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RELIGIOUS SITUATION  
IN POST-COMMUNIST RUSSIA

This paper aims to provide insights into the situation of mainstream and non-mainstream religions in post-communist Russia. A keen interest in religion in Russia after *perestroika* and especially after the adoption of the democratic law “On the Freedom of Conscience”, passed in 1990, has been noted by many Russian and foreign scholars of religion.

A number of sociological surveys have confirmed a growing interest in religion and revealed a marked increase in declared belief in God<sup>1</sup>. According to several surveys, the number of people who identify themselves as Orthodox has grown continuously since the early 1990s<sup>2</sup>. One explanation for the rise of declared belief in God, which has been offered by many scholars, is that it reflected a general identity crisis in post-communist society. Espousing the mainstream religion which was traditionally adhered to by one’s ethnic group was a way of overcoming this crisis and became an important part of Russian citizens’ self-identification. Thus individuals now identified themselves as Orthodox, Buddhist or Muslim because their ethnic groups had traditionally espoused these religions<sup>3</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Desiat’ Let po Puti Svobody Sovesti*, eds. A. Pchelintsev, T. Tomaeva, Moscow: Institut religii i prava, 2002, pp. 23–24; *Religion and Identity in Modern Russia: the Revival of Orthodoxy and Islam*, eds. Benjamin Forrest, Juliet Johnson and Marietta Stepaniants, Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005, p. 13; Zoe Knox, *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia after Communism*, New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005.

<sup>2</sup> *Religiia i Politika v Postkommunisticheskoj Rossii*, ed. L. N. Mitrokhin, Moscow: Izdatel’stvo Instituta filosofii RAN, 1994; *Starye Tserkvi, Novye Veruiushchie*, eds. Kimmo Kaariainen, D. Furman, St. Petersburg: Letnii sad, 2000, pp. 7–48.

<sup>3</sup> *Religion and Identity*, pp. 18–20.

## TWO TRENDS IN POST-COMMUNIST RELIGIOUS LIFE OF RUSSIA

In describing the religious situation in post-communist Russia, it is necessary to say that it can be studied via two different approaches. The first one concerns religion *per se*, that is, the variety of beliefs and faiths that are often intertwined and merged with one another in public consciousness. The second one concerns religion as a political force and covers those aspects of religious traditions that are used by nationalist ideologies and play an important role in the processes of shaping identity. The two aspects can be closely intertwined and are not easy to separate. Scholars of religion have pointed out that it is difficult to analyze the post-communist Russian religious worldview. On the whole, it is characterized by extreme eclecticism and instability. In fact, a growing influence of Eastern religions (originally, rather simplistic adoptions of Hinduism, Buddhism, Yoga and Tantra), Occultism and magic, as well as belief in UFOs, the yeti and reincarnation, have been observed in Russia since the 1970s<sup>4</sup>.

In the periods of *perestroika* and *post-perestroika*, religious consciousness has been characterized by an intricate mixture of different beliefs which include fragmentary elements of Orthodox Christianity, Occultism and Eastern religions, various New Age concepts (astrology, reincarnation, a belief in aliens and the approaching era of Aquarius) and magic. There have also been numerous systems concerned with health: various healing methods, yoga diets, acupuncture and so on. Theories related to science, parapsychology and extrasensory perception have also become an important element of contemporary Russian non-mainstream religiosity. As we can see from the summary above, in the period since the Soviet times and onwards, much of non-mainstream religiosity has contained Eastern elements or demonstrated influences of Eastern beliefs and ideas. It can be explained by the desire to escape the realities of the Soviet way of life – with its egalitarianism and oppressive control

<sup>4</sup> *Religiia i Obschestvo: Ocherki Religioznoi Zhizni Sovremennoi Rossii*, ed. S. Filatov, Moscow, St. Petersburg: Letnii sad, 2002, p. 447.

over spiritual and religious spheres – into some bright exotic “faraway elsewhere”<sup>5</sup>.

Amidst those non-mainstream groups inspired by Eastern spirituality, it is worth marking out Hare Krishna followers and various Roerich groups as the most popular and populous movements in Russia. While Hare Krishnas are well-known all over the world and do not need to be introduced minutely, the Roerich movement is something more indigenous and peculiar. It is based on philosophical teachings of a well-known painter, philosopher, traveler and public figure Nicholas Roerich and his wife Helena Roerich, called Agni Yoga or the “Living Ethics”, and contains elements borrowed from Buddhism, Hinduism, Helena Blavatsky’s Theosophy, Christianity and others in a quite arbitrary interpretation. The books on Agni Yoga had been available in the Soviet Union and, after the *perestroika*, the movement enjoyed an astonishing rise in popularity, especially among intellectuals and educated people. There is hardly a city in Russia where a Roerich group would not exist. The central headquarters of the organization, The International Roerich Centre, is in Moscow.

Moreover, in the late 1980s and the early 1990s, numerous lectures and seminars offering intensive training in various Eastern religious practices enjoyed wide popularity in Russia. Among bestselling books was Sergei Lazarev’s series *Diagnostika karma* (The Diagnostics of *karma*), which was concerned with “methods of correcting one’s *karma*”. Since the time of the *perestroika*, the landscape of Russian religiosity, already complicated as it was, has been supplemented with the concept of Russian Vedism, various notions of Russia being the motherland of the ancient Vedic culture, which allegedly predates the Vedic cultures of India and Iran and is the source from which the latter originated. Hence the ideas that Sanskrit, for example, developed from some form of an ancient language which, in fact, was Russian, etc.

It is against this background that the restoration of Orthodox Christianity and other mainstream religions has been taking place.

<sup>5</sup> Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006, pp. 150, 160.

It could be argued that Orthodox Christianity has been planted in a soil already fertile with various non-mainstream religious beliefs. These beliefs do not prevent people from turning to Christianity as well. Selected interviews and conversations with a number of newly-converted Orthodox Christians reveal that some of them have not given up their Oriental, pagan and New Age beliefs. Some of the interviewees, for example, admit that they meditate or do yoga exercises from time to time, read horoscopes, believe in “signs” “the evil eye” or entertain ideas about karmic retribution for bad deeds<sup>6</sup>.

#### RUSSIAN LEGISLATION ON RELIGION

The 1990 law “On Freedom of Conscience” codified the changes that had been introduced gradually in practice over the previous four years and, to use the words of Russian scholar of religion Marat Shterin, “reflected the early liberalizing aspects of post-communism”<sup>7</sup>. The law proclaimed the freedom of religion as an “inalienable right” of all citizens of Russia; they would now enjoy the right to practice any religion they wanted and to establish religious organizations. All religions and religious associations were proclaimed “equal before the law”. The law also abolished executive and administrative bodies that used to control the sphere of religion. All religious organizations were granted a full legal status from the moment of their registration. These changes resulted in an immediate growth in numbers of religious organizations. The new law was initially welcomed with enthusiasm by both the Russian society and various religious confessions and institutions, including the Moscow Patriarchate.

<sup>6</sup> Selective interviews were conducted by me among the parish of three churches of St. Petersburg and its suburbs in June–August, 2008; Petr Pavlovskii, “O ‘sglaze,’ ‘porche’ i prochikh sueveriiakh,” in: *Pravoslavnyi Peterburg*, St. Petersburg, 1997, no. 2 (56), p. 8.

<sup>7</sup> *New Religious Movements of the Twenty-First Century: Legal, Political, and Social Challenges in Global Perspective*, eds. Philip Charles Lukas and Thomas Robbins, New York: Routledge, 2004, pp. 101, 102.

## THE ROC AND THE RUSSIAN SOCIETY

As it has been mentioned, the Orthodox Church has become highly visible in post-communist Russia. In the pre-revolutionary period, the Church was widely regarded as the protector of nationalist interests and the defender of national traditions. When the collapse of communism resulted in identity crisis and left an ideological vacuum, Orthodox Christianity and the Moscow Patriarchate, which had been closely linked to Russian spiritual and cultural tradition in the past, appealed to many people. Indeed, for many Russians, Orthodox Christianity became a symbol of their cultural and national identity. Surveys demonstrated that around 65 percent of the population of Russia, both believers and non-believers, recognized the Orthodox Church as the bearer of spiritual and moral principles, and wanted these principles to be introduced into the political sphere<sup>8</sup>. Hundreds of prominent cultural and public figures declared that they belonged to the Orthodox Church.

The growing authority of the ROC coincided with the strengthening of the Church's position within the state. Numerous old church buildings were given back to believers and new ones were built. This process has been accompanied by the Moscow Patriarchate penetrating into different state institutions. In particular, the Church signed cooperation agreements with the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Defense and the Ministry of Health which guaranteed its presence in the army, the police, hospitals and prisons<sup>9</sup>. From 1992 onwards, the Church has received wide access to the system of education through Orthodox gymnasiums, Sunday schools and courses on "The Fundamentals of the Orthodox Culture" in mainstream educational institutions. The possibility of introducing religious education into the compulsory school curriculum has been discussed for years and has many advocates. In September 2012, a new subject called "The Foundation of Religious Culture and Secular Ethics" was introduced in Russian secondary

<sup>8</sup> *Desiat' Let po Puti Svobody Sovesti*, pp. 25–26.

<sup>9</sup> Aleksandr Glagolev, "K simfonii gosudarstva i tserkvi v Rossii", in: *Radonezh*, Moscow, 1997, no. 16–17 (61), p. 18.

schools<sup>10</sup>. It offers six elective modules and the Orthodox culture is one of them. So religion is actually taught at schools. Attitudes of the authorities towards the Church depend to a great extent on public opinion. Thus Sergei Filatov, a scholar of religion, has stated:

Orthodox Christianity became a national and cultural symbol for the majority of the Russian population: people were pleased with the restoration of churches and monasteries, national holidays and traditions. The state, in turn, picked up these ideas and sentiments and tried to make good use of them. One of the obvious reasons for this is that the level of confidence in the authorities in Russia is very low and they try to use all possible means to raise it.<sup>11</sup>

Both the authorities and prominent politicians routinely emphasize their friendly relationship with representatives of the Church hierarchy in various ways. Therefore political leaders regularly make television appearances where they stand humbly and hold lit candles during Eastertide or Christmas.

Alongside the association of the ROC with ecclesiastical, national, state and political issues, it is necessary to mention its social and moral influence on the people of Russia. By conducting numerous social activities, the Church has become involved in many areas which, in one way or another, contribute to the shaping of identity and nation-building: culture, civic education, ecology, charity, family life and relationships, the upbringing of children, struggle against “pernicious Western pop-culture”, homosexuality, pornography, alcoholism, prostitution, corruption, drug addiction, etc<sup>12</sup>. Orthodox clergymen advise the audience on what books, TV programmes, films and music are more appropriate for Orthodox believers, how they should raise their children, etc<sup>13</sup>. One can therefore

<sup>10</sup> “Ezhegodnoe eparhial’noe sobranie goroda Moskvj”, in: *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii*, Moscow, 2006, no. 1, pp. 40–41; Irina Rubtsova, “Isaakii – shkole”, in: *Pravoslavnyi Sankt-Peterburg*, St. Petersburg, 2008, no. 10 (202), p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> *Religiia i Obshchestvo*, p. 473.

<sup>12</sup> “Natsionalnaia sfera otvetstvennosti: vlast’, tserkov’, biznes, obshchestvo – protiv narkomanii”, in: *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii*, Moscow, 2006, no. 1, pp. 78–86.

<sup>13</sup> A. Aleksandrov, “Ostorozhno: NTV! Iskushenie khristian. Ocherednoe, no ne

state that the Church has become quite a powerful force in the shaping of identity and, under the circumstances, has put effort into maintaining its superior position. So it comes as little surprise that it has treated successful non-mainstream movements as dangerous competitors, whose supposedly pernicious influence on the souls of Russian people has to be eliminated. Therefore the period of religious freedom referred to above was rather short. From the mid-1990s, concerns about new “cults” posing a threat to the society and the state and destroying the “historically established ethno-religious balance of Russia” began to be voiced increasingly often<sup>14</sup>. In this context, the topic of cults threatening to destroy the “national identity of the Russian people” has also come to the fore<sup>15</sup>. Among the first objectors to new religious movements (NRMs) were parents and families of NRM members. They were mostly worried about the psychological state of the converts and the supposedly negative impact of new religions on their lives, careers and family relations<sup>16</sup>. In absence of any official information about the problem or access to professional help, desperate parents turned for support to the ROC, which had its own reasons to oppose NRMs.

In 1992, the classification of religions in Russia was supplemented with a new term, “totalitarian sect”, which had never been applied to religious communities before. The authorship of this term can be attributed to one of Russia’s main anti-cult ideologists and the founder of the Russia’s principal anti-cult organization, “Tsentr Sviashchennomuchenika Irineia

poslednee”, in: *Pravoslavnaia Moskva*, Moscow, 1997, no. 34 (130), pp. 1, 6; Nataliia Stavitskaia, “Kurinaia slepota gospodina Kiseleva, ili o masterakh nazyvat’ beloe chernym”, in: *Pravoslavnaia Moskva*, Moscow, 1997, no. 34 (130), p. 7; Aleksandr Shargunov, “Zachem eto nado NTV”, in: *Radonezh*, Moscow, 1997, no. 19 (63), p. 1; “V Ostankino molilos’ dvadtsat’ tysiach”, in: *Radonezh*, Moscow, 1997, no. 19 (63), pp. 2, 15.

<sup>14</sup> *New Religious Movements*, pp. 102–103.

<sup>15</sup> “Doklad Patriarkha Moskovskogo i vseia Rusi Aleksiiia II na Arkhiereiskom Sobore Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi 18 fevralia 1997”, in: *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii*, Moscow, 1997, no. 3, pp. 58–68.

<sup>16</sup> “Yekaterinburge proshel seminar vrachei-psikhiatorov, posviashchennyi deiatel’nosti religioznykh kul’tov”, in: *Radonezh*, Moscow, 1997, no. 19 (63), p. 8; Fedor Kondratiev, “Kak eto delaetsia”, in: *Radonezh*, Moscow, 1997, no. 16–17 (61), p. 7.

Lionskogo” (The St. Irenaeus of Lyons Information Centre or SILIC), Aleksandr Dvorkin, who claimed that he could not even imagine that he had introduced the new term, as “it seemed so self-evident”<sup>17</sup>. However, the significance of the term “totalitarian cult” lies not in its self-evidence, but rather in its sinister connotations, associated with words like “sect” and “totalitarian”. On the whole, it can be argued that the introduction of the terms “totalitarian sect” and “destructive sect”, which are never used in academic discourse because of their vagueness, has contributed to constructing the image of an enemy, a threatening “other”, represented by non-mainstream religious movements<sup>18</sup>. Against this background, the new law “On the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations” was being drafted. It was finally adopted in September 1997. The law distinguishes between the so-called “traditional” and “non-traditional” religions, emphasizing the superiority of Orthodox Christianity and imposing severe restrictions on the interests of those religions that had existed in Russia for less than 15 years.

The adoption of the law encouraged anti-cult activities all over the country. In 1998, Dvorkin published a book called “Introduction to the Study of the Cults”, based on a series of lectures he was giving at the Orthodox Sviato-Tikhvinskii Theological Institute. The book gives an account of so-called totalitarian cults. The list includes a large number of religious denominations, from Jehovah Witnesses, Mormons and Scientology to Hare Krishnas, Brahma Kumaris, Theosophy and various New Age groups. The book singles out religions with “alien” Eastern elements as the most dangerous ones.

The author dedicates much attention to Hare Krishnas, whom he stigmatizes as a satanic movement. Several events contributed to this view. The murder of Orthodox celibate priest Father Grigorii Iakovlev, committed by a mentally unstable self-proclaimed Krishna follower in 2000, and a number of high-profile cases of pedophilia in Hare Krishna circles in Moscow and Novosibirsk in 2010 and 2011 aroused

<sup>17</sup> Aleksandr Dvorkin, *Sektovedenie*, Nizhnii Novgorod: Izdatel'stvo bratstva vo imia sviatogo kniazia Aleksandra Nevskogo, 2000, p. 35.

<sup>18</sup> *Desiat' Let po Puti Svobody Sovesti*, pp. 30–36.

justified indignation among the public<sup>19</sup>. Predictably, the ROC used these cases to claim about the criminal and destructive character of the movement in general. However, there is no official evidence to confirm that the number of criminal offenses committed by members of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) is any higher than in other religious denominations or groups.

Another serious clash between ISKCON on the one hand and the ROC and anti-cult activists on the other can be traced back to the mid-2000s when Hare Krishnas planned to build a big temple near Khodynskoe field and were granted a plot of land to do so. The project of the 38-metre spacious “pagan shrine”, supposedly desecrating the city, provoked outrage on the part of Orthodox believers and representatives of other traditional religions. Under the severe pressure of the Orthodox public, backed by some State Duma deputies, educational organizations and public figures, Moscow officials had to cancel the construction and take back the land under the pretense that it was located in an environmentally sensitive area. The Krishna followers’ attempts to seek justice in arbitration court proved ineffective<sup>20</sup>.

The latest scandalous incident associated with the movement was the *cause célèbre* against *Bhagavat-Gita As It Is*, a translation with commentary of the sacred Hindu text *Bhagavat-Gita*, written by the founder of ISKCON Bhaktivedanta Svami Prabhupada. The trial was initiated by the public prosecutor’s office of the Siberian city of Tomsk and lasted from August 2011 until March 2012. Its main purpose was to ban *Bhagavat-Gita As It Is* and to stigmatize it as an extremist book, since it allegedly “contained elements of instigating religious hatred and discrimination on the basis of gender, race, nationality, origins, language and religious affiliation”<sup>21</sup>. The trial caused mass protests in India and

<sup>19</sup> “Dva goda deistvoval nasilnik-pedofil v moskovsom khrame Krishny”, in: [http://www.k-istine.ru/sects/mosk/mosk\\_pedophilia.htm](http://www.k-istine.ru/sects/mosk/mosk_pedophilia.htm)

<sup>20</sup> “Moskva: Spory vokrug Khrama”, in: <http://iriney.ru/sects/krishna/news024.htm>; Moskovskie krishnaity ne poluchat zemliu. Tak reshil arbitrazhnyi sud; in: <http://iriney.ru/sects/krishna/news047.htm>

<sup>21</sup> “Sudebnyi protsess nad ‘Bhagavad-gitoy kak ona est’”, in: <http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/>

sharp criticism of Russian oriental scholars and human rights activists. Some scholars of religion, invited as experts, expressed opinions that the Tomsk public prosecutor's office was actually protecting the interests of the ROC, who claimed "spiritual monopoly over the minds of the Russian people" and wanted to eliminate dangerous competitors<sup>22</sup>. According to a scholar of India, the head of religious movement Tantra Sangha Sergei Lobanov, the trial against Hare Krishnas "was conducted in the best tradition of the Soviet anti-cultist shows". Due to efforts of Hare Krishna followers, scholars and human rights advocates, the action was turned down and charges against the book dropped<sup>23</sup>.

Another leading critic and opponent of NRMs, Orthodox Deacon Andrei Kuraev, mostly focuses on the widespread Roerich movement, which he presents as an anti-Christian cult, extremely dangerous for the souls of the Russian people. He has published numerous articles and two books attacking it. One of the books is titled *Satanism for Intelligentsia* and it also suggests the devilish character of the teaching which mostly targets educated people (intelligentsia). Kuraev has also expressed concern about the growing influence of the Roerich movement in both the ideological and economic spheres of life and especially about the Roerich followers extending their influence into schools and other educational establishments. It is necessary to note that Kuraev's views of the Roerichs and their present-day followers are rather representative of those shared by the majority of the Orthodox clergy in Russia, including the main church body Moscow Patriarchate. It is also necessary to mention that the founders of the movement and their followers were excommunicated from the Church by the decision of the Highest Clerical Council as early as in December 1994.

Quite instructive was an incident that caused controversy in the Russian parliament (State Duma), related to the Roerich followers and their symbol, the so-called Banner of Peace (a red circle with three red dots on white background) which was originally designed by Nicholas

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> "O Tomskom protsesse, krishnaitakh i grazhdansom obshchestve", in: <http://iriney.ru/sects/krishna/news098.html>

Roerich as a symbol of the Pact of Roerich, adopted in 1935. It was the first international treaty aimed at protecting cultural and historical values. The banner appeared in the parliament building in 1994 thanks to the efforts of a deputy from the Chuvash Republic and Roerich follower, Nadezhda Bikalova.

The banner, which was presented to the deputies as a “gift of good will from the women of the Chuvash Republic and a symbol of peace, cooperation and unity of all people, irrespective of their nationality, faith and political views”, was in due course put on a wall in the parliament building next to the Russian flag without any formal procedures<sup>24</sup>. Three years later, one of the deputies, Nina Krivel’skaia, expressed her opinion that the Banner of Peace was an occult symbol and that it was insulting to the Church and even illegal to have in the Duma. She also mentioned the excommunication of the Roerichs and their followers by the Highest Clerical Council and questioned the scholarly and philosophical heritage of the Roerichs. It is noteworthy that the arguments put forward by the deputy were highly influenced or even borrowed from Kuraev’s above-mentioned book, *Satanism for Intelligentsia*. Krivel’skaia’s speech provoked heated debate among other deputies. Many of them defended the principle of freedom of conscience and claimed “that among the deputies, there were people with different worldviews and religious beliefs and the opinion of one deputy should not be decisive”. Krivel’skaia objected, saying that it was not only her opinion but one shared by a group of colleagues and that the banner was imposed on the deputies against the law<sup>25</sup>.

However, despite all the efforts of the Orthodox Church, Krivel’skaia and her associates failed to force Roerich followers out of the Duma. The banner, which had many protectors, remained in the building for six more years. In 2004, though, another deputy put an end to this long saga after having expressed views about the “satanic” and anti-Christian nature of the Roerich movement and their “occult flag”, which

<sup>24</sup> *Gosudarstvennaia Duma, Stenogramma Zasedanii, Vesenniaia Sessia*, Moscow: Respublika, 1994-05-01, pp. 61–63.

<sup>25</sup> *Gosudarstvennaia Duma, Stenogramma Zasedanii, biulleten*, Moscow: Izdanie Gosudarstvennoi Dumy, 1998, no. 167 (309), pp. 30–32.

allegedly desecrated the State Duma and separated the deputies from the Church. The request of this deputy was satisfied and the Banner of Peace finally disappeared from the State Duma<sup>26</sup>. The story of the Banner of Peace in the State Duma demonstrates the change in attitudes towards religious diversity in the Russian society. What the Church failed to do in 1998, at the time of greater religious pluralism and tolerance, was easily achieved in 2004, when opinions of the Church became far more dominant and shared by the majority of the deputies. The struggle against “cults”, initiated by the Church and “anti-cult” circles, had a great impact on the formation of public opinion. An opinion poll, conducted by VTsIOM in 2006, the absolute majority of respondents declared that they regarded Satanists and *sektanty* (cultists) as the main enemies of Orthodox Christianity.

Summing up the material used in this article, it is possible to conclude that, with the exception of a rather short period of religious tolerance and even permissiveness after the *perestroika*, attitudes towards non-mainstream religious groups in Russia have remained quite suspicious and negative. The Church spares no effort in order to defend its “indigenous territory” from intruders and to maintain spiritual superiority over other religious denominations. In this matter, the ROC relies on anti-cult circles, state officials, public figures, writers, scholars, journalists and psychiatrists. Moreover, over the recent years, there has formed an obvious tendency towards the fusion of the state and the Church, which reveals itself in their mutual support, protection of each other’s interests and prosecution of common enemies. The best example is, in our opinion, the case of the well-known feminist punk band whose activists were imprisoned under the pretext of hooliganism in a temple, although their action was mostly anti-government and targeted, in particular, president Putin. Bearing in mind that the Church is officially separated from the state and educational establishments in Russia, such a tendency causes concern.

<sup>26</sup> *Gosudarstvennaia Duma, Stenogramma Zasedanii*, Moscow: Izdanie Gosudarstvennoi Dumy, 2004, no. 71 (785), pp. 16–17.