THE DESECULARIZATION OF CONFLICT: THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN RUSSIA'S CONFRONTATION WITH CHECHNYA, 1785–TODAY

By Christopher Marsh

The post-Soviet Chechen independence movement was not an Islamic jihad, nor did religion play any significant role in the formation of the movement in its early stages of development. The grievances were economic, historical, and to some extent ethnic (with the latter tied in with the former), but at the heart of it the movement was nothing more than a nation seeking its right to national self-determination, and doing so based on legitimate legal claims (Wood 2007; Schaefer 2011). Within a few years, however, the situation would change dramatically, and the religious difference between Russians and Chechens would become a central component of the way the conflict was framed and understood on both sides. The conflict would be labeled a jihad by Chechens themselves and understood as such by many Russians, who called for countering it with their own holy war. The conflict also had an important international dimension, as international Islamist fighters (*mujahideen*) would provide training in foreign countries as well as travel to Chechnya to fight themselves, while also providing money, weapons, and safe havens. In its current iteration, the Chechen separatist movement has evolved into a radical Islamist insurgency that seeks the establishment of a *shari'a* law state that would span from the shores of the Caspian to the Black Sea, and encompass a territory larger than the Republic of Georgia, and whose leader, Doku Umarov, is responsible for terrorist acts throughout Russia, including a foiled 2012 plan to assassinate President Vladimir Putin.

These facts beg the question, how did a secular national independence movement evolve in such a way as to develop such religious overtones, many of which became highly significant? As I will argue in the conclusion, the *religicization* of the Chechen conflict must be understood as a *desecularization* of the conflict. From their first violent encounter more than two centuries ago, the Russo-Chechen conflict has been understood on both sides as having a significant religious component. Sheik Mansur labeled it a *gazavat* (holy war), while the conflict

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would be elevated to the *great gazavat* a generation later under the leadership of Imam Shamil.

During the Soviet era, relations between all nations were secularized—as was society as a whole. Despite the efforts to resist, to a great extent the Soviet secularization efforts were successful, if only in the short-term. In the wake of the Soviet collapse, not only did a surprising number of people begin to turn to religion for answers (Marsh 2011a, 2011b), but they also began to understand their historical experiences from a religious perspective. It would only be a matter of time before a secular conflict between two nations sharing such a violent past would find religion drawn back into the conflict, and that confrontation would evolve, as Hughes aptly titles his study of the subject, from "nationalism to jihad" (2007).

In the pages that follow, I attempt to develop further the theory of desecularization introduced by Berger more than a decade ago by expanding the concept into the realm of violent conflict, from small-scale communal violence to large-scale war. I then seek to use the case of the Russo-Chechen wars of the past two centuries to illuminate the processes whereby religion becomes a relevant factor in conflict between members of different religious communities. I do this by employing the phases of sacralization, secularization, and desecularization, and placing the conflict within the larger geostrategic, political, and historical circumstances of both the Russian state and the Chechen nation.

Desecularization and War and Peace

The term "desecularization" was coined by Peter Berger as he articulated his recantation of secularization theory, arguing that the world is just as religious as it ever was, and in some cases, extremely so (1999). His intent was not to articulate a theory, but simply to state a fact regarding the limits of secularization itself and to draw scholarly attention to the social processes of desecularization, particularly counter-secularizing trends across the world. Berger was highlighting both the persistence of religion as well as the religicization of parts of an already secularized world. If Berger's own early definition of secularization (1967) were inverted, we would arrive at a definition of desecularization as *the process by which sectors of society and culture are brought under the domination of religious institutions and symbols*. But this is only half the story, for the processes of secularization—as Berger pointed out—were still continuing. In fact, there was an increasing tension between secularizing and desecularizing co-occurring processes (this phenomenon has now been addressed with his theory of the "two pluralisms." See Berger 2014).

Berger pointed out that one possible outcome to the tensions between religion and modernity being played out between secularizing and desecularizing trends in the modern world was religious revolution, where a group seeks to take over society and not only promote a single religious ideal, but to make that vision obligatory on all members of society (1999, 3). This was not very likely, he pointed out, for it is a difficult thing to achieve. He also argued that it is necessary "to distinguish between political movements that are genuinely inspired by religion and those that use religion as a convenient legitimation for political agendas based on quite non-religious interests" (1999, 15).

In his seminal article, Berger identified what he labeled the "two most dynamic religious upsurges in the world today, the Islamic and the Evangelical" (1999, 7). The former is of primary concern to us here, as the Islamic revival in Chechnya is directly related to the desecularization of Chechen national identity, and by extension, to the desecularization of the Chechen conflict. Of course, this process is not limited to Chechnya, nor to the Russian North Caucasus, but can be witnessed across the Muslim world as well as in Muslim minority communities living within non-Muslim societies, be they secular, Christian, Hindu, or Confucian.

While the global religious resurgence is intimately related to other issues, including international politics, economic development, and human rights, the tension between co-occurring secularizing and desecularizing trends is never more volatile than when it relates to what Berger phrased "war and peace." Here he points to the fact that religion in the modern world

"more often fosters war, both between and within nations", and that religious movements can be seen "fanning wars and civil wars" across the globe (1999, 15). But Berger leaves this point to others, both in the volume to which he was contributing the lead chapter, and to future scholars who would wrestle with his ideas in the years ahead. Developing a more systematic understanding of this phenomenon, broadly defined as the "desecularization of conflict", is my primary purpose here.

The concept of desecularization has been drawn upon by others since Berger's article-length treatment of the subject (Hovsepian 2011; Marsh 2011a), but no one has so systematically undertaken to operationalize the concept and help develop it into a full-blown theory as Karpov (2010). After much serious research on the idea, Karpov offered what has proven to be the most effective and accurate means of operationalizing desecularization and fleshing out its components. By suggesting that desecularization is "a process of counter-secularization, through which religion reasserts its societal influence in reaction to previous and/or co-occurring secularizing processes," Karpov gets directly at the heart of the matter and accurately describes the contemporary global process of religion reasserting its formerly held positions, within private life, politics, society, economics, etc., while also accounting for the fact that desecularization may be at work even if no single sector succumbs fully to the pressure (Karpov 2010, 250). Secondly, Karpov keeps in the equation the fact that the trends we are observing are counter-secularizing trends, that is, they are occurring as a *response to* secularization. This is a point Berger argued repeatedly in his 1999 article. Moreover, Karpov highlights several empirical referents to identify and distinguish cases of desecularization, including a rapprochement between formerly secularized institutions and religious norms; a resurgence of religious beliefs and practices; a return of religion to the public sphere; a revival of religious content in culture; and religion-related changes in society's substrata (including demography, economics, etc.).

As I have argued elsewhere, one environment in which the concept of desecularization is fully appropriate is the post-Communist world (Marsh 2011a). In territories controlled by Communist governments, policies of forced secularization were carried out, often with zeal and great success. In sharp contrast to places such as the former East Germany, which is today the most atheistic region in all of Europe, most other post-Communist societies witnessed a rapid return of religion to public life almost immediately following the liberalization of religion policy. The history and current politics of these societies proved extremely useful in further extending the body of evidence in support of the theory of desecularization, including Poland, Russia, Ukraine, and China. They exemplify well the process of rapid change, from forced secularization to a vibrant resurgence of religious belief among segments of post-Communist societies, the struggle between continuing secularizing trends and newly invigorated counter-secularizing efforts, a return of religion to the public sphere, and the penetration of religious content into culture and virtually all aspects of life.

If the reach of desecularization is this encompassing, it certainly carries with it implications for the relationship between religion and war. Both Berger and Karpov saw the potential for social conflict in the process, but each stopped short of expanding into the thorny realm of the desecularization of violent conflict, which may range from small-scale communal violence to total war. Given that the desecularization of conflict is a narrower phenomenon than desecularization in general, the range of empirical referents available to identify dimensions of the former will be more limited in scope than in the case of the latter, but certainly not in significance. First of all, we can hypothesize that the desecularization of a conflict must necessarily be preceded by—or occur concurrently with—a more general desecularization of the societies party to the conflict. We would thus likely see a resurgence in religious belief, a revival of religious content in culture, and a return of religion to the public sphere in one or both societies involved in the conflict, either prior to or concurrently with the emergence of specific religious dimensions of the

conflict. These religious dimensions would likely include proclamations of a religious duty to fight (perhaps countered with religious prohibitions against fighting), religious aspects being inextricably intertwined with ethnic/nationalist aspects, a sacred framing of the conflict coupled with strong religious symbolism, and the intentional targeting of religious symbols.

Each of these dimensions has been identified either in regard to religious dimensions of conflict directly, or ethnic conflict more broadly. Much of the literature on religion in conflict has focused almost exclusively on the theological dimension and religious obligations to fight or abstain from fighting (Nordquist 1989; Carlson and Ebel 2012), while others have simply coupled religious dimensions with ethnic dimensions, or even denied that the religious dimension added anything unique to such conflicts (Cornell 1998, 46–48; Varshney 2003, 5; Tishkov 2004, 179). Juergensmeyer (2000) has gone the farthest in articulating the way religion can be used in the framing of conflicts, introducing the concept of "cosmic war". Finally, Kaufman, although focusing on "ethnic war", nevertheless recognized that symbolism was an important factor in how myths (including religious myths) can be generated and used to "shape" conflicts and justify hostile action (2001, 12).

Probably the most innovative approach, however, is the focus on the intentional targeting of religious symbols. In my own fieldwork, in such places as Chechnya and Nagorno-Karabakh, I have seen first-hand religious symbols—churches, mosques, pilgrimage sites, etc.—that have been intentionally destroyed for no apparent tactical purpose. It was not until Bevan (2006), however, that I began to see the strategic value to such destruction. As he poignantly articulates, besides the destruction wrought simply due to military maneuvering and collateral damage, "there has always been another war against architecture going on—the destruction of the cultural artefacts [*sic*] of an enemy people or nation as a means of dominating, terrorizing, dividing or eradicating it altogether". As he explains, the "aim here is not the rout of an opposing army—it is a tactic often conducted well away from any front line—but the pursuit of ethnic cleansing or genocide by other means". In this way, Bevan explains, "architecture takes on a totemic quality: a mosque, for example, is not simply a mosque; it represents to its enemies the presence of a community marked for erasure" (2006, 8).

This is a pattern many have seen across the world, particularly in the Balkan Wars, although its significance often goes unrecognized. One of the few scholars who recognizes such actions for what they are is Sells, who argues that the religious dimension to the war in Bosnia-Herzegovina was "both obvious and invisible," obvious in that both perpetrators and victims were identified by religion, and invisible in that religious manifestations were viewed as either incidental or masks for other, deeper issues, including ethnicity (2003, 309–310).

While all of the dimensions of conflict listed above have been analyzed by other scholars, very few have been used to analyze the religious dimension of conflict, and no study has sought systematically to draw upon these dimensions as empirical referents of the desecularization of conflict. In the present study, this is precisely what I seek to do, employing the more than two-centuries-long Russo-Chechen conflict as a case study. This is part of a larger research project that seeks to examine these same dimensions in much more depth than can be accomplished in the limited space of an article, and adds a comparative perspective by including the cases of the wars in Bosnia and Kosovo. This present study, however, hopefully will begin to offer both a deeper understanding of the Chechen conflict, one that sees historical continuity in the clash between Russia and Chechnya and illuminates the way religion has played a significant role. Additionally, it contributes to the theoretical work on desecularization by beginning the process of extending the theory to cases of violent conflict.

Sacralization

The two Chechen wars of 1994–1996 and 1999–2002 were not the first time the Russians and Chechens faced each other in battle, nor was it the first time the clash was labeled a "holy war". The roots of the conflict do not rest with ancient ethnic tensions or religious clashes, however, but

with geostrategic calculations on the part of the Russian Empire, and unfortunate geographic location on the part of the nations who populated the strategic crossroads of the Caucasus. In the late Eighteenth century, as Ottoman and Persian power waned, Russia once again attempted to expand its borders southward (it had tried with less success in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries). It first succeeded in extending its southern flank into the northern Caucasus to what was called the "Caucasian Line", a string of fortifications and Cossack settlements following the Kuban and Terek Rivers across the northern tier of the Caucasus. By 1801, Russia had annexed Christian Georgia after its ruler, Georgii XII, sought Russian protection from Persia and Turkey. Russia then controlled a swathe of territory from the Caspian to the Black Sea along the southern rim of the Caucasus, giving it access to critical mountain passes and lines of communication needed to secure the territory and, if necessary, to employ and supply forces in the region. Having expanded its border farther south, however, it now also laid claim to the territories that lay in between, lands that were home to many different non-Slavic, and non-Christian, groups. As Baumann points out, "the predominantly Muslim tribes native to this area proved far less willing to give their allegiance to a Christian sovereign" than had Orthodox Georgia (1993, 2).

The Gazavat

Russia's conflict with Chechnya had already begun almost two decades earlier, however, when in July 1785 Russian forces attempted to capture a local imam who had been calling on his compatriots to repent and live according to Islamic law, the *shari'a*. That imam was Sheikh Mansur, who believed the crisis the Muslim world had undergone in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth centuries had arisen because the *umma* had gone astray. Mansur was preaching a message calling upon his fellow Muslims to abandon their local tribal customs and return to true Islam by embracing *shari'a*. Only then, he argued, would they be able to regain their strength and effectively wage *jihad* against the invading infidels. Initially, Mansur apparently believed he could reach some sort of accommodation with the Russians, and he explicitly instructed his compatriots to avoid any confrontation with the invaders (Gammer 2006, 19). This quickly failed, however, as Russian forces attempted to capture Mansur, whom they had labeled a "false prophet", and put an end to his nascent uprising. Several thousand men, armed with artillery, attacked Mansur's village, and finding it abandoned, razed the whole place to the ground. What happened next was passed down from generation to generation and eventually recorded by tsarist historians before the Bolshevik Revolution: "Mansur [then] stood at the head of the Mountaineers and declared holy war—*gazavat*" (Korol'kov 1914, 412). Thus occurred the initial sacralization of the confrontation between the Chechens and the Russians, framing the conflict in religious terms, a pattern that would persist throughout the Nineteenth century and re-emerge after the conflict reignited following the collapse of the Soviet regime.

Although they had failed to capture or kill Mansur the first time, the Russian military would prove persistent and resourceful in its efforts to do so. Mansur soon turned the tables, however, and began to launch raids against Russian posts. After an initial victory in the Battle of Sunzha, he later proved unable to defeat the Russians in subsequent engagements, although he did prove a formidable force and inflicted significant casualties against Russian forces. While his military tactics are noteworthy and were mythologized by later generations, our concern here rests with his appeal to Islam. This he did, in addition to framing the conflict as a holy war and proclaiming a religious duty to fight, by also using religion to recruit forces and solicit external support. He also attempted to enforce *shari'a* among the Muslim population of the North Caucasus—and sought to increase their number "by word and the sword", leading to significant conversions among the pagan Ingush and Christian Ossets (Gammer 2006, 25). Mansur also drew upon the institutional structure of Islam to recruit and organize his forces, ordering that each "mosque" (institutionally equivalent to a parish in the West) should furnish three

warriors with supplies for the *gazavat* (Gammer 2006, 24).

Mansur also drew upon Islam in seeking external support, both from the Turks of Central Asia and the Ottoman Empire. In the case of the former, he called on them to return to true Islam and to join the fight by attacking the Russians at Astrakhan (Gammer 2006, 26). In regard to the latter, the Turks were suspicious of his intentions in the early days of his movement, but once the Russo-Ottoman War of 1787–1792 broke out, the Ottomans cooperated with Mansur. While fighting with the Ottomans in the eastern Black Sea town of Anapa, Mansur was lured out of his fortified position with promises of fair treatment and eventual release. Instead, he was incarcerated in the Shlisselburg fortress in St. Petersburg where he would die within 3 years. In his less than 5 years of activity, Sheikh Mansur had not only proved a thorn in the side of Russia's imperial ambitions, he also established several strategies that would be drawn upon—and mythologized—by later generations, including obstinate resistance to Russian rule, framing the conflict as one of Islam against infidels, the utilization of Islam as a means of recruiting and mobilizing resistance forces, and soliciting external support from co-religionists.

The Great Gazavat

The capture of Mansur and the end of the Russo-Ottoman war did not bring the fighting in the Caucasus to an end. For more than 40 years, Russian forces sought to fortify the Caucasian Line and subdue the local population, the "mountaineers" (or "gortsy"). Under General Yermolov, they had great success, mostly due to the brutal tactics employed, but also due to the lack of a unified resistance movement among the mountaineers that could be used to mobilize resistance forces effectively. The impetus for that movement was the order by Tsar Nicholas I to "tame forever the mountain peoples, or exterminate the insubordinate" (Gammer 2006, 46). The imminent Russian assault mobilized the Naqshbandi leadership, and Ghazi Muhammad was elected imam. He immediately declared *gazavat*, thus initiating the "great *gazavat*", which would last from 1829–1859. Ghazi Muhammad's period of leadership was brilliant but brief. He organized all the mountain peoples and was able to get them to engage in systematic battle with the Russians, where they enjoyed significant success. He also employed what are today referred to as deception operations, using disinformation to mask his true battle plans and thus launch surprise attacks. After a series of successes, however, the tsar ordered his elimination, and he was eventually found and killed with virtually all of his remaining forces.

After Ghazi Muhammad's brief period of leadership, another imam was elected (Hamzet Bek), but he, too, was killed very quickly. It was the third imam, Shamil, a close friend of Ghazi Muhammad and one of his first followers (and one of only two survivors of the attack that killed Ghazi Muhammad), who would lead the "great *gazavat*" for the next 25 years and bring it unprecedented success. Originally operating in Dagestan, Shamil had little influence, but once being forced out by constant Russian military incursions into his villages, he found refuge in Chechnya, where the Russians were attempting to disarm the Chechens (an affront to a man's dignity and manhood in that culture) and to install local "supervisors" among them. There Shamil lived according to his religious principles, a fact not lost on the Chechens, who soon began to flock to him asking to be taught how to live according to true Islam. His shift from religious leader to military leader was rapid, and he was soon asked to lead the Chechens' armed rebellion against the Russians.

Shamil employed military tactics learned from the previous imams and their engagements with Russian forces, especially the tactical use of terrain (Schaefer 2011, 62). He organized a full-time force of devout and fearless religious warriors, the *murtazeks,* who served as local administrators and judges, governing according to the *shari'a* (Schaefer 2011, 65). Shamil was able to capture a large amount of territory in Dagestan to use as his operating base, utilizing Chechen territory as the breadbasket to feed his army. As with Mansur, he appealed to the Ottomans for help. The initiation of the Crimean War (1853–1856) seemed like an answered prayer to Shamil and the Chechens at first. Their

swift defeat, however, was a huge psychological blow to the resistance movement. As Schaefer explains it, the "psychological impact of the realization that the great Ottoman Sultan—even with the help of the mighty English and French—could not beat the Russians dealt an almost immediate deathblow to Shamil and his insurgency" (2011, 67).

They had hoped Ottoman assistance would help them defeat Russia, but if the Russians could defeat the Ottomans themselves, what chance did the Chechens have, either with Ottoman assistance as they had hoped, or alone, which the situation now dictated? Shamil understood that this development changed everything, and he appealed to the Russians for agreeable terms to end the fighting. From the start, Shamil had wanted autonomy for the Muslim peoples of the North Caucasus and the right to live according to *shari'a*. After decades of fighting, however, the Russians would not agree to these terms and offered resettlement instead. Shamil and the clan representatives were not willing to accept such terms, and they then attempted to renew their fight. This was to no avail, however, as the Russian forces—now freshly fortified with an additional 200,000 men freed from fighting in Crimea—quickly crushed the insurgency. The forced resettlement of mountaineers began, with hundreds of thousands leaving the Caucasus for the Ottoman Empire, while those who remained were resettled into the lowlands more than 200 miles away.

Shamil was not the last Muslim leader of the North Caucasus to draw upon Islam to organize resistance to Russian rule. Others included Hamza Muhammad (nephew of Shamil), Baysungur, Sultan Murad, and Kunta Hajji. In Addition, in the interregnum between the collapse of tsarist control and the Bolshevik seizure of power, several independence movements emerged in the region, most with at least some connection to Islam. One of the most influential was the Chechen Congress, led by Naji al-Din, which tried to enforce *shari'a* and establish a muftiate in the region (Gammer 2006, 120–122). Naji al-Din was strongly anti-Communist, but the Bolsheviks employed a divide and conquer strategy, eventually inducing Ali Mitayev to join their "revolutionary committee" and support Bolshevik control in the North Caucasus. To Mitayev and the others who sided with the Bolsheviks, the Soviet Constitution seemed to guarantee freedom of religion, which they took to mean that they would be free to practice Islam and live according to the *shari'a*. Of course, before long the Soviet religious freedom guarantees were exposed for what they were—powerless words on a piece of paper. The reining in of those freedoms would proceed more quickly in the North Caucasus than in most other parts of the nascent Soviet Union.

Secularization

Once the Bolsheviks had consolidated their power, they began to carry out the most prolonged and systematic forced secularization program the world has ever seen. Of the more than 50,000 Russian Orthodox churches and chapels in existence on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution, only a few hundred remained in existence by the late 1930s (Davis 2003, 13). In the North Caucasus, Islam was vibrant and powerful at the time of the Bolshevik seizure of power. In Chechnya and Ingushetiya alone, 850 mullahs operated 2675 mosques and 140 religious schools. As Gammer suggests, these facts, including the fact that the population during the 1920s paid 25 times more in *zakat* to their religious institutions than to the Soviet taxing authorities, suggest that "the Muslim clergy, not the Soviets, controlled the people and the economy" (p. 142).

The secularization of the North Caucasus conflict, therefore, obviously necessitated the secularization of society, and to achieve this the Soviets determined that they needed to eliminate the Muslim clergy first, since they would be the fiercest obstacle to this effort. The first to go was Mitayev. Although he had joined with the Bolsheviks during the revolution, once Bolshevik power had been established he was no longer of any value to them. Instead, as the most influential sheikh in the region, he now stood in the way of their plans. The impetus to remove Mitayev was his continuing insistence on maintaining *shari'a* as the legal foundation for the new republic. He

was invited "to meet Lenin" and discuss the issue "with him personally", but instead his journey brought him to a Rostov jail where he was strangled to death, with his body then returned to his people with apologies that he had died of a "heart attack" after being released.

With their most powerful advocate eliminated, the secularization process continued by first disarming the mountaineers, a move that must be understood both as a violation of their rights and an affront to their manhood. The second target was the "radical intellectuals", or "padishas", who, although they had collaborated with the Bolsheviks from the start, had always been seen as harboring a secret nationalist agenda. Perhaps the greatest obstacle, and one of the most significant, were the Muslim schools (referred to by the Russians as "Arabic" schools). As mentioned above, these were very numerous at the time of the revolution and their influence continued long afterwards. In fact, even though Moscow sank large sums of money into the region to build new secular schools, they remained almost empty. Conversely, the "Arabic" schools were over-filled, with children sitting on dirt floors memorizing the Quran (Gammer 2006, 146–147).

In 1929, the Soviet authorities attempted to shut down the "Arabic" schools and the rather immediate result was an uprising led by Shita Istamulov, a former lieutenant of Mitayev. They sent a list of demands directly to Moscow, insisting that they would only submit to Soviet authority again once the demands were met. In addition to the school issue, the list of demands was broadened to include the removal of the Soviet "popular courts" and the reinstatement of *shari'a* courts, and called for the end to the intervention of Soviet authorities into the affairs of the "Chechen Autonomous Region." The Soviet authorities handled the affair by sending a high-level "peace committee" to the region to deal with the rebels. After declaring that the local authorities had indeed violated Soviet policy by their actions, a detachment of Soviet forces surrounded Shita Istamulov's home and opened fire, only to be almost completely destroyed by him and his brother, who refused to come out. Istamulov then declared a *gazavat* for the reestablishment of the imamate of the Caucasus and the eviction of the infidels from their land.

The fighting that ensued between Istamulov and his men and Soviet forces became fierce, eventually involving five Soviet divisions and various regiments. In the end, however, Moscow changed its tune and reversed itself on the issue of collectivization and "dekulakization," two important issues to the mountaineers. Istamulov was then appointed president of the Rural Consumer's Cooperative in his native village. Then in 1931 the regional chief of the political department brought Istamulov in to meet with him, ostensibly to receive his amnesty from Moscow. As he was handed his amnesty with one hand, however, the chief shot him with the other (Istamulov died, but not before stabbing his assailant to death).

With these obstacles removed, Soviet secularization efforts in the Caucasus continued apace, and as with the rest of the USSR, over the years the policies had a significant impact. But whereas the Soviet Union's religion policy was softened during World War II, as part of what is known as the concordat, simultaneously Stalin began an ethnic crack-down in the North Caucasus, ordering the deportation of the Chechens (and other mountain peoples) to Central Asia in 1944 for alleged collaboration with the Germans. This is where most studies of the Chechen conflict pick up the story of Russo-Chechen animosity, but doing so fails to recognize the secularization of the conflict that had taken place between 1917 and World War II. Indeed, it is hard to find a religious element to the deportations, but when one considers that historically it had primarily been religious leaders who had sacralized the conflict by framing it as a *gazavat*, with the imams and mullahs now mostly eliminated, there was no one to frame it in this way. Moreover, secularization had slowly set in, and while a residue of Islamic belief continued to exist to some extent among them, the Chechens were gradually secularized, as was most of the rest of the Soviet population.

Desecularization

When Mikhail Gorbachev ascended to the post of general secretary of the CPSU in 1985, he

was taking the helm of one of the most secularized societies in the world. Indeed, statistics on religion in the final days of the Soviet Union show that religious belief was almost nonexistent, with less than 20 percent of Soviet citizens identifying themselves as religious (Zuev 1995). And while data on belief among Muslims in the Soviet Union are not available, the mere fact that at the time there were only 47 mosques in the entire North Caucasus region, with only 12 in Checheno-Ingushetia (Vachagaev 2006), suggest that the Muslims of the North Caucasus fared no better than the average Soviet citizen in the face of forced secularization.

Given the pervasiveness of Soviet secularization efforts, when territorial disputes began to erupt in the final days of the USSR, one would have suspected that religion would have played no role, since religious consciousness was apparently nonexistent among the vast majority of the population. The tendency, therefore, was for the conflicts to become framed as "ethnic" or "nationalist." This would change, however, as society spontaneously began to undo the effects of years of forced secularization.

THE REASON RUSSIA'S MUSLIM POPULATION BEGAN UNDERGOING "RE-ISLAMIZATION" WAS BECAUSE OF SOVIET-ERA POLICIES OF FORCED SECULARIZATION

The religious renaissance that took off in the Soviet Union's final years was dramatic, and by 1993 the percentage of religious believers had more than doubled to 43 percent (Zuev 1995; see also K. Marsh 2011). Such a rapid rise in religious belief suggests that something like a religious "residue" must have continued to exist in the minds of many citizens, despite the USSR's best efforts at eradicating all vestiges of religion. This residue seems to have facilitated a rapid desecularization of the entire population, Christian, Muslim, and even Buddhist. Of primary concern to the present discussion is the desecularization of Russia's Muslim population[1] in general, and of Chechen society in particular. Hahn (2007) refers to this process as re-Islamization, and while his term is useful, it lacks context and generalizability. Of particular importance is the fact that the reason Russia's Muslim population began undergoing "re-Islamization" was because of Soviet-era policies of forced secularization. As I have shown elsewhere (Marsh 2011a), forced secularization is a problematic process, and among most societies that underwent the process (most—though not all, cf. Estonia and East Germany, for example) the immediate response following liberalization was a religious renaissance. Russia's North Caucasus is no exception, and the liberalization of Soviet-era restrictions on religion resulted in a rapid and dramatic increase in the number of mosques and madrasas and the return of Russia's traditionally Muslim population to them. The desecularization of Russia's Muslim population in general, and those of the North Caucasus in particular, however, had far greater consequences than simply the number of minarets that began to dot the Russian landscape once again following the collapse of the USSR. A direct result of the desecularization process was the desecularization of the conflicts that had begun to erupt in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union.

The political liberalization of the Soviet system unleashed a complex of factors, from freedom of expression to the pursuit of long pent-up aspirations. It is no surprise that calls for national self-determination emerged simultaneously with the search for a post-Soviet identity and religious freedom. These processes, coupled with the battle in Moscow between the various levels of political power, almost inevitably lead to confrontation over where power rested. In cases where Moscow was willing to let territories go, the process could continue peacefully, but when the Kremlin refused to let other territories secede, that's when conflicts ensued.

A residual effect of Soviet secularization was that these conflicts were framed in mostly ethnic and nationalist terms, with religion playing very little role at the outset. As the conflicts evolved, however, two things happened to change this. First, there is the effect of desecularization of society, with an increase in religious belief among

the populations on both sides of the conflict. While religious belief (or identification) is probably a prerequisite for a conflict to be effectively framed in religious terms, the mere existence of a moderate or even high degree of religious belief among a population does not mean that a conflict will be religiously framed. Religious identification is a necessary, but not sufficient condition for religious framing. As I have argued elsewhere, however, when conflicts become violent there is a tendency for them to become framed in terms of religion, and statistical evidence suggests that this is particularly likely to occur when there is a religious difference between the sides to the conflict (Marsh 2007). The case of the Chechen conflict fits this pattern perfectly, and the fact that the conflict did not become understood as having a religious component until *after* violence ensued supports the thesis that religious framing occurs as a result of the "demonization" of the other and the cosmological dimension of killing (Marsh 2007, 821–823; see also Juergensmeyer 1993, 156–160).

There are some who flatly reject the proposition that there is a religious dimension to the Chechen conflict. Valery Tishkov, the eminent Russian anthropologist and scholar of ethnicity—and former Russian minister of nationalities—authored one of the most well-researched and thought-provoking studies on the Chechen conflict in which he rejected the idea that religion played any significant role in Chechnya's war for independence. In support of his conclusion he cites such evidence as low levels of adherence to Islam during the Soviet era, the incompatibility between Wahhabist-Arab culture and Chechen culture, and the rarity with which Chechen leaders invoked Islamic language and symbolism to justify the war (2004). The first issue is one that I have dealt with above, that the secularization of Chechen society resulted in a lag in the emergence of the religious dimension rather than its absence. I fully agree with Tishkov's point that there is a deep incompatibility between Wahhabist-Arab culture (Tishkov's term) and Chechen culture, but I do not agree with his conclusion—that Chechens would prefer Russification to Wahhabist-Arabization (2004, 179). The only truly viable alternative is a society based upon traditional Chechen culture, with varying degrees of Sufi influences. Putin's approach since the start of the Second Chechen War, of arguing that Russia provides a conducive environment within which traditional Chechen Sufism can prosper, is a recognition of this fact, and explains why the "Chechenization" process has been so effective at stabilizing the situation.

Tishkov's third point is the most interesting one, since it is not the absence of religious language that leads him to reject the role of religion in the conflict, but the "rarity" with which it was invoked. In support of his position, Tishkov argues that Zelimkhan Yandarbiyev, Chechnya's second president, "rarely discussed religious aspects of the events in Chechnya." Tishkov attempts to make this argument even though Tishkov himself quotes from the preface to Yandarbiyev's book on the Chechen War, *Chechnya—Bitva za svobodu*, where the latter refers to the war as "a holy ghazavat waged in the name of Allah" (2004, 169).

By framing the debate over the role of religion in the Chechen conflict as a yes or no issue, Tishkov dismisses it as *the* cause, and then never considers it as *a* cause. But dismissing religion as a factor simply because it was "rarely" invoked is an unpersuasive argument. Rarely invoked in what context? In negotiations with the Russians, or in local mosques? There is no way to ascertain accurately the degree to which religious rhetoric is involved in a conflict, since there is no way to measure completely what is the rhetoric of a conflict. Religious language was invoked, however, by some of the most significant actors. In the demand note from the 2002 Nord-Ost hostage-taking at the Dubrovka theater (Stepankov 2003), for example, the "fate" of Chechnya was referred to as being in Allah's hands, and Russians were referred to as "sinners": "we will take with us the lives of hundreds of sinners. If we die, others will come and follow us—our brothers and sisters who are willing to sacrifice their lives, in Allah's way, to liberate their nation." How can dozens of people volunteering for a violent death, and to kill others in the process, who then explain their actions in

religious terms, not be understood as having a significant religious component?

The religious dimension of the conflict played itself out in ways other than in religious rhetoric. A Russian soldier, Vyacheslav Mironov, vividly described the nailing of a Russian soldier to a rooftop cross and the mutilation of his body during the first Chechen War. The "dead soldier's body", he wrote, "was up there just like Jesus" (as quoted in Murphy 2004, 19). This scene was later immortalized in the Russian film *Purgatory* (*chistilishche*), a film whose rich religious symbolism extends far beyond the title. Chechen commander Ruslan Khaikharov even beheaded a 19-year-old foot-soldier in May 1996 for refusing to renounce his faith and convert to Islam. The young soldier, Yevgeny Rodionov, was eventually canonized for his martyrdom. The Russian Orthodox Church resisted canonizing the young "martyr" for years, partly due to the inability to corroborate the story of his death. In 2004, however, the Church finally caved in to pressure from its laity and certain outspoken members of its own clergy and canonized the young man as a saint. Since then, several more "soldier-martyrs" have been being proffered as candidates for canonization (McGregor 2006). Actions such as these not only illustrate the religious dimension of Chechen war behavior, but also how such behavior resonated strongly with the Russian population.

Clearly the conflict became infused with religious imagery on both sides, but this does not mean that religion is at the root of the conflict, and that is not what I am arguing here. The point I am trying to make is only that religion is a significant factor in the equation and that its impact is unique among other socio-cultural markers of identity in that it deals with "ultimate concerns," to borrow Tillich's phrase (1957). Other scholarship also disagrees with Tishkov's assessment and has come to accept the role of religion in the conflict (Antonian 2008). In particular, Hughes (2007) focuses on how this conflict, which started as a nationalist independence movement, evolved into a "jihad", while Hahn (2007) considers that religion was a factor from the start, but that it increased dramatically once radical elements within the movement sought assistance from abroad, bringing international mujahideen fighters into the conflict (he also identifies what he calls the Chechen "jihadist warrior culture" as partly responsible) (2007, 30). It is worth noting that the recurring pattern of seeking external support from co-religionists throughout the conflict, and how in this instance this tactic was successful and contributed to the religicization of the conflict. Others see religion as inextricably linked with the conflict, both historically and presently (Gammer 2006; Schaefer 2011). Schaefer gets right to the point:

> although religion might not be the strongest motivating factor for every individual involved … it is simply counterproductive to argue that religion doesn't matter—or that this ideological influence is not the most repeated throughout the history of conflict in the North Caucasus. (2011, 72)

From the perspective of desecularization theory, each of these facets of the religious dimension is understood as a part of the overall puzzle, only adding two points of emphasis. First, the conflict has a history, and that history unfolded through the phases of sacralization, secularization, and desecularization. Second, that there was a high probability that the conflict would become framed in a religious manner if fighting erupted, *given* the religious difference between the two sides. Desecularization theory offers us a unique way of understanding the Chechen conflict, one that presents a more accurate picture of the role of religion and relates this conflict to the larger global phenomenon of religicized conflict.

Desecularizing the Study of Conflict

To argue that religion did not play a significant role in the Chechen conflict is to ignore history and facts. Sheikh Mansur, Ghazi Muhammad, and Imam Shamil, individually and collectively, drew upon Islam in their framing of the conflict, used religion to organize and lead forces, increased the degree of Islam in the North Caucasus, and attempted to draw in external

support from co-religionists. In these ways, Islam played a significant role in the Caucasian Wars of the Eighteenth and Nineteenth centuries. Once the Soviet regime consolidated its power, however, it began a secularization process that secularized both society in general as well as the conflicts that had existed. With the collapse of the Soviet regime, both underwent a process of desecularization. In this way, Chechnya serves as an almost ideal case in which to analyze the desecularization of conflict, since its Nineteenth century conflict with Russia was framed on both sides with significant religious overtones, the conflict was secularized during the Soviet period, and it then re-erupted simultaneously with the collapse of the Soviet regime. At that time the conflict was then secular as a result of the overall secularization carried out by the Soviet regime, but gradually religion began to play an increasingly significant role in the conflict, fed by a rise in religious belief and, once the fighting erupted, by the demonization of the "other".

Christianity and Islam seem to suffer from this demonization effect most acutely, probably due to the salvific and exclusivistic nature of these religions. As I have argued elsewhere (2007, 822–823), taking religion seriously means that we must accept the fact that as part of their universal truth Abrahamic religions have places in their theology for believers of other faiths. This may be their eventual conversion to the "truth" or it may mean an eternity of torment in hell. The fact that there is a truth dispute at the center of religious difference is a critical aspect. By preaching a universal truth, non-coreligionists are "evil" to some degree, whether simply because they are outside of the truth and are thus heretics, or because they are already "dead" in the eyes of God. In cases where it is the latter, then the act of killing is only speeding up the inevitable, or even carrying out the will of God.

The argument I am putting forth here is not that religion is the cause of conflicts such as the one analyzed here. When the Chechen independence movement began, it was much more a nationalist movement than a religious one. In fact, in the first years of the Chechen separatist movement, one would be hard pressed to find any significant references to the religious difference between the Russians and Chechens. It was not even about ethnic difference, but about the rights of Chechnya to have an independent state, just as the states of Eastern Europe and the successor states to the Soviet Union had done. At its outset, the war was waged between Russians and Chechens, with the former fighting for geopolitical territory and the latter for its independence and even survival.

All conflicts evolve, however, and as they do the roles of the various factors change, sometimes dramatically. In the case of the Chechen conflict, historical grievances played a major role in popular support for Chechen independence in the early years of the movement. The quasi-genocide of the Chechen people who were deported in 1944 was still a historical memory to most Chechens, lived either by them or their parents or other relatives. The attempt to "erase" their existence, in the sense that Bevan (2006) conveys it, was also understood and remembered. One of the most poignant examples of this is the fact that the Soviets had apparently used the tombstones from a Chechen cemetery, which was hundreds of years old, for the construction of sidewalks and foundations for houses (Lieven 1998, 320). Dudaev drew upon this fact and used it to generate support for the independence movement by having these tombstones gathered and used to construct a memorial wall bearing the inscription: "We will not weep; we will not weaken; we will not forget." Clearly historical memory was at work. Once the fighting began in 1994, however, and once the degree of destruction set in, historical grievances were no longer directly the motivating factor—now it was the contemporary destruction and the resultant deaths. Once killing begins, these deaths are much more salient and "real" than the deaths of thousands of ethnic kin during the deportation half a century earlier.

Again, at this point religion is still not *the* cause, but where there is death there is a search for answers, a desire to find what Berger calls "cosmological significance". The environment of death is one in which religion will perhaps inevitably arise. And when there is a religious

difference between the combatants, the tendency for religion to be drawn into the conflict will be very high. In general, there is a natural tendency for conflicts between non-co-religionists to draw religion in (Marsh 2007), but this was artificially altered in the post-Communist world, since the societies—and their histories—were secularized. But just as secularization is not proving long-lasting in terms of religious belief, neither is the secularization of these conflicts. The case of Chechnya is but one example of an—unfortunately—large group of conflicts across the globe, from the Balkans to South Asia to Xinjiang in western China. The theory of desecularization provides a framework for understanding these conflicts and the role religion plays in them. As Berger warned more than a decade ago, those who "neglect religion in their analyses of contemporary affairs do so at great peril" (1999, 18). In matters of war and peace, an improper understanding of the role of the various factors involved in the conflict can have catastrophic results. ❖

Note

1. By the term Russia's "Muslim population," and "ethnic Muslim population," unless otherwise specified, I am referring to that segment of the population comprised of the various ethnic groups that have a strong historical affinity to Islam, that is, those ethnic groups among whom Islam was the dominant religion prior to forced secularization.

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