

Orthodox resurgence: Civil religion in Russia

by [John P. Burgess](#) in the [June 16, 2009](#) issue

Immediately after his inauguration as president of the Russian Federation in May 2008, Dmitry Medvedev proceeded to a Kremlin church, where Patriarch Aleksy II blessed him and gave him an icon of the Vladimir Mother of God, to which Russians over the centuries have turned for national protection. Medvedev, along with former president Vladimir Putin, was again present when Metropolitan Kirill was enthroned as the new patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church on February 1.

In light of such events, some Russian Orthodox anticipate a return to the ancient conception of a “symphony” between church and state in Russia: the church infuses the state and society with spiritual values, while the state protects the church. Critics of the church, however, charge that the church is simply returning to its historic role of being aligned with the state in return for social and political privilege.

The situation is complex. Although there is a renewal of Orthodox life in some ways, at the same time Russia is becoming religiously pluralistic—and it remains highly secular.

When Aleksy died in December 2008, his supporters could point to the impressive changes of the past 20 years since the fall of the Soviet regime. The number of monasteries had jumped from 22 to 804; the number of parishes, from 7,000 to 30,000 (as many as half of these, however, lie outside of the Russian Federation, many of them in Ukraine). The number of Orthodox churches in Moscow alone rose from 40 to 872. Moreover, the percentage of Russians identifying themselves as Orthodox increased from 20 percent to perhaps as much as 80 percent. The massive persecution of the church under communism has been followed by what seems to many Orthodox a miracle of rebirth.

Dramatic evidence of this rebirth can be found at the monastery in Solovki, located 100 miles south of the Arctic Circle on an island in the White Sea. In the early 1920s, the Soviets transformed the monastery into their first concentration camp, where

they refined the methods that they would apply to the entire gulag system. Thousands of people died from cold and disease before the camp was closed in 1939. Two outlying churches served as hospitals—in reality, holding pens—for prisoners who had contracted typhoid. Until the recent restoration of these buildings, one could still see the prisoners' blood that had soaked into the floorboards.

In the early 1990s, the government began returning parts of the monastery complex to the church. Today monastic life has been reestablished both in the main monastery, where 30 monks celebrate a full cycle of services every day, and in two smaller, semihermetical communities. Two churches in the main complex have been restored and reconsecrated, and memorials have been dedicated to the many believers who died a martyr's death here. As many as 30,000 Russian pilgrims and tourists now visit Solovki annually.

The renewal of parishes and monasteries has been complemented by the church's commitment to addressing social needs and issues, as reflected in a major document adopted at a bishops' council in 2000 and titled "The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church." Patriarch Kirill, who at that time was chair of the church's Department of External Church Relations, was its principal author. The document includes chapters on law, work, property, politics, war, family, health, bioethics, ecology, education, media and globalization.

The Russian Orthodox Church has reestablished hospitals, orphanages and nursing homes. It is negotiating with the state about providing religious education in the public schools and supplying military chaplains. It has privileged access to the mass media. On Saturday mornings Kirill is featured in a half-hour television program about Orthodox belief and practice.

In their book *Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent*, John and Carol Garrard argue that the Russian Orthodox Church "has achieved a cultural dominance akin to Western Christianity's in the United States." They depict Aleksy as adroitly protecting the church from state manipulation and positioning it to offer society key symbols for a post-Soviet Russian identity. In "an almost perfect parallel to Constantine's slow and careful substitution of the symbols of Christianity for those of pagan Rome," Orthodox narratives, holidays and moral values, they argue, have quietly but inexorably replaced the discredited social ideology of Russian communism.

But this view is at best half of the story. Orthodox identity in Russia today has to be reconstructed from a tradition that was decisively shattered. A typical Russian is Tanya, who lives with her husband in a large apartment in a northwest suburb of Moscow and works as an adjuster for an insurance company. I met her at Solovki, where she had come to immerse herself for a week in the rhythms of monastic life and prayer.

Tanya does not attend church in Moscow. Most of Moscow's churches are in the historic city center, and attending one of them would involve a commute of an hour or more for Tanya. She did not grow up in the church and knows little about Christian belief and practice. She is so busy with work that she would not get involved in the life of a congregation if she wanted to.

Yet her time at Solovki touched her deeply. She experienced a spiritual power that she wanted to hold on to but knew that she would lose as soon as she returned home. Life in the monastery represented a reordered world in which the problems and conflicts of her everyday world vanished. The ancient rhythms of the liturgy swept her up into Russia's great spiritual past.

Sociological studies illuminate the paradoxes of Tanya's religiosity. Russians, more than almost any other people in the world, see religion as insignificant for their everyday lives. When asked which institutions should shape their moral values, only 4 percent mention the church—about the same percentage as those who look to the mass media. (The vast majority, 67 percent, cite the family.)

Priests commonly told me that at most 5 percent of the population are regularly in church. Last year, 83 percent of Russians said that they would not fast at all during Lent, and only 3 percent that they would fast in full accordance with the church's rules. This year's survey indicated that more Russians intended to keep the fast at least partially. But it also revealed that only 30 percent of Russians see it as a spiritual exercise, whereas 24 percent regard it as a cultural tradition, 19 percent as a way of cleansing the body, and 22 percent as no longer having any special meaning.

Just what kind of social identity, then, do Russians find in Orthodoxy?

For many Russians, to be Russian is to be Orthodox. Nineteenth-century Slavophile ideas are still influential, casting Catholicism and Protestantism as Western imports that have belonged historically to invaders from abroad (such as Catholic Poles or

Protestant Swedes and Germans). Many Russians are suspicious of Western pluralism and the notion that the individual can construct an identity, including a religious identity. Russians assume that individuals inherit a historical identity from the ethnos to which they belong. Russians are more readily able to acknowledge the unique religious identity of other ethnic groups within the Russian Federation (such as Muslim Tartars) than to accept the fact of a plurality of religious identities among ethnic Russians.

Kirill reinforces such ideas when he, like his predecessor, speaks of the unique place of Orthodoxy in Russian history, or refers to the Orthodox Church's "canonical territory," presumably off-limits to other Christian churches. Aleksy took particular umbrage at Pope John Paul II's creation of new Catholic dioceses within this canonical territory and supported state legislation to limit Catholic and Protestant missionary work. When the Russian Orthodox Church speaks of religious education in the public schools, it proposes alternatives for members of other religious groups, such as Islam, but not for members of other Christian churches.

If to be Russian is to be Orthodox, it is not surprising that Alexander Lukashenko, the dictatorial leader of Belarus, can call himself, with no tongue in cheek, "an Orthodox atheist." Indeed, according to the Garrards, a whopping 42 percent of self-identified atheists in Russia claim that they are also Orthodox.

Equating Russia and Orthodoxy is troubling, however. First, it is simply not true historically. Catholicism and Protestantism, while never as large or influential as Orthodoxy, have nevertheless had a historical presence in Russia, in some places for centuries. They not only guarded immigrants' ethnic identity but also helped shape Russian culture (whoever learns a little Russian soon discovers the number of words appropriated from languages like German). Surely, too, there is a Christian solidarity in suffering, for the Soviet persecution affected these little churches as much as the Orthodox Church.

Christianity itself has never been monolithic in Russia. The history of the country's Baptist churches is instructive. While Baptist missionaries came from Germany into Russia in the late 19th century, small indigenous religious groups with free-church characteristics (Molokans, Stundists) shaped the Baptist movement there into a distinctively Russian phenomenon.

Second, equating Russia and Orthodoxy easily underwrites xenophobia. Russian Catholics and Protestants continue to suffer under a general social (and Orthodox) suspicion that they are being financed and used by Western political interests. They often have difficulty in getting building permits, holding public rallies or conducting evangelistic campaigns. Kirill, like Aleksy, has been careful in public statements to call for religious toleration and to honor the leaders of other Christian groups. But he has not embraced a vigorous social pluralism that would recognize the necessary and legitimate place of these groups in Russian society.

Third, equating Russia and Orthodoxy reduces Christianity to a cultural identity. Orthodox, Catholics and Protestants agree that the heart of their religion lies in people's faithful response to God's call to a new way of life in communion with the risen Lord.

Echoing statements of Aleksy and Kirill, priests with whom I spoke emphasized that the most pressing challenge before the Russian Orthodox Church today is education. Too few people know the basics of the faith or what it means to commit themselves to the life and work of the church.

Orthodox identity provides for social harmony and unity in post-Soviet Russia. The fall of communism and the integration of Russia into the global marketplace have brought about tremendous social dislocation and demoralization. Once able to think of itself as a superpower, Russia today is perceived both domestically and internationally as a second-tier nation. The United Nations ranks its standard of living at approximately 73rd in the world, below that of Mexico (51st) or Romania (62nd). International watchdog groups classify Russia as among the world's most corrupt places for doing business.

Huge social inequities stir up public resentment: Russia ranks third among countries with billionaires (after the U.S. and Germany), yet elderly people barely survive on minuscule state pensions. The general economic infrastructure lags decades behind the West's (there is not yet a fully built controlled-access four-lane expressway between Moscow and St. Petersburg). With breakdowns in the health-care system and widespread abuse of alcohol, the average age at which men die has declined since the fall of communism to 59.

In a society that can be hard and cruel, Orthodoxy offers a socially unifying ideology. It promotes personal values that make community possible: committed work,

honesty in relationships, and concern for one's neighbor. Russians increasingly want the church to guide them through life's major transitions. They know little or nothing of Christian theology, but the church's rituals give them a sense of healing and peace. Slavophile ideas are again at work here: the Russian identity as shaped by Orthodoxy represents a powerful alternative to Western individualism and social competition.

Sociologist Robert Bellah has argued for the virtues of American civil religion, and perhaps Russians, by way of Orthodoxy, are trying to construct a viable civil religion for themselves. One nevertheless has reason to doubt that Orthodoxy in Russia can fulfill its Christian responsibility to society except as it engages in the hard work of rebuilding vital congregational life. Russian Orthodoxy's prominence as a social ideology seems curiously out of proportion with the realities on the ground, where the work of familiarizing people with the scriptures, the liturgy and basic church practices is still at the beginning and is seriously hampered by the secularizing forces that communism let loose and that continue in a different way under conditions of the global market economy.

Orthodoxy gives Russians a sense of national mission. Contemporary Orthodoxy's cultural relevance goes even further: it gives Russians a sense of their place in world history. Russian Orthodoxy has traditionally viewed Russia as a great nation with a divine appointment to defend civilization itself. Like Americans, Russians have believed in their exceptionalism—that they are not subject to the vices of other nations but are uniquely able to realize a more perfect political order, which God calls them to offer to the world. In both countries, religious language has easily gravitated into political rhetoric.

Historians have often noted that Marxism itself has roots in biblical eschatology, and Soviet ideology was filled with religious-like language of sacrifice, personal transformation ("the new human") and a perfected social order. With the fall of communism, this eschatology has been reconstructed within an Orthodox worldview that looks back to words that Abbot Filofei of Pskov wrote to Czar Vasili III several decades after the fall of Constantinople in 1453: "[You alone are now] lord and protector of the altars of God and of the holy ecumenical Catholic and Apostolic Church. . . . Two Romes have fallen, the third stands, and a fourth there will not be."

Moscow as the Third Rome has a new lease on life in post-Soviet Russia. On September 1, 2004, Chechen rebels took hundreds of children and their parents and

teachers hostage at a school in Beslan in the Russian republic of North Ossetia. When Russian troops stormed the building two days later, more than 300 people, including 186 children, died. As all Russia mourned these events, Russian television broadcast footage of President Putin, alone in a Kremlin chapel with an Orthodox priest, saying prayers for Beslan's dead. The camera panned in close as Putin, wearing a tired, grim look, crossed himself and bowed. Consciously or unconsciously, he seemed to be invoking the historical mythology that places Christian (Orthodox) Russia over against godless barbarian hordes.

Putin and Medvedev have been careful to avoid the language of religious war and have emphasized that the Russian Federation is a multiethnic, multireligious nation in which different groups must respect each other and work together. But Orthodox notions of Russia's unique historical mission are never far from the surface as the church bestows awards on military leaders and blesses their troops and weapons. The potential for religious conflict remains real in a country in which the ethnic Russian population is rapidly declining while the Muslim population is increasing.

Patriarch Kirill also gives expression to Russia's unique historical mission when he calls for the church (and the nation) to defend Christian moral values. His statements resonate with pronouncements from John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and have spawned widespread speculation that he will make common cause with Rome in defending "Christian Europe."

But the Russian Orthodox Church has traditionally been less willing to speak a critical word to its own state. No American should render judgment on the path of political accommodation that all the Russian churches took under the heavy hand of communism. The Orthodox Church did everything that it could to protect the liturgy, and one can argue that as long as it preserved the liturgy, it also preserved the seeds of the alternative politics that Christ sets forth over and against the ideologies and powers of this world. But one might wish that Kirill and other church leaders would provide for more vigorous debate and analysis of the church's past and present relationship to the state than currently seems to be the case.

An Orthodox culture is reappearing in contemporary Russia. It is evident not only in renewed religious life and the church's social initiatives but also in such phenomena as music (every monastery sells CDs of its chanting, and the traditional chant of the famous Valaam Monastery has won popular recognition), film (a recent movie, *Ostrov* [Island], won popular acclaim for its portrayal of Orthodox monastic life),

church newspapers, museums, youth clubs and summer camps.

Nevertheless, it seems unlikely that Russia as a whole is on its way to embodying an Orthodox culture in the way that it did up to 1905 or 1917. A reconstructed Orthodox culture will likely be nothing more than one subculture among many. In such a world, the church's social and political influence will wax and wane, as has that of mainline and evangelical Protestant churches in North America, which, despite their deep roots in U.S. history, are now but one voice among many in the spiritual marketplace.

Many Russians—including many Russian politicians—will formally bow to Orthodoxy and even regard it as a special part of Russian identity. But they will increasingly try on other, sometimes competing cultural identities. The new Russia is a place in which not only Orthodoxy thrives, but also Western-like consumerism, Western sexual mores and a multitude of religious, ideological and lifestyle subcultures, all of which the Russian state gladly tolerates so long as they do not threaten its hold on power.

Most Russians are probably not on the way to claiming Orthodoxy as their primary identity. Whatever being Orthodox will mean to them, it will not lead them into the deeper experience of faith that every Christian community seeks to nurture. At best, the reconstruction of Russian identity as Orthodox identity will open up social space in which the church can do its proper work. At worst, it will tempt the church with worldly power (as managed by the state) and divert it from shaping congregations in which people hear the gospel, participate in the sacraments, shape a more faithful life together and work for a more just society.

In the end, the opportunities and perils that face Russian Orthodoxy and its new patriarch are no different from those that face Christian churches in the pluralistic West. We are always tempted to overestimate our cultural significance and relevance, and to underestimate the demands of the gospel and the difficulty of thinking about our lives theologically. The Russian Orthodox Church faces these enduring challenges even as it tells Russians that they are part of a great tradition with far deeper historical roots than communism, that they both belong and do not belong to the West, and that they still have a unique mission to the world.