITICAL RELIGION OR UNIFYING THEORY? EXPLORING ITS ROLE IN TOTALITARIAN POLITICS AND SOCIAL COHESION

Abstract. This article analyses how to interpret Soviet socialism as a quasi-religious tradition. Its main aim is to compare two analytical frameworks: Soviet ideology as a political religion (the classic view of it as a tool of totalitarian control) and as a unifying theory (a system that ensures social cohesion, based on the ideas of the evolutionary biologist David Sloan Wilson). The author seeks to answer the question of the status of Soviet ideology in the context of sociological and religious studies research – going beyond a purely historical or Sovietological perspective – and aims to open new research directions that follow from applying the unifying-theory approach. In the paper, arguments for attributing religious features to Soviet ideology are examined with reference to the history of ideas and classical theories of religion (including those of Émile Durkheim and Max Weber). The article highlights similarities between the system and millenarianism, eschatology, and apocalyptic thought, while also acknowledging empirical difficulties in studying religiosity in the USSR. Both interpretive frameworks are illustrated using examples of social organizations, including the Komsomol and the Proletkult. The findings indicate that the political-religious concept emphasizes the sacralization of power and its role as an oppressive instrument of control, striving to completely replace traditional denominations with a new system. By contrast, the unifying theory highlights the adaptive role of quasi-religious mechanisms, which strive to build stable social structures by drawing on the evolutionary foundation of religiosity, rather than creating a new faith. As a result, the first framework treats ideology as a mechanism of enslavement, whereas the second views it as a tool for strengthening cohesion, serving the group's survival and stability. The author argues that the Soviet project should be regarded as a hybrid entity, operating simultaneously in the registers of coercion and cohesion, in which the two models complement each other – explaining both the regime's institutional architecture and its capacity to stabilize the social order in a post-religious reality.

Keywords: socialism; religion; Marxism; politics; communism; theory of religion

1. Discussing the Soviet religion. 2. Treating Marxism as religion in the context of the Soviet system. 3. Studying Soviet socialism through the theory of religion. 4. The interpretation of Soviet socialism as a political religion and theory of unity. 5. Komsomol and Proletkult in the 1920s: a case study. 6. Conclusions.

Every thing to be true must become a religion
Oscar Wilde[1]

1. DISCUSSING THE SOVIET RELIGION

At the turn of the 20th century, ideology – understood here as a comprehensive, future-oriented doctrine claiming authority over all major domains of social life – became a central principle of political rule in Europe. According to Karl Mannheim, ideology in the context of the state is the process by which ruling elements become so "intensively interest-bound to a situation that they are simply no longer able to see certain facts which would undermine their sense of domination". This results in a collective unconscious that obscures the real condition of society to both the rulers and the ruled, thereby functioning to stabilize the existing order (Mannheim, 40).

In 1917, a Bolshevik party seized state power in Russia and treated Marxism (understood here both as a political theory and an ideological tradition) as a source of legitimacy and a blueprint for institutional transformation. Abdurakhman Avtorkhanov referred to this new entity as an "ideocratic empire" (Авторханов, 1988, 9-10). By this, the Chechen writer understood an entire state system founded exclusively on ideological principles – one that strives not only for the triumph of its own ideology but also seeks to transform foreign societies according to norms dictated by that ideology. A similar view was expressed by Andrzej Nowak, who argued that, after seizing power the Bolsheviks were not guided directly by a policy of imperialism, but rather by ideological imperatives – particularly evident in their commitment to internationalism (Nowak, 2015, 95; Nowak, 2023, 29).

---

1 Wilde, O. (1997). *De profundis.* In *Collected works of Oscar Wilde.* Wordsworth Editions, 1073.

The uniqueness of the 20th-century state lies in its attempt to reclaim what Mannheim called a "monopolistic control over the society's world-view" (Mannheim, 1936, 10), a role historically held by different classes or castes. The case of the 1917 revolution shows that for the first time the intervention in the social process was guided by a totalizing doctrine, outside of control and self-criticism. In this sense, a state ideology is an institutionalized structure, which serves as an administrative control mechanism (Mannheim, 1936, 56, 114).

Research on the "religious" aspect of Soviet ideology has been traditionally dominated by the political religion paradigm, which assumes that the regime functioned as a secularized form of faith through the sacralization of power. This methodology, attributed first to Eric Voegelin and Raymond Aron, and later formalized by Emilio Gentile, interprets Soviet socialism primarily as a top-down instrument of totalitarian control and spiritual displacement. Although the functional-evolutionary dimension remains largely peripheral in Sovietology, one cannot ignore, for example, Stephen Kotkin's concept of "Speaking Bolshevik" or Jochen Hellbeck's work on Soviet subjectivity. The current debate remains largely polarized around the validity of the political religion theory, leaving other theories, including the "unifying theory" (which views ideology as an adaptive mechanism for group cohesion), underexplored.

The idea of a "unifying theory" in relation to religious or ideological movements has been signalled by David Sloan Wilson, an evolutionary biologist (Wilson, 2003). Rather than from a theological, sociological, or historical perspective Wilson offers an argument that opens a new path for interpreting not only socialism as a form of religion but also for reconsidering the broader theoretical framework of religion itself.

Instead of revisiting the century-old debate over the religious or political nature of Soviet socialism, this paper examines the *de facto* function of state ideology through the lens of sociology and religious theory. By shifting the focus away from ideology's self-proclaimed

objectives to its practical operation, I navigate between two distinct interpretative frameworks to examine Soviet socialism as an adaptive system of social cohesion. While the political religion approach addresses the well-established totalitarian and oppressive aspects of the regime, David Sloan Wilson's unifying theory offers a path to reconsider Soviet socialism as a functional equivalent of religion that strengthened group stability.

The use of the term "Soviet socialism" in this paper is deliberate, aiming to distinguish the specific, institutionalized practice of the Soviet regime from the broader, theoretical abstractions of Marxism or the eschatological ideal of communism. While Marxism serves as a philosophical foundation and communism symbolizes the envisioned final stage of history, Soviet socialism, in my opinion, captures the operational reality of state ideology as it was implemented, experienced, and enforced. This term aims to enable an examination of the system as a functioning socio-political entity that actively reshaped the institutional and social landscape of the USSR. In the following sections, I will analyse how the aforementioned oppressive and adaptive models manifested in the operations of social organizations such as the Komsomol and Proletkult.

This analysis seeks to uncover how the Soviet project attempted to bridge the gap between what Mannheim calls "collective unconscious" and Wilson's concept of "adaptive group cohesion". In doing so, we can determine whether the Soviet state's ideological monopoly functioned primarily as a top-down instrument of spiritual displacement or as the vital, although often directly or indirectly coercive, connective tissue required to sustain a new social body in a state of perpetual transformation.

2. TREATING MARXISM AS RELIGION IN THE CONTEXT OF THE SOVIET SYSTEM

Scientists who reject the idea that Soviet socialism incorporates religious elements, or that it is strictly connected to the schematics of religious thinking, have raised various concerns about classifying materialist or strictly atheist movements as variations of an organized religion. The concept of socialism, among other ideologies such as nationalism, as a political religion was popularized mainly by Eric Voegelin, later by members of the "totalitarian" school of Sovietology (Richard Pipes, Martin Malia, Robert Conquest, among others) and scholars such as Emilio Gentile, Raymond Aron, Murray Rothbard, and most recently by Yuri Slezkine and Oleg Kharkhordin. Critics of the concept of political religion are currently concentrating on recognizing the uniqueness of religious thinking and institutions, arguing that it is not possible for a secular ideology to be recognized as something similar.

The most important contemporary critics of the concept of a Soviet political religion include Ninian Smart, Tamás Nyirkos, and Erik van Ree. Ninian Smart described "Marxist and Soviet Atheism" purely as a "worldview", without comparing, or even delving deeper into, those ideas (Smart, 1997, 510-513), stating however that it is not appropriate to try to call them religions or even quasi-religions (Smart 1997, 25). Tamás Nyirkos adopts a cautious, largely sceptical stance toward equating socialism with religion, emphasizing the conceptual ambiguities and historical misreading inherent in the "political religion" or "secular religion" framework (Nyirkos, 2021-2022, 1-22; Nyirkos, 2021, 68-85; Nyirkos, 2024). Van Ree, in his 2016 article *Stalinist Ritual and Belief System: Reflections on 'Political Religion'*, was heavily critical of the whole concept of a "political religion theory", claiming:

> […] 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. (van Ree, 2016, 143)

There is, of course, another group of scholars rejecting the aforementioned thesis, comprising mainly those who themselves identify with socialist or Marxist ideas and methodologies (such as Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar), and who are inherently opposed to the notion that an anti-religious ideology could itself become a religion. This position is particularly unsuited for academic discussion, as it stems from deep personal engagement and, moreover, can be readily falsified by comparison. Marxism was not only anti-religious but also an anti-nationalist movement; yet this did not prevent Marxist successor states from becoming nationalist states, nor did it stop Marxist movements in Central-Eastern Europe from evolving to incorporate elements of chauvinistic, nationalist ideology, such as national communism. If this is true, then why would the fact that Marxism was anti-religious prevent future states in the Soviet sphere of influence and the Soviet Union itself from becoming entangled in religious thinking and mechanisms?

The ultimate goal of the socialist revolution was itself religious– the goal of creating a new ideal world, a society without classes, which is rightfully compared to utopian thinking. This cultural trope is also akin to the apocalyptic tradition of Judaeo-Christian heritage. Moreover, the famous Marxist view of religion as the "opium of the people" stems precisely from this goal. It is not so much about criticism of the intentions inherent in faith, but rather the fact that religion postpones the creation of the ideal society to a time beyond human life, offering hope that a higher being would bring about the necessary changes and thus relieving humanity of that task.

The issue of "ideology as religion" is much broader than just a reflection on whether the Soviet Union was becoming a religious state. It's part of a wider discussion about totalitarian regimes adapting religious hierarchy and functions. In his classic book *Religion, Society and the Individual*, John Milton Yinger argued:

> There seems little doubt that, from the point of view of a functional theory of religion, modern totalitarian systems serve as religions for many people. They attempt to make the grave problems of life more bearable by reference to a happier future, thus sharing the cosmic optimism of religion. The dictator becomes a living embodiment of a "supernatural" power, scarcely limited by the forces that have prevented other men from solving overwhelming problems. (Yinger, 1962, 122)

On the other hand, Thomas Luckmann wrote in *The Invisible Religion* that:

> The fate of totalitarianism in modern industrial societies shows that attempts to transform "institutional" ideologies into encompassing world views were not notably successful. Even Communism – which articulated something like an "official" model and which succeeded in enforcing routine socialization of "everybody" into that model in the Soviet Union – seems to have failed in producing a "new man". (Luckmann, 1967, 101-102)

We can see that Yinger views totalitarianism as functioning like a religion, offering purpose, symbolic authority, and ritual to unite and motivate people. Luckmann, however, argues that such regimes fail to instil deeply internalized beliefs, even under systematic indoctrination.

In my opinion, when analyzing this issue comparatively from the perspective of the history of ideas the religiosity of Soviet

socialism is one of the key features of the ideology, whose ultimate aspiration was to create a "new man" and a "new society". To reach this goal Soviet socialism reproduced numerous patterns from Christian traditions: excommunication, original sin, and religious mentality. François Furet pointed to significant parallels between party authorities and the clerical hierarchy, prophets, and priests. By the time Joseph Stalin became the party's chief ideologue, most ideological debate had been reduced to the role of admonitions in a style that Furet described as catechism – a question-and-answer format in which the content was irrelevant and only the canonical responses mattered (Furet, 1999, 132-133).

"Marxism is a religious creed", wrote Murray Rothbard (Rothbard, 1990, 125-126). Under a materialist approach, the intention of building the Kingdom of God on Earth remains essential. The works of the prophets – Marx, Engels, and Lenin – are treated as vision; eschatology, that is, the striving for utopia, is embodied in political activity and class struggle under the leadership of the Communist Party; and the apocalyptic dimension, namely the description of the transition to utopia, is the dream of achieving communism – a revolution that would radically transform the entire social order, as Karl Popper wrote (Popper, 2013) – postponed to the future, towards which humanity is to strive according to the principles of scientific socialism. "Social economics", wrote Jacob Taubes, is for Marx "an economics of salvation" (Taubes, 2009, 188).

Rothbard characterized Marx as a "communist eschatologist", envisioning communism as humanity's ultimate destiny – a secular counterpart to the Kingdom of Heaven. In this interpretation, the struggles and suffering of history would culminate in a classless utopia guided by a vanguard of "secular saints", whose mission was to bring about a final, transformative end to human conflict (Rothbard, 1990, 123).

Building on this religiously inflected metaphor, Andrzej Walicki described the collapse of international capitalism and the triumph

of the working class as the central drama of the Marxist apocalypse, ushering in a communist millennium. Yet Walicki emphasized that this vision was not one of strict historical determinism; the path was not mechanically predetermined (Walicki, 1995). Instead, the emergence of a communist "kingdom of freedom" in a *post-Christum*, post-religious world required a miraculous leap – one for which only Marxists, as self-appointed "redeemers of society" with a messianic role in human history, could prepare humanity (Taubes, 1967, 456).

These interpretations, however, remain theoretical reflections grounded in ideological texts and fragments of Soviet political history. What they lack is a direct sociological examination of the people who lived under the Soviet system. One of the few attempts in this direction was conducted in 1989 by Sam McFarland, an American psychologist who explored correlations between religious belief and communist ideology. Using psychological methods and interviews with Russian citizens, McFarland found notable similarities in the worldviews of religious individuals and committed communists. Yet he cautioned that his work was only a preliminary step – its momentum cut short by the rapid collapse of the Soviet Union. It's also important to remember that the worldview of Soviet citizens in 1989 was likely very different from that of the early 20th century (McFarland, 1998).

Since empirical research has not yielded conclusive evidence of religiosity within Soviet society, the question remains open. In the absence of comprehensive psychological or sociological data, the investigation must turn instead to the tools of the theory of religion and the history of ideas, which allow us to interpret Soviet ideology and practice as a form of secular/civil/political religion, or falsify this interpretation.

3. STUDYING SOVIET SOCIALISM THROUGH THE THEORY OF RELIGION

The first point to stress when engaging with the theory of religion is that it is challenging to operate strictly within the established framework of this academic discipline, while stretching it to address issues for which it was not originally intended. The theory of religion can be adapted to examine spheres of religious influence, but it becomes a far more limited tool when applied to the analysis of quasi-religious or para-religious movements.

A further issue that must be acknowledged is the Eurocentric bias inherent in religious studies, a bias rooted in the Christian heritage of the very concept of "religion". Under the influence of colonial thought, the Christian conception of religion was applied as a lens through which to interpret both religious and non-religious movements in the Global South, often reshaping their true nature into a distorted form sanctioned by established transatlantic scholars.

Another perspective worth considering is the case of the "Old" and "New" Paradigms, as described by Richard Stephan Warner (Warner, 1993). In the sociology of religion, the two paradigms illustrate different ways of approaching religion studies – the "Old Paradigm" assumes decline under modernity; the "New Paradigm" emphasizes persistence, adaptability and pluralism of belief. The shift to the "New Paradigm" opens even more possibilities to apply the study of religion to movements that are not strictly religious. For example, in the Soviet Union under Stalin, socialist ideology and the cult of personality took on quasi-religious dimensions, suggesting that the "New Paradigm" may offer a more flexible analytical framework than the traditional theory of religion, which was originally tailored to the Abrahamic faiths (Goldstein, 2012, 350; Richard, 2015; Luckmann, 1967, 31-38).

Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that an established framework from one methodology or field of academic discourse can, with due caution, be applied in another. My argument here is that the theoretical framework of the study of religion can indeed

be employed to analyze Soviet socialism, provided that we remain mindful that our object of study involves processes that, in our interpretation, resemble those found in religious movements proper.

To introduce and explain all the various schools within the theory of religion would require far more space than is available here, and is, in my view, unnecessary for the present purpose.[2] I have therefore chosen to focus on two aspects most relevant to the theme of this paper: first, the specific characteristics of the theory of religion that support the argument for the existence of a "political religion", and second, the "theory of social unity".

At the beginning of the 20th century the two main schools of the theory of religion emerged – one originating from Émile Durkheim and one rooted in Max Weber's works.[3] Both of them, albeit Weber to a lesser extent, endorse a formal (or functional) concept of religion (Riesebrodt, 2010, 72). The functional approach was the dominant research paradigm in religious studies in the 20th century, surpassing the rivalling content-based concept of religion by far.

Émile Durkheim argued that religion constitutes a unified system of beliefs and practices concerning sacred things, which serves to bind individuals together into a cohesive moral community. Durkheim viewed religion as a fundamentally social phenomenon that organizes collective life by defining group boundaries and prescribing the behaviors of its members. For him, religion and society were inseparable and mutually constitutive, with almost all mental categories and institutions emerging from religious foundations. Central to his theory was the distinction between the sacred and the profane,

2 For an overview of the most important traditions in the theory of religion, see Riesebrodt (2010). For an overview of Soviet studies of religion, see Shakhanobich (1993), and Pushchaev (2017). For an overview of contemporary Global South studies, see: The role of religions in multiple modern societies: The Global South (2024).

3 For a comparison of the definitions of religion formulated by these authors, see Launay (2022).

which he saw as the basis for social order: the sacred marked what was commanded, forbidden, and sanctioned, enabling cooperation and coordination. In his studies Durkheim sought to demonstrate that religion served the essential demand for social integration in the modern nation-state, functioning as the repository of shared cognitive, moral, and aesthetic principles without which communal life could not be sustained (Wilson, 2003, 54; Riesebrodt, 2010, 62, 74; Znamenski 2021, XV-XVI; Goldstein 2012, 348).

Although Durkheim argues that religion, while being a "unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church" (Durkheim 1964, 74), it is interesting that he does not need, in its essence, the elements of supernatural phenomena or the presence of a deity (Durkheim, 1964, 24-35). Yinger, another proponent of a functional theory of religion, developed an even more radical view of the role of religion in society, saying that a religion can be defined "as a system of beliefs and practices by means of which a group of people struggles with these ultimate problems of human life". Thus, he continues, "religions are built to carry the «peak load» of human emotional need" (Yinger, 1962, 9-10).

Another representative of a functional school (though also strongly influenced by phenomenology) was Thomas Luckmann, who coined the term "sociological theory of religion" and provided the theoretical framework for this subfield of sociology (Goldstein, 2012, 347). He argued in *The Invisible Religion* that the worldview, as an objective and historical social reality, fulfils an essentially religious function and represents a universal social form of religion. He saw religion's original role as integrating the social order and legitimizing the status quo, though in certain historical contexts, institutionalized religion could become a dynamic force that challenges secular institutions or other religious groups. Religion, for him, becomes a social fact either through ritual or doctrine, and while it is often assumed that

individual religious needs align with these institutional forms, their variations may be shaped as much by socio-historical conditions as by personal needs (Luckmann, 1967, 22, 53, 67).

In contrast to Durkheim's focus on religion as a mechanism of social cohesion, Max Weber approached the study of religion from an action-oriented, interpretative perspective, concerned primarily with how religious ideas shape the ethos, conduct, and cultural orientations of social actors. Rather than seeking an overarching definition of religion, Weber concentrated on examining the ways in which religious worldviews influence economic behavior, social stratification, and forms of domination. Weber investigated why the West achieved the highest degree of rationalization across multiple spheres of life, including economics. In the context of Soviet socialism, Weber's framework supports an explanation of how Marxist-Leninist ideology functioned in terms comparable to religious ethics by cultivating a distinct habitus, shaping patterns of authority, and embedding itself into the moral and cultural logic of Soviet society (Riesebrodt, 2010, 65).

It is possible to apply Weber's account of the structures and purposes of religious life to the study of secular ideologies like Soviet socialism. Marxist historicism and dialectical materialism, which view history as an autonomous, law-governed process determining humanity's fate, closely resemble Weber's description of "spirits" as elusive, invisible forces that are neither personal nor divine but are nevertheless seen as guiding events (Weber 1965, 3-4). Revolutionary leaders, such as Marx or Lenin, whose political directives and intellectual visions served as the movement's cornerstones, are comparable to Weber's idea of the prophet as a charismatic figure whose authority is based on personal gifts and the declaration of a binding doctrine (Weber, 1965, 46-47).

Even his account of priesthood as a social organization of officeholders serving the collective recalls the Communist Party's function as the institutional custodian of the doctrine, enforcing

orthodoxy and performing the rituals of ideological life (Weber, 1965, 28). When writing about society itself Weber pointed out the problem of the "rationalization of taboos", which lead to the system of norms, sanctions and punishments, that could be used as a base for analyzing law under a totalitarian state (Weber, 1965, 38). Given this, Weber's categories provide a remarkably appropriate vocabulary for understanding how Soviet socialism established its own organized, quasi-religious symbolic universe.

The theoretical viewpoints of Durkheim, Weber, and later functionalist and interpretative schools demonstrate how the analytical tools of religious studies can shed light on phenomena that extend well beyond the confines of conventional faith. When used carefully, these frameworks allow for the analysis of secular ideologies in terms of how they organize social life, unite communities, and influence moral and cultural traits. Such systems may adapt many of the social roles of religion, even in the absence of traditional mysticism and supernatural phenomena.

4. THE INTERPRETATION OF SOVIET SOCIALISM AS A POLITICAL RELIGION AND THEORY OF UNITY

As noted earlier, the idea of Sovietism, particularly Stalinism, as a form of political religion is not new. It draws heavily on the broader theory of totalitarianism, in which the totalitarian state appropriates elements from its predecessor regimes but reshapes them to serve its own ideological purposes. Some scholars go even further, tracing the roots of political religion to periods well before the 20th century; however, it was in the context of totalitarian regimes that the framework of political religion gained wide currency in the analysis of fascist, Nazi, and communist states (Gill, 2021, 1; Roginska 2025, 16). One could, of course, follow the thread back into antiquity, to the deification of rulers, yet a more coherent chronological starting point may be found in the works of Niccolò Machiavelli.

For Machiavelli, religion functioned as an instrument through which rulers could maintain control over society, while at the same time serving society itself by establishing ethical and moral principles that ensured legal and civilizational stability (Brown, 2010, 166).

Among the most vocal contemporary proponents of the thesis that Sovietism can be interpreted as a political religion are Dmytro Vovk and Andrei Znamenski. In his paper *Soviet Law and Political Religion* (2022), Vovk argued that socialist religiosity in the Soviet Union was implied from totalitarianism, which itself can be described as a political religion. He concentrated mostly on the totalitarian aspect of secular religiosity and political religion, suggesting that: "totalitarian political regimes are inclined to sacralize their power and employ religious tools in order to sustain themselves. This usually has some influence on the legal systems of totalitarian countries" (Vovk, 2022, 227). Vovk also emphasized the importance of secular religion for society itself, not only the governing bodies:

> The institutional dimension of Soviet political religion comprised not only the state but also the Party and mass state-funded associations of young people, artists, writers, and so on. Membership in these movements, just like belonging to a state religion in many nonsecular states, was not just a way of immersing the population in official ideology from the moment one first stepped foot outside the family into kindergarten or primary school; it was also a way of determining privileges or, what was more common, it was a condition of nondiscrimination. (Vovk, 2022, 233)

While Vovk restrains himself in his definition of political religion to analyze the totalitarian concept of secular religiosity, Andrei Znamenski goes even further. In his broad definition, he stays close to Voegelin's original vision by interpreting socialism – alongside other modern ideologies such as classical liberalism, conservatism, and nationalism – as a force that significantly shaped modern society

by either complementing or entirely replacing traditional religious structures.

According to Znamenski, socialism functioned as a surrogate political faith that addressed the specific needs of various radicalized groups, including intellectuals, the working class, and the impoverished peasantry. These groups were often characterized by an internal conflict: a strong desire to participate in the modern world, while simultaneously feeling deeply alienated from it. In this sense, Znamenski posits that the socialist ideology provided these individuals with a secularized framework of belief, helping them navigate the tensions and dislocations inherent in the process of modernization (Znamenski, 2021, XIV).

Another theoretical perspective relevant to analyzing the Soviet system's potential religiosity is that of political theology, which ties somewhat into the concept of political religion. Political theology's main goal, as described by Carl Schmitt, is to analyze how main political concepts are *de facto* secularized adaptations of traditional theological ideas. Schmitt's statement that "all significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts" suggests that even militantly atheist regimes may unconsciously inherit the forms and structures of religion. The Soviet Union and its main theoretical justifications and practical actions can thus be understood as reconfigurations of theological archetypes embedded in the political tradition of the tsarist Russia and Orthodoxy (James, Newman, 2023, 67-83).[4]

Political religion, therefore, provides the idea that a totalitarian state supplements systems of societal control with newly created institutions and traditions that are both replacing and recreating the old

4 The authors argued, in conclusion, that: "a political-theological politics reopens the question of what it is that should be regarded as sacred, where a community's 'ultimate' values lie, and that invites analysts to examine how such a question becomes the medium of ideological innovation and contest." (p. 80)

ones, rooted in religion. The arguments for why certain actions by the Soviet ruling bodies, revolutionary artists and society itself, resembled religion are numerous and not widely contested (the famous transformation of the "Red Corner" is the prime example of an old, religious symbol becoming a new, secular one) (Gill, 2021, 7-8).

In contrast to the theory of political religion, the theory of social unity, as proposed by David Sloan Wilson, does not necessarily equalize the outcome, does not state that the ideology of the ruling regime becomes a new model of religion. Rather, the social unity thesis proposes the concept of social cohesion as a crucial element of the societal relations between the individual and the ruling institutions. Its most important statement is that there is a need, present in each of three layers: individual, society and institutions, to co-exist with each other and strive for the highest level of social cohesion. First, let's try to define social cohesion.

Current research, as exemplified by Xavier Fonseca, Stephan Lukosch and Frances Brazier among others, shows that the various attempts to define social cohesion can be traced back to Durkheim, yet there is no clear consensus. The characteristics of social cohesion include, in most cases, the absence of conflict (internal and external), a desire for affiliation, a group property, a degree of stability, the strength of connections, shared values such as trust, general well-being and equal representation/opportunities in society (Fonseca *et al.*, 2019, 241).

In their 2019 paper, Fonseca, Lukosch and Brazier proposed a new definition of social cohesion, one that, in their opinion, shows best the connections and interdependencies between the individual, the community and the institutions. Summarizing their research, we can formulate the following definition of social cohesion: it is a condition in which members of a society or group share compatible norms and values, experience mutual trust, stability, and a sense of belonging, and enjoy equal opportunities for participation and representation. It involves the absence of conflict and the presence

of strong social connections, supported by formal laws and informal cultural frameworks that enable individuals to engage fully in collective life. The most contributing factors to social cohesion are the lack of conflict between individual and societal/institutional beliefs and the willingness to remain part of the group and contribute to it (Fonseca *et al.*, 2019, 247).

Social cohesion is therefore a result of the actions taken by each of the participants in a society. Actions however are being taken by actors according to their individual or collective values. Society is constantly under pressure to change its core values, according to the will of the majority or the institutions in power. The individual, on the other hand, can isolate themselves from the majority and disturb the social cohesion in process. We can consider all of the actions taken by the actors as a unifying system. Religion is but one of the systems that are unifying society. However, David Sloan Wilson claims that:

> religions are not the only systems that unite people into adaptive groups. [There are as well] political organizations, business organizations, military organizations, sports teams, family groups, secular intellectual traditions, or even diffuse cultures as adaptive units. We therefore need to develop a general theory of unifying systems of which religion is a special case. The general theory should distinguish religion from other unifying systems, but it also ought to show what religion shares in common with other unifying systems, including those that appear highly nonreligious in other respects. (Wilson, 2003, 220)

One can trace the roots of Wilson's statements to John Milton Yinger, who in his 1962 book *Religion, Society and the Individual* formulated a concept of social order "that requires a unifying value scheme" to stop internal conflict and promote its own values. Yinger argues that the values promoted have to be "self-enforcing", that is

built into the personalities of the members of the society. The less positive aspect of Yinger's theory is that a political authority is needed to oversee the implementation and stability of the unifying social order – through taxation, force and coercive measures. In this unifying theory Yinger sees the role of the religion as supplementary, not decisive:

> By ritual, by symbol, by its system of beliefs, its doctrines of rewards and punishments, religion may help to produce the socialized individuals who accept the dominate values as to legitimate means and ends. This aids the political authorities, but also applies to them. (Yinger, 1962, 71)

To sum up, we have argued that religion can be treated in two ways when talking about the existing unifying system in the theory of social unity and cohesion: as a primary and a secondary unifier. The former leans closely to the political religion theory; the latter sees religion as an aiding force, abused by the perpetrator of a unifying scheme to enforce it. In contrast to the political religion theory, the theory of unity does not state that an ideology becomes a religious movement. Rather, ideology uses religiosity, both traditional and secular, to its own gains, to strengthen social cohesion.

5. KOMSOMOL AND PROLETKULT IN THE 1920S: A CASE STUDY

Rather than delving into the previously well-studied territory of the most obvious emanations of political religion in the Soviet Union (such as official ideological rituals or the cult of personality), I propose a brief analysis of two fundamental organizations in the Soviet society of the 1920s: the Communist Union of Youth (Komsomol) and the Proletarian Cultural and Educational Organization (Proletkult). Their relevance is due to their distinct roles within the Soviet project of social engineering. While the Komsomol exemplifies

the state-driven, top-down institutionalization of ideology (functioning effectively as a secular catechumenate for the "New Man"), the Proletkult offers a unique insight into the bottom-up, autonomous attempt to forge a proletarian class consciousness through culture.

Comparing these two cases allows for an evaluation of how Soviet ideology operated simultaneously as an instrument of political control and a mechanism for adaptive group solidarity, thereby testing the validity of both the political religion and unifying theory frameworks.

The Komsomol's primary goal was the re-education of the contemporary youth, the elimination of "traits from the Tsarist period", and their orientation toward the Marxist model. The Komsomol members promoted sports, encouraged youth participation in labor, fought against prostitution, took part in the creation of theatrical and publishing projects, and even organized sports clubs. By the end of 1920, the Komsomol counted nearly 500,000 members in more than twelve thousand cells, both urban and rural. It was regarded as the default political organization for radically revolutionary youth aspiring to participate directly in socialist social transformation.[5]

The goal of the Proletkult was to organize the cultural life of workers in a mass manner, offering classes in sculpture, painting, the natural sciences, reading, writing, and arithmetic. Proletkult poetry circles, popular theatres, and libraries were also established, and additional university-level courses for workers were organized. At the heart of proletarian cultural thought was the thesis of its "autonomy", according to which the experiences and perceptions of the working class were inaccessible to other social classes. According to the Proletkultists, socialism would be achieved only when the working class developed, from below and independently, class consciousness and confidence in its abilities – both cultural and political. In 1920, Proletkult had as many as 400,000 members. In most

5 On the Komsomol, see Gooderham (1982), Tirado (1993), Gorsuch (1996), Waters (1992).

factories there were Proletkult cells operating entirely independently from party cells.[6]

From the perspective of political religion, these organizations were meant to replace the previously existing systems, such as church education, aristocratic patronage of the arts, or the religious organization of the day-to-day life. They incorporated elements of these systems (such as weddings, baptisms, prayers, holy icons, and naming preferences) and transformed them into a secular, socialist equivalent.

From the perspective of the theory of unity, however, these organizations stand out as two methods of organizing society, establishing social cohesion, and spreading common values. They are not merely a replacement designed by the totalitarian regime, but a necessary element of society. The transition from the feudal to the communist state, therefore, can be reinterpreted as a transformation of the ruling system of unity. The socialist revolution, whose ultimate goal was to transform the old society into a new one, did not create its own religion; rather, it used the religiosity that was common in Russian society to strengthen secular ideology and align materialism with mystical thinking.

6. CONCLUSIONS

This paper showcased two different frameworks of studying Soviet ideology and regime-society relations. The framework of political religion proves essential for analyzing the regime's totalitarian dimensions – the sacralization of power and replacement of traditional faith with ideology, which was meant to legitimize the "ideocratic empire". However, this perspective alone risks reducing the Soviet experience to a mechanism of top-down oppression.

By integrating it with David Sloan Wilson's unifying theory, I've tried to argue that there exists a deeper, adaptive layer of the ideology:

6 On the Proletkult, see Frame (2020), Mally (1990).

its capacity to function as a mechanism of group cohesion. As evidenced by the case of the Proletkult, the system utilized solidarity to bind the individual to the collective, satisfying the fundamental human need for belonging within the "New Society".

The difference between political religion and the theory of unity is also evident when we analyze the ultimate goal of the actors in both theories. Political religion is strongly rooted in the "totalitarian school" of Sovietology, meaning it treats Soviet socialism as an oppressive force toward society. The ultimate goal, then, would be the power of the ruling institution over society and the individual. For the theory of unity, however, the ultimate goal would be to achieve social cohesion – a state in which the majority of actors from three layers (individual, society, and institutions) are satisfied.

As a result, the Soviet project should be viewed as a hybrid entity that operated simultaneously on two frequencies: coercive and cohesive. The comparison between the Komsomol and the early Proletkult illustrates such a dual nature. While the political religion model effectively explains the regime's institutional architecture and its ambition to monopolize the worldview, the unifying theory offers a way to explain how those structures aimed to stabilize social order. Ultimately, Soviet socialism dominated the public sphere because it fulfilled the function of a unifying system, ensuring the survival and cooperation of the group in a radically transformed, post-religious reality.

STATEMENTS

Funding: This research received no external funding .

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not applicable.

Data Availability Statement: Not applicable.

Acknowledgments: Not applicable.

AI Tools Declaration: During the preparation of this manuscript and the underlying study, the author used generative artificial intelligence tool (Google Gemini Pro and Google NotebookLM) for the following purposes: deep research function, analysis of the bibliography, organizing and editing of the citations and bibliography to the APA Style, basic proofreading (spelling, grammar

and punctuation errors). The author reviewed and edited the output where necessary and took full responsibility for the content of this publication.
Conflicts of Interest: Not applicable.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Avtorkhanov, A. (1988). *Imperiya Kremlja: Sovetskij tip kolonializma*. Prometheus-Verlag.

Brown, A. (2010). *Philosophy and religion in Machiavelli*. In J.M. Najemy (ed.), *The Cambridge companion to Machiavelli* (1-18). Cambridge University Press.

Durkheim, E. (1964). *Elementary forms of religious life* (J.W. Swain, trans.). George Allen & Unwin. (Original work published 1912)

Fonseca, X., Lukosch, S., Brazier, F. (2019). Social cohesion revisited: A new definition and how to characterize it. *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research*, *32*(2), 231–253. https://doi.org/10.1080/13511610.2018.1497480.

Frame, M. (2020). *Early Soviet culture: Education, science and Proletkult*. In D. Orlovsky (ed.), *A companion to the Russian Revo*lution (375–382). Wiley-Blackwell.

Furet, F. (1999). *The passing of an illusion* (D. Furet, Trans.). University of Chicago Press. (Original work published 1995)

Gill, G. (2021). The Stalin cult as political religion. *Religions*, *12*(12), Article 1112. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel12121112.

Goldstein, W.S. (2012). Sociological theory of religion. *Religion Compass*, *6*(7), 347–353. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1749-8171.2012.00363.x.

Gooderham, P. (1982). The Komsomol and worker youth: The inculcation of 'communist values' in Leningrad during NEP. *Soviet Studies*, *34*(4), 506-528.

Gorsuch, A.E. (1996). "A woman is not a man": The culture of gender and generation in Soviet Russia, 1921–1928. *Slavic Review*, *55*(3), 636–660.

James, M., Newman, S. (2023). Recontesting the sacred: Political theology as ideological method. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, *30*(1), 67–83. https://doi.org/10.1080/13569317.2023.2225237.

Launay, R. (2022). Defining religion: Durkheim and Weber compared. *Religions*, *13*(1), Article 89. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13020089.

Luckmann, T. (1967). *The invisible religion*. Macmillan.

Mally, L. (1990). *Culture of the future: The Proletkult movement in revolutionary Russia*. University of California Press.

Mannheim, K. (1936). *Ideology and utopia: An introduction to the sociology of knowledge* (L. Wirth, E. Shils, Trans.). Harcourt, Brace and Company.

McFarland, S. (1998). Communism as religion. *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, *8*(1), 33–48. https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327582ijpr0801_5.
Nowak, A. (2015). *Polska i trzy Rosje*. Arcana.
Nowak, A. (2023). *Powrót „Imperium zła"*. Arcana.
Nyirkos, T. (2021–2022). The concept of political religion: A historical overview. *Politica e Religione*, *11*, 1–22.
Nyirkos, T. (2021). The proliferation of secular religions: Theoretical and practical aspects. *Pro Publico Bono – Public Administration*, *2021*(2), 68–85. https://doi.org/10.32575/ppb.2021.2.4.
Nyirkos, T. (2024). *Secular religions: The key concepts*. Routledge.
Popper, K. (2013). *The open society and its enemies*. Princeton University Press.
Pushchaev, Y.V. (2017). Sovetskie filosofy i religiya: Sluchay Il'enkova (marksizm kak filosofiya zhizni i «beloe pyatno» smerti). In *Vestnik PSTGU. Seriya I: Bogoslovie. Filosofiya. Religiovedenie* (48–68).
Richard, H.L. (2015). New paradigms for religion, multiple religious belonging, and insider movements. *Missiology*, *43*(3), 297–308. https://doi.org/10.1177/009182961456584.
Riesebrodt, M. (2010). *The promise of salvation* (S. Rendall, Trans.). University of Chicago Press.
Roginska, M. (2025). The mystified unknown – Sacralizing influence in Soviet science, religion, and ideology. *Religions*, *16*(5), Article 637. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16050637.
Rothbard, M.N. (1990). Karl Marx: Communist as religious eschatologist. *The Review of Austrian Economics*, *4*, 123–179. http://doi.org/10.1007/BF02426366.
Shakhanobich, M.M. (1993). The study of religion in the Soviet Union. *Numen*, *40*(1), 67–81. https://doi.org/10.1163/156852793X00059.
Smart, N. (1997). *The world's religions: Old traditions and modern transformations*. Cambridge University Press.
Taubes, J. (1967). *Buber and philosophy of history*. In P.A. Schilpp, M. Friedman (eds.), *The philosophy of Martin Buber* (1–20). Open Court.
Taubes, J. (2009). *Occidental eschatology* (D. Ratmoko, Trans.). Stanford University Press.
van Ree, E. (2016). Stalinist ritual and belief system: Reflections on "political religion". *Politics, Religion & Ideology*, *17*(2–3), 143–161. https://doi.org/10.1080/21567689.2016.1187600.
The role of religions in multiple modern societies: The Global South [Special issue]. (2024). *Religions*, *16*(7).

Tirado, I.A. (1993). The Komsomol and young peasants: The dilemma of rural expansion, 1921–1925. Slavic Review, *52*(3), 460–476.
Vovk, D. (2022). *Soviet law and political religion*. In D.C. Flatto, B. Porat (eds.), *Law as religion, religion as law* (1–20). Cambridge University Press.
Walicki, A. (1995). *Marxism and the leap to the kingdom of freedom: The rise and fall of the communist utopia*. Stanford University Press.
Warner, R.S. (1993). Work in progress toward a new paradigm for the sociological study of religion in the United States. *American Journal of Sociology*, *98*(5), 1044–1093. https://doi.org/10.1086/230139.
Waters, E. (1992). *Victim or villain? Prostitution in post-revolutionary Russia*. In L. Edmondson (ed.), *Women and society in Russia and the Soviet Union* (1–20). Cambridge University Press.
Weber, M. (1965). *The sociology of religion* (E. Fischoff, Trans.). Methuen.
Wilson, D.S. (2003). *Darwin's cathedral*. University of Chicago Press.
Yinger, J.M. (1962). *Religion, society and the individual*. Macmillan.
Znamenski, A. (2021). *Socialism as a secular creed*. Lexington Books.

JĘDRZEJ PIEKARA
Dział Naukowy, Muzeum II Wojny Światowej w Gdańsku
(Research Department, Museum of the Second World War in Gdańsk)
https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0644-0093
j.piekara@muzeum1939.pl

https://doi.org/10.21697/spch.2026.62.A.02

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License (CC BY-ND 4.0).

Received: 14/08/2025. Reviewed: 13/11/2025. Accepted: 16/02/2026.