Church, state and punk: The Pussy Riot protest

by John P. Burgess in the October 3, 2012 issue

Игорь Мухин at ru.wikipedia

During the week in which the Orthodox Church prepares for the Great Lenten Fast, a video appeared on the website of Pussy Riot, a Russian feminist group known for its public provocations. It showed four women wearing ski masks and brightly colored dresses and tights kicking their legs, pumping their fists and screaming, “Mother of God, drive Putin out,” to the accompaniment of piercing electric guitar music. The apparent setting for this “punk prayer service” was Christ the Savior Cathedral, Moscow’s central Orthodox church.

A few weeks later, in early March, three members of Pussy Riot—Maria Alekhina, Yekaterina Samutsevich and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova—were arrested and charged with hooliganism motivated by antireligious hatred. On August 17, after a two-week trial, they were sentenced to two years in prison.

The women have become a cause célèbre of the political opposition in Russia and its Western supporters. For them the issues boil down to freedom of speech and artistic expression. In the weeks leading up to the trial, “Free Pussy Riot” joined “Russia Without Putin” as an opposition slogan. Some demonstrators carried placards that depicted a hooded Pussy Riot woman nailed to a cross.

Meanwhile, Amnesty International declared the women prisoners of conscience, and Western rock groups called for their release. At a concert in Moscow, Madonna defended the women's actions and asked the court to show leniency. Paul McCartney posted a message of support on his website. The *New York Times* and *Time* magazine depicted the women as heroic fighters against an oppressive state that is supported by a wealthy and corrupt church.

Many ordinary Orthodox believers viewed the Pussy Riot incident quite differently, however. For them it raised practical questions about how the church should protect itself from unwelcome intrusions, as well as theological questions about how to respond in a Christian spirit to antireligious sentiments. Ironically, Russian president Vladimir Putin may have summed up the incident best when he told British journalists that nothing good could come of it.

As events unfolded, I was living in Moscow, researching the church's efforts to shape postcommunist Russian society. Soon after their arrest, Vsevolod Chaplin, head of the church's department for relations with society, harshly condemned the women, warning that unless they repented of their actions they could not hope for eternal life. Andrei Kuraev, a popular Orthodox publicist, countered that the church should show mercy. He compared the women to the holy fools of Orthodox tradition who confronted czars with uncomfortable truths. He added that if he had been on watch in the church, he would have treated the women to blinis, the traditional Russian pancakes that the Orthodox eat during the week before Lent. The women quickly posted his statement on their website.

From the outset, the case presented enigmas. Press reports spoke of five women staging the incident at the cathedral, yet the video showed only four. Only three were arrested. Supposedly, church security guards had taken the women to the local police station. If so, why had they been released, only to be arrested several weeks later? Two of the three denied participating; how could they be confidently identified?

The now-infamous video has its own enigmas. Some shots were taken in bright daylight, others at dusk; only in the latter did the women hold guitars. How could the women have gotten their instruments past the security checkpoint in the church?

As the trial progressed, several of these mysteries were resolved. The video had spliced together different materials, including scenes from an earlier intrusion into a

different church. While in Christ the Savior Cathedral, the women only lip-synced to a tape recording. They had no guitars with them, and the whole incident lasted 40 seconds in a nearly empty church. Security guards had removed the women's hoods but had not taken them to the police. One member of the group had shown up late; two had gone underground afterward.

The biggest mystery remained, however. Why had the city prosecutor pressed criminal charges following the release of the video? The women had been detained for previous stunts but always immediately released, sometimes after paying a small fine for disorderly conduct. Many legal experts, as well as some political leaders, saw no grounds for charging the women with antireligious hooliganism, which carries a sentence of up to seven years in prison.

Some observers suggested that the prosecutor had bowed to pressure from the church. But church leaders had insisted only that the state protect it from such incidents in the future, and even Chaplin had expressed doubts that a jail sentence would truly reform the women. Did Putin want to make an example of the women in order to stifle growing opposition to his rule? Or had he been personally offended by their rant?

While the trial did not answer these questions directly, it vividly demonstrated that prosecution, defense and judge alike wanted to score larger political points. When the women presented themselves as self-confident witnesses to the truth rather than humble penitents, the judge decided that only prison time could drive the lesson home: Pussy Riot had finally gone too far. Public opinion polls indicated that most Russians agreed. Only 6 percent said they sympathized with the women. More than two-thirds condemned their actions.

The Pussy Riot incident took place at a time of heightened tension for both church and the government. In September 2011, President Dmitry Medvedev announced that he and Putin, then prime minister, would exchange positions in upcoming elections, with Putin returning to the presidency that he had previously held for eight years. Some in the nation's urban middle class scoffed at Putin's power play. A cartoon of Putin resembling a bushy-eyebrowed Leonid Brezhnev in a Soviet general's uniform raced across the Internet.

When parliamentary elections were held in December 2011, a small but growing number of political activists monitored the voting and immediately accused officials

of having permitted widespread vote fraud. Nevertheless, even the official numbers indicated that a fundamental shift in the political landscape had occurred. United Russia, Medvedev and Putin's party, was the leading vote getter, but it fell short of a two-thirds majority in the Duma (parliament).

Opposition leaders called for public protest of the vote. In recent years, demonstrations in Moscow have been small, unremarkable affairs, rarely attracting more than 100 to 200 people, while the police presence has been massive and intimidating. To everyone's surprise, the postelection demonstration drew tens of thousands of protesters, and the police kept a low profile. A second demonstration later in December drew even larger crowds. While it seemed clear that Putin would win the presidential elections scheduled for March, the emboldened opposition hoped to drive him into a run-off.

Adding to the sense of political movement was the church's response to the protests. Though Chaplin was known for very conservative social positions—in the fall, he had called for a public dress code to oppose women's short hemlines and had accused public schools of assigning readings that contained latent pedophilia (even though several of the books in question were Russian classics)—he took a conciliatory tone toward the protesters. In early January, Patriarch Kirill in a nationally broadcast Christmas interview called on the government to enter into dialogue with the opposition and said that just as the church tried to learn from internal critique, so too should the state.

New demonstrations raised the specter of a people's revolution, but Putin pushed back. In the course of a rambling four-hour question-and-answer television show, he mocked the protesters, saying that he had mistaken their white ribbons for condoms. A few days later, the nation's surgeon general warned people to avoid the demonstrations because of dangerously cold temperatures. School directors scheduled exams on demonstration days to prevent young people from attending. United Russia organized massive counterdemonstrations. Putin was clearly determined not only to avoid a run-off but also to achieve a resounding majority that would demoralize the opposition.

By late January, the patriarch started sounding a different tune. He declared that "believers do not attend demonstrations. They stay home and pray." In early February, he praised Putin's rule as miraculous. His change of tone suggested to many observers that he had succumbed to pressure from the Kremlin.

It was in this context that Pussy Riot made its video. Several weeks before entering Christ the Savior Cathedral, the women had performed a protest song in front of St. Basil's Cathedral on Red Square. Now they entered the very seat of the patriarch. They posted their lyrics on their website and in subsequent interviews made clear that they were directly criticizing Kirill and the church's allegiance to Putin.

From the beginning, some of Pussy Riot's Russian supporters had conceded that one could legitimately object to the women's decision to stage their protest inside a church. Few Western press reports, however, reported the content of the women's song, the full context of the protest or how the performance affected ordinary Orthodox believers.

Addressing Kirill by his last name rather than by his title, the women accuse him of believing more in Putin than in God. They add that the church's "top saint is head of the KGB / who takes protesters by convoy to prison camp / If women aren't going to offend his Holiness / they have to make love and give birth." Other lines allude to the black limousines that some church officials use, religious instruction in the public schools ("be sure to bring the preacher money"), prohibition of gay pride parades, and the belt of the Virgin, a relic that millions of Russians lined up to venerate in November 2011 ("It can't take the place of the protests"). "Become a feminist, Virgin Mary," they cry. The chorus is composed of expletives. Loud, aggressive music accompanies the song.

In the video posted online, the camera lurches from one angle to another, as though the viewer is dodging the women's attack. A church helper reacts with horror and tries to cover the camera lens with her hand. One dancer kicks her leg so high that her genital area is visible beneath her semitransparent tights. Finally, the women fall on their knees and repeatedly cross themselves, until the befuddled security guards lead them away.

As the trial progressed, details emerged of other street theater actions in which the women had participated. One had starred in a video posted on the Internet in which she walks into a grocery store, buys a frozen chicken, slips off her panties, hikes up her dress and attempts to stuff the chicken into her vagina. Another defendant had participated in a sexual orgy in Moscow's Biology Museum in 2008, also posted on the Web.

Much of the Russian and Western press criticized the court for allowing prosecution witnesses to refer to medieval Orthodox canons or to describe the women's actions as satanic. Clearly, Orthodox sensibilities must not take the place of secular law in the courtroom. But liberal-minded Westerners can understand and even sympathize with those Orthodox who were offended by the women's actions.

From a Russian Orthodox perspective, several factors added to the offense. An Orthodox church is arranged as holy space. People approach it with reverence, crossing themselves and bowing. Men remove hats; women often wear headscarves. Any kind of clowning around can result in a scolding from church helpers.

The iconostasis separates the altar area, which normally only clergy enter, from the area of the worshipers. During the liturgy, the priests process with the holy scriptures and the eucharistic elements in front of the iconostasis. Laypeople do not approach it without invitation. In no case would they use it as a platform for a personal statement. Whatever the patriarch's personal faults, he is accorded deep respect because of the office he holds. Mocking him offends ordinary Orthodox in the same way that mocking the pope offends pious Catholics.

Western reporting on the trial picked up on the offensive character of Pussy Riot's actions only when early in the trial the women themselves acknowledged that performing the song in a church had perhaps been an "ethical mistake." They added that if they had offended believers, they had not meant to.

To many Orthodox, however, their words fell short of a full apology. The women continued to assert that they had rightfully criticized distortions of church practice. They argued that the Orthodox Church itself does not treat Christ the Savior Cathedral as holy space, because it allows secular groups to use the large auditorium in the basement and several commercial businesses to rent space. They insisted that they were speaking out against the hierarchy's—and specifically the patriarch's—entanglement in politics, in violation of the Russian constitution's guarantee of separation of church and state.

Pussy Riot raises legitimate issues, but they are far more complex than the women's supporters have acknowledged. Christ the Savior Cathedral was rebuilt at the initiative of Boris Yeltsin, the first post-Soviet president of Russia, and does not even belong to the church. Unfortunately, the group's efforts to force public discussion of the church's role in society has only made the church feel threatened, driving it into

the protective arms of the state. The controversy has also weakened the opposition itself, which includes nationalists who often ally themselves with conservative Orthodox groups.

Immediately after the fall of communism, the Orthodox Church devoted itself to rebuilding its infrastructure. In 20 years, the number of parishes grew from 7,000 to 30,000, the number of monasteries from 22 to over 800. Kirill has since called on the church to bring more people into its life. Though as many as 70 to 80 percent of Russians have been baptized, identify themselves as Orthodox and think favorably of the patriarch, only 4 to 5 percent regularly attend the liturgy and receive the Eucharist. Kirill seems confident, however, that Russia can be re-Christianized. He argues that Orthodox moral and aesthetic values lie at the heart of the nation's identity, and that Russia can be Russia only as it acknowledges and affirms its Orthodox roots and ethos.

Kirill has pushed the church to see all segments of Russian society—from bikers to rock music fans, from drug addicts to political candidates—as its mission field. He believes that a church that seeks to be a comprehensive social presence cannot help but work closely with the state, even though it wishes to remain independent of state control.

Over the past year, however, the media have not focused on the patriarch's new initiatives in education, social outreach and parish life. The big news has been his personal excesses. Soon after the Pussy Riot arrests, the press reported that Kirill owned a luxury apartment on the banks of the Moscow River and had sued a neighbor for damaging a rare book collection worth hundreds of thousands of dollars. The media also mocked the church's publication of a photo that turned out to have been clumsily doctored to remove evidence of a $30,000 watch on the patriarch's wrist.

In early April, the Holy Synod declared that the church faced the threat of new persecution. It issued a pastoral letter on the issue and asked that it be read aloud at the Sunday liturgy in every parish. It also distributed leaflets with a photograph showing the razing of Christ the Savior Cathedral by Stalin in 1936 and scheduled a mass prayer service calling for the defense of the church against its enemies. The church demonstrated that it could call out as many people as the political opposition: 60,000 Orthodox faithful gathered on the grounds of Christ the Savior Cathedral on April 22. But the event also exposed the church's reliance on the state,

for the church could not have organized the event, including the busing of thousands of people from other dioceses, without state assistance.

After decades of communist persecution, the church understandably wants the state to protect its place in Russian society. But its charge that a new era of persecution has arisen, with allusions to the harshest repression of the Soviet period, seems farfetched and unhelpful. As one of my Russian friends observed, “It’s hard to talk of persecution when you have thousands of police officers on your side.”

The women’s two-year prison sentence seemed excessive to many observers, including President Obama and other Western leaders. Public opinion polls suggested that even those Russians who regarded Pussy Riot’s acts as blasphemous favored less stringent penalties. Some Orthodox leaders, such as Kuraev, worried that the sentence would damage relations between church and society for years to come. The patriarchate affirmed the court’s decision but called for the state to show mercy, in hopes that the women might still repent.

In the end, both Pussy Riot and the church hierarchy have reason to repent. Each has pressured the other to confess its sins; neither has been successful. Each has claimed to be a victim; neither has resisted power politics. The biggest lesson for the opposition may be that fighting the church is not the best way to fight the state. The biggest lesson for the church may be that the re-Christianization of Russia is not a done deal; it may not even be desirable if it comes at the cost of accommodation to the state. Whether Putin has learned anything is still anyone’s guess.