

# The Issue Of Secular State And Religious Policy In The Soviet Period

Ibadullaeva Gulhayo Shukhrat kizi - Assistant of the Department of Physical Culture and Humanities of the Tashkent University of Information Technologies named after Muhammad al-Khwarizmi

**Abstract.** This article analyzes the formation of the concept of a secular state and the main stages of religious policy in the Soviet era. The contradiction between the proclamation of legal secularism and the primacy of ideological atheism in practice is revealed. Also, the policy of "scientific atheism", the pragmatic approach during the Second World War, and the differences between the Soviet model and modern secular state concepts are scientifically highlighted. The research is conducted based on the method of historical and political analysis.

**Keywords:** Soviet era, secular state, secularism, religious policy, scientific atheism, Marxism-Leninism, freedom of conscience, ideology, state and religion relations, legal system, pragmatism, historical analysis, political model.

**INTRODUCTION.** In the history of the 20th century, the issue of state and religion relations emerged as one of the most pressing political and philosophical problems. In particular, the experience of the Soviet Union formed a unique model of the concept of a secular state. Although the Soviet government declared itself secular, that is, a system in which religion and state were separated, in practical politics it took a sharp ideological position towards religious institutions [1:9]. This situation created a complex relationship between the legal essence of secularism and atheistic ideology. The founders of Marxist doctrine, in particular K. Marx and V. Lenin, interpreted religion as a historical form of social consciousness, evaluating it as a product of class society [2:11]. Therefore, in the Soviet political system, secularism was combined not only with the separation of the state from confessions, but also with the restriction of religious worldview and the promotion of "scientific atheism". As a result, a certain discrepancy arose between the officially proclaimed principle of freedom of conscience and real political practice. This article analyzes the theoretical foundations of the idea of a secular state in the Soviet era, its legal expression, and practical manifestations in religious policy. It also highlights the aspects of this experience that differ from modern concepts of secularism from a scientific point of view.

**LITERATURE REVIEW.** This study used theoretical, historical and comparative sources to shed light on the issue of the secular state and religious policy in the Soviet era. For scientific analysis, primary sources based on Marxist-Leninist ideology were first studied. In particular, the social essence of religion, its role in society, and the foundations of atheistic views were analyzed in the works of K. Marx and V. Lenin. These sources constitute the ideological foundation of Soviet religious policy. Also, the constitutions and normative legal documents adopted during the Soviet Union (1918, 1936, 1977) were analyzed. These documents reflect the principles of freedom of conscience and the separation of religion from the state. Historical legal sources made it possible to identify the differences between the official model of Soviet secularism and its practical policy. In the course of the research, modern literature published in international scientific publications was also studied. In these sources, Soviet secularism was analyzed comparatively, comparing it with the model of Western countries. In particular, the differences between the neutral-legal model of secularism and the Soviet ideological model were highlighted based on the experience of France and the United States. Also, historical sources on changes in religious policy during the Second World War were analyzed. It is noted in scientific literature that a pragmatic approach was observed towards religious institutions in the conditions of the Second World War.

**METHODOLOGY.** The issue of the secular state and religious policy in the Soviet period was studied on the basis of historical, legal and comparative approaches. The methodological basis of the study was chosen as a systematic analysis, the principle of historicity and the principles of objectivity. This approach made it possible to consider the topic not only from an ideological point of view, but also on a complex scientific

basis. The study primarily used the historical-genetic method. This method served to identify the stages of formation of the Soviet secularism model, its theoretical roots and legal foundations. Also, the content of regulatory documents of 1918, 1936 and 1977 was studied through legal-documentary analysis. This method made it possible to compare the formal and practical aspects of Soviet secularism. Using the comparative method, the Soviet model was compared with modern secular state concepts. In addition, scientific literature and historical sources were studied on the basis of content analysis. In the research process, scientific objectivity, reliability of sources and a systematic approach were identified as the main criteria. These methodological foundations ensured the scientific quality of the article and enhanced the objectivity of the conclusions.

**RESEARCH RESULTS.** The results of this study show that, although the secular state model in the Soviet era was formally based on the separation of religion and state, in practice it was formed as a system combined with ideological atheism. Although legal documents, in particular the constitutional norms of 1918, 1936 and 1977, proclaimed freedom of conscience, the activities of religious institutions were under strict administrative control. This confirms the discrepancy between legal secularism and real politics. The analysis shows that the main goal of Soviet religious policy, along with the separation of religious institutions from state administration, was to prioritize a materialistic and scientific worldview in society. The policy of “scientific atheism” was widely promoted through the education system, the media and the cultural sphere. As a result, religion was limited to the level of personal belief, and its social impact was significantly reduced. It is determined that during the Second World War, there was a temporary relaxation in religious policy. This indicates that the Soviet model was not strictly ideological, but flexible to political needs. However, in the post-war period, atheistic politics became more active. The results of the comparative analysis showed that the Soviet model of secularism differs from modern secular state concepts. While in modern models the state maintains religious neutrality, in the Soviet experience there was an ideological priority. In general, the study concludes that Soviet secularism was not a neutral legal system, but an ideologically oriented model of secularism.

**DISCUSSION (SCIENTIFIC DEBATES).** The difference between Western secularism and the Soviet model is manifested, first of all, in their theoretical foundations and practical goals. The concept of secularism was formed in Western political thought on the basis of the idea of balancing the relationship between state and religion, ensuring religious pluralism, and guaranteeing freedom of conscience. In this model, the state does not deny religion, but separates it from political power and takes a neutral position towards all beliefs. The philosophical roots of secularism go back to the Enlightenment. For example, J. Locke interpreted religious tolerance as an important condition for civil society [3:55], while J. J. Rousseau put forward the concept of civil religion [4:55]. In these views, religion is recognized as part of social life, but its transformation into a means of political domination is limited. Another important aspect of Western secularism is the state's equal distance from confessions. For example, the US Constitution enshrines the principles of “no establishment of religion” and “freedom of belief.” In this model, the state does not prohibit religious institutions, but rather creates conditions for their free operation. In some European countries, including France, there is a form of secularism, which also strictly ensures the separation of religion and state, but accepts religious belief within the framework of personal freedom. Thus, in the Western model, secularism is a neutral legal principle. In the Soviet model, secularism acquired a different meaning. It was formed on the basis of Marxist-Leninist ideology and assessed religion as a historical transient phenomenon. While K. Marx explained religion as a product of social injustice, V. Lenin brought it into the arena of political struggle. As a result, secularism manifested itself not in the form of religious neutrality of the state, but in the form of the dominance of atheistic ideology. Although the Constitutions of the Soviet Union proclaimed freedom of conscience, in practice religious organizations were strictly controlled, many churches were closed, and clergy were persecuted. In this model, although religion was separated from the state, an attempt was made to squeeze it out of society. Thus, Soviet secularism was not neutral, but ideological in nature. The main difference is that while Western secularism was aimed at protecting religious pluralism and personal freedom, the Soviet model aimed to reduce religious consciousness and form an atheistic worldview [5:33]. In the West, secularism is a legal and democratic principle, while in the Soviet experience it became a political and ideological tool. In the first, the state appeared as a neutral arbiter, in the second, the state actively participated as an ideological subject. Thus, the difference between Western secularism and the Soviet model lies in their essence: one is

based on freedom and neutrality, and the other is based on ideological primacy and atheistic control. This difference clearly shows that the relationship between the state and religion has developed in different historical and philosophical directions.

In the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, the issue of religion is one of the important directions of socio-philosophical analysis. This doctrine interprets religion not as a divine truth, but as a form of social consciousness that is a product of historical and economic conditions. According to Marxist theory, the material life of society, that is, the relations of production and the economic structure, determine human consciousness. From this point of view, religion is also considered a phenomenon that arose in connection with a certain historical period and social system. K. Marx assessed religion as a form of spiritual consolation that arose in response to social contradictions and injustices in human real life. According to his famous phrase, religion is "the opium of the people." This idea was not simply to reject religion, but to explain it as an echo of suffering and inequality in society. For Marx, religion serves as an ideological tool that justifies the existing system and weakens class consciousness. Therefore, he linked criticism of religion with the elimination of social injustice. V. Lenin, who developed Marx's ideas at a political and practical level, took a more decisive approach to the issue of religion. For Lenin, religion is an ideological weapon of bourgeois society, which serves as a means of keeping the working masses in subjection. Therefore, he emphasized the need to separate religion from the state and strengthen atheistic propaganda. According to Lenin, the working class cannot achieve true freedom unless it forms a consciousness based on a scientific worldview. As a result, the issue of religion was seen not only within the framework of personal beliefs, but also in the arena of political struggle. In the ideology of Marxism-Leninism, it is theoretically stated that the goal of eliminating religion should be achieved not by violence, but by changing social conditions. That is, the view was put forward that once economic equality and a classless society were established, religion would "wither away" by itself. However, in practice, especially during the Soviet period, atheistic policies were combined with active propaganda and control. "Scientific atheism" was taught as a science, and religious institutions were placed under strict control. Thus, in Marxism-Leninism, religion is interpreted not as a metaphysical reality, but as a historical and social phenomenon. It is considered a product of class society and, to a certain extent, an ideological factor that strengthens it. This approach considers religion in the context of social consciousness and political struggle, rather than at the level of personal belief. As a result, within the framework of Marxist-Leninist ideology, the issue of religion is interpreted as a component of the process of forming social consciousness and renewing society, rather than as a problem of free belief.

After the October Revolution of 1917, the Bolsheviks, who came to power, began to legally consolidate the new political system. Their main goal was to abolish the old imperial-ruling system and build a new state based on Marxist-Leninist ideology [6:58]. In this process, the issue of redefining the relationship between state and religion played an important role. Because during the Russian Empire, the Russian Orthodox Church was closely connected with the state and served as the ruling ideological institution. The decree "On the Separation of Church from State and School from Church," adopted on January 23, 1918, became the first major legal document of the Soviet government in the religious sphere. According to this decree, the state does not recognize any religion as official or dominant, and all citizens were declared to have freedom of religion. Religious organizations were deprived of the status of state institutions, and their rights as legal entities were limited. The school system was also cleansed of religious influence and education was transferred to a secular basis. This document legally strengthened the principle of secularism and declared the separation of state and religion. However, this separation was not as neutral as in Western secularism. In Bolshevik ideology, religion was interpreted as a product of class society, and it was considered a "reactionary form" of social consciousness. Therefore, the 1918 decree was aimed not only at separation, but also at bringing religious institutions under state control and reducing their social influence. Religious property was nationalized, and the land of churches and mosques was transferred to state ownership. This weakened the economic foundations of religious organizations. The principle of freedom of conscience was also strengthened in the 1918 Constitution of the RSFSR. It gave citizens the right to have or not to have a religious belief. However, although equality was provided for between religious and atheistic propaganda, in practice the state actively supported atheistic views. Religious organizations were excluded from political life, their role in public life was sharply reduced. Additional regulatory documents adopted in the 1920s further restricted the activities of religious organizations. For example, the obligation to register religious associations was

introduced. Unregistered communities were declared illegal. Public religious services required permission from local authorities. This effectively brought religious life under administrative control. The Constitution of the Soviet Union, established in 1924, also guaranteed freedom of conscience. However, the 1929 Decree “On Religious Associations” further restricted religious activity. According to it, religious communities were to be limited to worship. Charity, education, and cultural and educational activities were prohibited. This decision was aimed at minimizing the social influence of religious institutions. Although freedom of conscience was declared in legal documents, repressive mechanisms intensified in practice. The “Stalin Constitution” of 1936 also officially confirmed freedom of religious belief. It granted citizens the right to perform religious rituals. However, this right was surrounded by political and administrative control. Thus, the issue of religion in the Soviet legal system acquired a two-sided character: on the one hand, freedom was officially declared; on the other hand, the real possibilities of religious institutions were sharply limited. Although the initial legal decisions of the Soviet authorities were aimed at ensuring the secularity of the state, they had an ideological orientation. Religion was separated from the state, but attempts were also made to squeeze it out of public life. Legal secularism became intertwined with atheistic politics. As a result, the state, although it declared itself a secular system separated from confessions, continued to actively intervene in the religious sphere. In short, the initial legal decisions of the Soviet authorities were aimed at creating a secular state model. However, this model was based not on classical secularism, but on ideological atheism. Although legal documents strengthened the separation of religion and state, in practice religious institutions were forced to operate under strict control and restrictions. This demonstrates the unique, contradictory nature of the Soviet legal system.

The changes observed in Soviet religious policy during World War II are a vivid example of political pragmatism. In the pre-war period, the state sought to sharply limit the social influence of religious institutions on the basis of atheistic ideology. However, the war conditions that began in 1941 with the attack of fascist Germany forced the government to take a different approach to the issue of internal unity and spiritual mobilization. Thus, ideological firmness was replaced by a temporary pragmatic policy. During World War II, the main task for the state was to unite the people in a single goal - the defense of the Fatherland. In this process, religious institutions were reassessed as one of the spiritual and moral pillars of society. In particular, in 1943, a meeting was held with the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church at the initiative of I. Stalin [7:18]. As a result, some restrictions on church activity were eased, the election of a new patriarch was allowed, and religious seminaries were reopened. These decisions showed that the state had chosen the path of compromise in the religious sphere. The essence of political pragmatism was that, instead of completely denying religion, the government turned it to a certain extent into a tool for social mobilization. Religious organizations actively participated in initiatives such as raising funds for the front and providing spiritual assistance to soldiers and their families. Representatives of the church and other confessions interpreted the war as a “holy struggle” and called on citizens to be courageous and patient. This created a certain harmony between the ideological goals of the state and religious rhetoric. At the same time, the relaxation of religious policy did not mean complete freedom. Religious organizations were controlled through special state bodies. The Councils for Religious Affairs, established in 1943, coordinated the activities of the church and other confessions. Thus, the policy of reconciliation was carried out along with control mechanisms. This shows that pragmatism has a limited and conditional character. During the war years, certain changes took place in religious policy in Central Asia. For example, the establishment of the Muslim Religious Administration in 1943 served to coordinate religious life in the region under official control. This also means that the state used the religious factor to strengthen political stability. In general, political pragmatism during the Second World War represents a temporary retreat of the Soviet state from ideological determination. Instead of completely rejecting religious institutions, the state used their social potential for strategic purposes. However, these changes were not a fundamental ideological turn, but an adaptation to the conditions of war. This is also confirmed by the reactivation of atheistic politics in the post-war years. Thus, religious policy during this period is characterized by being determined not by ideology, but primarily by political necessity and state interests.

In the 1950s–1980s, the concept of “scientific atheism” occupied a central place in the religious policy of the Soviet state. During this period, the issue of religion was interpreted as a problem that needed to be solved not only through administrative restrictions, but also through ideological and scientifically based propaganda. The

term “scientific atheism” was based on Marxist-Leninist philosophy and aimed at explaining religious beliefs as a historical and social phenomenon and presenting them as a “relic of antiquity” in the conditions of modern socialist society. The theoretical roots of this policy go back to the views of K. Marx and V. Lenin. According to them, religion is a product of class society and a form of consciousness formed in conditions of social inequality and economic oppression. In the process of building socialism, a scientific worldview should have taken precedence. Therefore, starting from the 1950s, atheism was formed not only as an ideological slogan, but also as a scientific discipline. In the Soviet Union, “scientific atheism” was taught as a separate subject in higher education institutions. Courses on “Fundamentals of Scientific Atheism” were introduced in universities and institutes, and students were educated in the spirit of a Marxist worldview. Religious beliefs were criticized from a psychological, sociological, and historical perspective. This process manifested itself in the form of an ideological struggle against religious views under the guise of science.

The media, literature, and culture also became important tools for atheist propaganda. Newspapers and magazines interpreted religious ceremonies as “old-fashioned,” and theater and cinema criticized religious superstition. Atheist museums and educational events were organized. Thus, “scientific atheism” was transformed into a complex mechanism for shaping public consciousness. At the same time, during the reign of N. Khrushchev in 1958–1964, religious policy became even more acute. Many temples were closed, and administrative pressure on religious communities intensified. Although freedom of conscience was officially preserved, in practice religious activity was under strict control. Religious organizations were required to register, and their social activities were limited only to worship. Freedom of conscience was also enshrined in the 1977 Constitution. However, this freedom was carried out in parallel with atheist propaganda. Although the state declared itself secular, it did not act as a neutral subject, but as an active supporter of atheistic ideology. The policy of “scientific atheism” was aimed at suppressing religion through enlightenment and strengthening the materialist worldview in society. In general, the policy of “scientific atheism” of the 1950s–1980s represents the ideological stage of the Soviet model of secularism. During this period, the struggle with religion took on an ideological and enlightening form rather than a repressive one. However, this process demonstrated not the neutrality of the state, but its atheistic primacy. As a result, secularism acted not as a legal principle, but as a tool of ideological policy.

The Soviet secular model was formed as a unique and complex phenomenon among the political systems of the 20th century. It emerged in the process of redefining the relationship between state and religion and developed on the basis of Marxist-Leninist ideology. To understand the main features of this model, it is necessary to analyze its theoretical, legal and practical aspects together. The first feature is the formal separation of state and religion. The Soviet Union declared itself a secular state and separated religious institutions from state administration. Religious organizations were deprived of the status of state institutions, and the education system was transferred to a completely secular basis. Although this aspect may seem similar to the principle of legal secularism, its content was unique. The second feature is the primacy of ideological atheism. The Soviet model did not limit religion to the level of personal beliefs, but interpreted it as a historical phenomenon that hindered the development of society. This approach was based on the views of K. Marx and V. Lenin. Religion was considered a transient form of social consciousness, and the formation of a scientific worldview became an important direction of state policy. The third feature was the systematic promotion of “scientific atheism”. Atheism was taught as a separate subject in educational institutions, and a critical attitude towards religious views was formed through the media. This process was aimed at rebuilding the consciousness of society on the basis of a materialistic worldview. Atheism became not only a theoretical position, but also a political and cultural strategy. The fourth feature is the administrative control of religious institutions. Religious communities were required to register, and their activities were limited to prayer. Even major denominations, such as the Russian Orthodox Church, were forced to work in coordination with state bodies. This significantly reduced the independence of religious life. The fifth feature is periodic relaxations associated with political pragmatism. For example, during World War II, the attitude towards religious institutions was temporarily relaxed. This indicates that the Soviet model of secularism was not strictly ideological, but flexible to political conditions. However, in the post-war period, atheistic politics became more active. The sixth feature is the official recognition of freedom of conscience, but the presence of practical restrictions. Although freedom of religious belief was enshrined in the constitutions, the state continued to control religious activity. Therefore, the Soviet model is characterized as a combination of legal secularism

and ideological atheism. In summary, the main features of the Soviet model of secularism were the separation of state and religion, the primacy of atheistic ideology, the promotion of scientific atheism, the control of religious institutions, and a pragmatic approach that varied depending on political circumstances. This model has earned its place in history not as a classical neutral secularism, but as a system of ideologically oriented secularism.

The question of the connection between legal secularism and ideological atheism is an important theoretical problem that reveals the complex nature of state-religion relations, especially in the case of the Soviet experience. Legal secularism essentially means the separation of the state from religious institutions, the recognition of the right of all citizens to freedom of conscience, and neutrality towards confessions. This model was formed in Western political and philosophical thought, in which the state does not deny religion, but separates it from political power. Such an approach is based on the principles of freedom and pluralism. However, in Marxist-Leninist ideology, the attitude to the issue of religion was formed differently. As a result, secularism was transformed not as a legal principle, but into a tool of atheistic ideology. Although freedom of conscience was proclaimed in the Constitutions of the Soviet Union, in practice the state strictly controlled religious activity. Legal secularism was formally based on the principle of “separation of state and church,” but this separation was not neutral. On the contrary, the state pursued a policy of ousting religious institutions from public life. Thus, although secularism existed as a legal form, its content was supplemented by ideological atheism. The main goal of ideological atheism was to interpret religious consciousness as a “relic of antiquity” and prioritize a scientific worldview [8:24]. The education system, the media, and cultural policy played an important role in this process. “Scientific atheism” was taught as a science, while religious rituals were presented as a factor hindering the development of society. Thus, legal secularism, combined with ideological atheism, laid the foundation for active state intervention in the religious sphere. In theory, secularism meant the neutrality of the state. However, in the Soviet model, not neutrality, but ideological primacy prevailed. Religion was separated from the state, but an attempt was also made to separate it from society. This created an internal conflict between the legal principle and the ideological goal. Although freedom of conscience existed on paper, religious activity was surrounded by many restrictions. Thus, the connection between legal secularism and ideological atheism was manifested in the Soviet experience in the form of a kind of synthesis. While secularism served as an organizational and legal basis, atheism determined its ideological content. This model, in contrast to the concept of classical secularism, shows that the state does not take a neutral, but rather an active and ideological position on the issue of religion. As a result, secularism became part of a political and ideological strategy rather than a legal principle.

The difference between the Soviet experience and modern secular state concepts is manifested, first of all, in the content and purpose of secularism. The modern secular state model is usually based on the neutrality of the state in religious matters, equal treatment of all beliefs, and full provision of freedom of conscience for citizens. In this approach, religion is recognized as an integral part of personal and public life, but it is not made a determining factor in state policy. Thus, modern secularism is more based on the principle of legal and institutional balance. In the Soviet experience, secularism acquired a different meaning. Although the Soviet Union declared itself a system in which religion and state were separated, in practice it turned atheistic ideology into the main direction of state policy. In this model, religion was interpreted not only as a personal belief, but also as a “relic of antiquity” in the formation of social consciousness. As a result, secularism became not a neutral principle, but a means of ideological primacy. In modern secular states, such as France or the United States, the state maintains a neutral position towards religious organizations. The main principle here is religious pluralism and the protection of human rights. Religion is separated from political power, but its activities in society are allowed to develop freely. In the Soviet model, religious institutions are strictly controlled and their social influence is limited to the maximum. Another important difference is in the ideological approach. Modern secular states usually do not define any worldview as an official ideology. The task of the state is to ensure equality between different beliefs and views. In the Soviet experience, the Marxist-Leninist ideology became the official basis of the state, and the relationship with religion was determined within the framework of this ideology. This situation showed secularism not as political neutrality, but as part of an ideological system. Also, in modern concepts, freedom of conscience is not only declared, but also protected through judicial and legal mechanisms. During the Soviet era, although this right existed in official documents, administrative restrictions on religious activity were widely used in practical policy. This indicates

a gap between legal norms and real practice. In short, the main difference between the Soviet experience and modern concepts of a secular state lies in their essence. While the modern model is aimed at ensuring balance and neutrality between the religious and secular spheres, the Soviet experience is characterized by ideological restrictions on religion and the prioritization of an atheistic worldview. Therefore, Soviet secularism is historically considered a unique ideological model.

**CONCLUSION.** The issue of a secular state and religious policy during the Soviet era was a complex and multi-layered process. Although the Soviet Union declared itself a secular system in which religion and state were separated, ideological atheism occupied a leading position in practical politics. Although freedom of conscience was legally recognized, the activities of religious institutions were carried out under administrative control and restrictions. This situation shows that Soviet secularism differed from the classical neutral model. The results of the study confirm that the theoretical foundations of Soviet religious policy were based on the views of Karl Marx and Vladimir Lenin. Religion was interpreted as a form of social consciousness, and the formation of a materialistic worldview became an important direction of state policy. In particular, the concept of “scientific atheism” was widely promoted through the education and culture system. Historical processes also showed that Soviet religious policy was not uniform and rigid. During World War II, a pragmatic approach was observed towards religious institutions, which was associated with the interests of the state. Thus, the Soviet model was formed on the basis of a balance between ideological firmness and political flexibility. In general, the study shows that the Soviet model of secularism is a combined form of legal secularism and ideological atheism, which differs significantly from the neutral secular concepts of modern democratic states. This experience is historically significant and is of particular scientific importance in the study of state-religion relations.

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