

ATHEIST EDUCATION UNDER COMMUNISM IN THE SOVIET UNION

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Abstract

Twentieth-century Russian Revolution, formed by the union of 15 states the Soviet Union, and its attempt to create a new society by abolishing private ownership of the means of production, was an important event in human history. A new human being was needed to live in this new world and the responsibility of creating this new human being was placed on the Soviet education system. Religion had no place in this new world. Of course efforts were made through formal and informal education to wipe out thousands of years of religious practices and prevent them from passing on to the new generation. This paper discusses the communist perspective towards religion, the objectives of atheist education in the Soviet Union and the formal curriculum and co-curricular programs through which atheist education was offered.

Keywords Soviet Union, Atheism, Atheist Education, Communism and Religion

Introduction

The Russian Revolution took place in 1917. With the ambition of creating a new world and a new human being living in it, the Soviet Union, which was formed by Russia and 14 other states, started its journey. Education began to be restructured to create a new human being. But the Soviet educationists did not have a ready-made plan of education presented by Marx or Engels. This led to new experiments and explorations of education based on specific concepts in the writings of Marx and Engels. For example, since religion has no place in the new world, the new humans in this world are also expected to be atheists. Therefore, in order to inculcate the views of communist philosophers like Marx, Engels and Lenin on religion, the education of atheism was included in the school curriculum in the Soviet Union. This was the first experiment in human history regarding education.

Communism and Religion

Communists' idea of religion is against idealistic and traditional religious ideas. Philosophers like Nietzsche, before Marx, expressed the view that Christianity helped people to be weak, impotent, and dependent. According to Marx and Engels, religion is a useless thing that keeps human beings in delusion. Marx refers to religion as the opium of the masses, a ruthless weapon used to exploit suffering humanity. Religion is a mere illusion amidst the dreadful sorrows of the material world, and to elevate the religion that serves as a means of people's deluded enjoyment is to demand their real enjoyment. According to Marx, religion is the distorted consciousness of humanity, but this distortion originates from the distortions within the world itself. To expose this distorted world, humans sought the essence of religion. In 1846, in the 'German Ideology', Marx and Engels adopted a materialistic perspective to examine history, and as a result, they concluded that instead of consciousness shaping life, it is the life that shapes consciousness. This implies that gods and supernatural entities can exist only in the realm of human imagination. Furthermore, Marx introduced the concepts of base and superstructure. The material production and the relations of production are the determining factors in human history. Society forms the base, upon which ideas and institutions are built. Engels, in his work Anti-Dühring, states, "Primitive humans attributed the qualities of divine beings to natural forces. In other words, there are no supernatural powers creating and dominating nature." (Engels, 1975) According to the

followers of socialism, religion is a form of mental oppression and tyranny. On the other hand, it further burdens the already exploited working-class masses, who have been subjected to labor and deprivation. Due to the primary alienation of human beings in the struggle with nature, concepts such as gods, Satan, miracles, etc., find belief in the present world. Consequently, lacking an alternative path to liberate themselves from this exploitation, they hold onto the belief in heavenly rewards after death. Even though they suffer throughout their lives, they are taught to endure the suffering and patiently wait for rewards in the next life. Religion instructs the suffering masses to accept their current plight with patience and promises them heavenly rewards in the next life in exchange for their continued suffering in this life. Religion, which misdirects the direction of the suffering masses, only bows down to the ruling class, as Lenin sarcastically remarks, "Today, religion advises those who toil and moil for their living to donate a little of what little they have to the beggars born in the same world, and thus all their sins will be washed away." (Lenin, 1975, p. 85) He further states that religion shows the easiest path to the oppressors to liberate themselves, who bear the brunt of all their lives, from their sins. The ideologies of individualism, teaches the oppressed ignorant masses to peacefully endure their sufferings and injustices, while perpetuating the cycle of power and wealth in favor of the ruling class and capitalists, who exploit the poor, laborers who place their faith in the afterlife and reincarnation. This creates a favorable environment and narrative that continues to socially reproduce their exploitation. The established religious power brokers strike a deal with the capitalist rulers. Using their influence, they show the people the illusion of religion and instill fear of both the afterlife and the wrath of God, urging them to accept their current miserable conditions and continue to support the social structure built on economic exploitation. Therefore, Marx asserts, "Through the teaching of religious otherworldliness, people's real economic causes of suffering are overlooked. That is to say, religion does not make people understand the true material and economic causes of their suffering. Instead, it misdirects them and indirectly benefits the wealthy capitalists who exercise economic power". (Lenin, 1975, p. 84) Religion becomes a means for both religious and political exploitation operating in society and serves as an instrument of injustice. It hinders the establishment of equality and justice and works against the promotion of equality and justice. However, if the people are made to understand the economic system of society and the true causes of their exploitation are revealed through their efforts, they can liberate themselves from suffering and continue to challenge their misery. Marx expresses this hopeful view that "the religion which indirectly aids in their exploitation will be abandoned." (Lenin, 1975) Marx and Engels did not give priority to religion in their battle against feudalism. According to their beliefs, religion is not the true enemy of the working class, but rather a distorted social system. They saw that as history progresses, religion will naturally disappear. Some thinkers had observed that Marx viewed religion with a certain urgency. Marx seemed to acknowledge the religion as the compassionate response that humanity had given to the cruel world. But, Lenin, however, played a provocative role against religion. He considered religion as a despised matter that still existed in the world. After the Russian Revolution, pure moral integrity and love for humanity became the alternative to religious socialism based on knowledge. Thus, Lenin transformed Marx's concept of "Opium of the proletariat" into "Opium for the people" emphasizing the difference between the two. In the former, the proletariat itself took the initiative to overthrow its physical conditions of distress by consuming the pill of religion. In the latter, however, the creation of the pill of religion was intended to keep the people ignorant and unaware, representing a clearer manipulation of the masses. After the October Revolution, Lenin declared, "Religion is the private affair of individuals; it has no relation to the state, and there should be no connection between religious institutions and the government. Each person should have the freedom to practice or not practice religion, which means complete atheism. Mentioning one's religion in official documents should also be abolished. Churches or religious organizations should not receive any funding from the government." (Lenin, 1975, p. 85)

Following the spontaneous revolution, religious institutions faced restrictions, religious influence in education was curbed, and the promotion of atheism became prevalent. According to the views of the communists, if a new communist individual were enthusiastic about religious faith for their personal security, they should not prepare themselves to seek protection from divine or superhuman powers

present in nature. They considered the belief in such powers as blind faith. Hence, they sought security by adhering to the laws of nature. Instead of teaching students hymns and prayers, it was considered important to impart them with knowledge of scientific methods. The significant social and scientific responsibilities present in our daily lives, which have been effectively addressed, contribute to the harmony and progress of individuals. They claim that it has no connection to religion.

Goals and Objectives of Atheist Education

Atheist education will require special consideration as a Soviet educational system. There were two perspectives on viewing atheist education: the first was the atheist viewpoint, and the second was the anti-religious viewpoint. The atheist viewpoint was positive and persuasive, while the anti-religious viewpoint was negative and focused on conveying criticisms and restrictions through information. The atheist perspective aimed to create a hopeful and progressive environment, bring about social change, and educate people to be well-informed, happy, and healthy. By providing all the material comforts on Earth, it sought to eliminate the need for an alternative metaphysical system. This rational atheistic perspective was followed by the idea of organizing new festivals and events as an alternative to religious rituals, as proposed by Soviet educational experts. On the other hand, the anti-religious viewpoint tended to label religious rituals and practices as superstitious and delusional, targeting the preconceptions and behaviours of religious believers.

The objective of atheist education in schools was to instill unwavering commitment and foster staunch atheism. This means imparting a materialistic perspective among students and guiding them to shape their lifestyles accordingly. The objective of atheist education follows this goal and aims to achieve the following:

- 1) Re-education of religious students - To eliminate religious preconceptions among students.
- 2) Implanting atheistic beliefs among irreligious students - To use the knowledge of social and natural sciences to render religion irrelevant and promote the development of an anti-religious perspective.
- 3) Active promotion of atheism - To educate students about atheism through rational arguments and cultivate a scholarly understanding of atheism, as well as emphasize the significance of this perspective.

Teaching Atheism through Classroom Teaching

In the context of teaching, there is an expectation to incorporate atheist education to some extent in all subjects. This means that subjects like natural science, biology, physics, chemistry, history, and literature had elements of atheist education. For example, in science classes, the origin of the universe and Darwin's theory of evolution were taught. In history classes, discussions were held on scientists like Copernicus, Galileo, and Bruno, highlighting their controversial, oppositional, and sometimes cruel roles. In 1977, D. P. Plotkin published a textbook for history subjects from the fifth to seventh grades, which included a supplementary reading list of about 70 books for students. Many of these books were published in the 1960s and 1970s. (Tomiak, 1986)

In this book, the author states in the introduction that the development of atheistic perspectives and anti-religious sentiments is an essential component of the socialist education of the younger generation in the Soviet Union. The author further explains that atheistic education mainly consists of two components. One is the criticism of prevailing religions, and the other is the development of atheistic convictions. The author suggests that teachers should consider the depth of students' religious and atheistic perspectives and decide which component to emphasize. The teaching of history from a Marxist-Leninist perspective should incorporate a scientific analysis of historical processes, which can be in direct opposition to religious beliefs. In the final section of the textbook, the author states that it is the duty of every history teacher to critique religion based on historical and rational perspectives. The development of students' scholarly atheistic and global perspectives should continue from the eighth to the tenth grade.

To foster anti-religious sentiments, literature and reading materials based on scholarly concepts were included in the curriculum. The novel 'Pomni Ob Minyae' (Keep my Memories) by Lev Ovaley,

published in 1976, was included in the curriculum with a circulation of one lakh copies. This novel included a dramatic story of a lost girl encountered by a school student, highlighting her journey of self-discovery. Although this girl is found in the company of unruly criminals, she represents a deeply religious person. The protagonist of the novel, a young detective, finds himself questioning traditional religious practices, making it natural to include this novel in the curriculum.

In the tenth grade curriculum, the subject of Social Science became compulsory. In the curriculum of this subject, there were two components related to the teaching of atheism. The first component was the inclusion of the materialist conception of history. This component encompassed the fundamental dichotomy between materialism and idealism and the spiritual wealth of developed socialism. The second component involved the development of a scientific global perspective, which contradicted unscientific and religious perspectives, and included the principles of scientific atheism.

In the school curriculum, the teaching of atheism continued in higher education as well. In comparison to the school curriculum, there was a reduced emphasis on anti-religious propaganda and a greater focus on teaching scientific atheism in higher education. The inclusion of political education as an independent subject in higher education also allowed for the incorporation of atheistic teachings. Separate textbooks were available for the teaching of atheism. These textbooks consisted of five sections, which are as follows:

- 1) The role of religion in social events (the essence of religion, major components and social functions of religion, historical significance of religion, various religions in the world, diverse religions in the country, challenges to religion in the present context).
- 2) Atheism and social progress (development of atheism following humanism, pre-Marxist atheism, the highest form of atheism according to Marx and Lenin, atheism and contemporary ideological struggles).
- 3) Principles of global atheistic perspective (anti-religious and national perspectives, study of natural sciences as the basis of atheism, materialist conception of history and atheism, ethical implications of scientific atheism).
- 4) Atheism and religion (development of collective atheism in a socialist society, Marxist-Leninist thought on freedom of conscience).
- 5) Teaching of scientific atheism (fundamental principles of atheistic materialism, methods of teaching scientific atheism, principles of atheism in Soviet education at the secondary and university levels).

Inculcation of Atheism through Co-curricular Activities

The responsibility of promoting atheism from the school level was handed over to youth organizations by the Ministry of Education. At the primary level, the "October Children's Organization," followed by the "Pioneer Organization" at the secondary level, and later the "Communist Youth Organization" were established to work towards the political and social indoctrination of students aged 7 to 17 in schools and young students in higher education institutions. The curriculum of atheism was included in the handbook for the leaders of the Pioneer groups. According to it, 10 to 11-year-old Pioneer members were taught about religious superstitions and the origins of festivals, emphasizing the damage caused by beliefs in religion and God. They were instructed to promote atheism among their classmates and at home. Furthermore, children aged 11 to 12 were to be introduced to the scientific nature of religion and encouraged to organize "Atheist Evenings" for younger children. Between the ages of 12 and 15, efforts were made to develop a critical perspective on atheism and train them to engage in religious debates. The Pioneers were then tasked with disseminating religious skepticism among the parents and children with religious tendencies. (Donstron, 1987, p. 62)

In the handbook of the Pioneer organization's group leaders after the Second World War, various methods were suggested for incorporating the curriculum of atheism. For example, organizing discussions and entertainment programs based on scientific and technological knowledge, conducting question-answer sessions on atheism, providing explanations of natural observations and phenomena, organizing debates, conducting competitions on natural science subjects, creating atheist poetry

groups, arranging visits to museums and observatories, reading and discussing books by prominent scientific environmentalists, and organizing programs related to atheism through school magazines and newsletters were some of the expected activities from the Pioneer organization. The concept of teaching atheism can be inferred from a passage in the handbook of the 1968 Pioneer organization, which stated, "It was decided that each pioneer member should set up an atheist corner in his home. In the grandmother's corner there was a holy idol of Mary while the opposite corner was filled by her grandson Sirozya with anti-religious pictures, poems, scriptures and sayings of writers. This corner was titled by Sirozya in large letters, "I am Godless." Whenever Sirozya put up this bulletin in his corner his grandmother tore it when he went to school. Then Sirozya used to put up another bulletin and again grandmother tears it. One day, Sirozya took an extreme stance and threatened the grandmother that he too would break the holy idol of Mary. Grandmother then panics in fear of divine wrath and approves of Sirozya's atheist corner." (Donstron, 1987)

The handbook notes before this entry that although Sirozya had failed to re-educate his grandmother, his victory was no less significant. He no longer had to directly confront the ignorant grandmother. Later, this entry was missing from the 1982 edition of the same booklet because Soviet educationists must have realized that the fight of atheism should be against religious ideas and not against religious people.

Atheist Education and Religious Festivals

The importance of atheist education in post-revolutionary society lies in reducing the significance of religious festivals within the Soviet Union. Instead of emphasizing religious celebrations in schools and other public spheres of life, other national and international events and holidays were promoted. For example, Orthodox Church's traditional enthusiasm for the New Year's Day celebration was replaced by alternative festivities. Easter vacations were replaced by spring festivals in schools. Although the Communist Party accepted a policy of aggressive opposition to religious propaganda, in many places, even during the 1970s, on May 1st (International Workers' Day), Pioneer organization members, members of the Young Communist League, and supporters of the Soviet Union would hold parades and demonstrations, openly challenging religious festivals. This was another objective expressed through such demonstrations. In December, during the Christmas holidays in Christian religions, programs were organized to visit museums of material culture. Similarly, programs were organized to dispel misconceptions about supernatural beliefs of the past. On Christmas Day, slogans would echo through school windows, saying, "We are against fasting," "We are against destroying our small fir tree gardens," "Religious gurus only invite landowners to Christmas feasts," "We greet all workers on Christmas," "All religious people are active enemies of socialism," etc. Easter, the second traditional festival of Christians, falls in April. On Easter Day, school windows would be decorated again with colorful ribbons. "Easter is prohibited," "Religion is the main enemy of a socialist government," "Soviet schools should fight against religion," "Religion creates obstacles in the five-year plan," etc. Such messages were instilled not only among Christian students but also among other students, propagating anti-religious sentiments. During the aftermath of another world war, the pace of this anti-religious campaign somewhat slowed down. The Pioneer organization contributed to the development of a scientific perspective. However, due to the necessity of imparting lessons against all religious beliefs during another major conflict, the Communist Party and the Soviet government played an official role in not hurting people's religious sentiments and beliefs.

Conclusion

The discussion of the relationship between religion and education has been carried out by numerous scholars, sociologists, and education experts worldwide. In this context, three main perspectives can be identified. According to the theistic perspective, religious education refers to moral education. From a humanitarian perspective, "service to society is service to God," and thus, religious education is seen as encompassing social service. On the other hand, the materialistic perspective emphasizes that there is no significant need for religious education in terms of moral education. The concept of egalitarianism is a materialistic belief. It questions the things that can be observed, experienced, and established

through scientific methods, and it holds a materialistic worldview. Believers in materialism place their trust in things that can be perceived through the senses. The concept of the future is fundamentally rooted in a metaphysical perspective. A materialistic individual may have faith in religion, considering it necessary for their own future security, but they may still be enthusiastic and concerned about attaining this security. However, they do not rely on divine or superhuman powers from the natural realm to achieve this security. The idea of such power is seen as some form of blind faith, which is perceived quite seriously, leading to opposition to egalitarianism.

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