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ROUTLEDGE



RELIGION AND IDENTITY IN MODERN RUSSIA

The Revival of Orthodoxy and Islam

Edited by JULIET JOHNSON,
MARIETTA STEPANIANTS and BENJAMIN FOREST

RELIGION AND IDENTITY IN MODERN RUSSIA

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The Revival of Orthodoxy and Islam

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Preface

Juliet Johnson and Benjamin Forest

To the surprise of many, religious movements across Russia “re-awakened” after Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev’s liberalizing reforms of the late 1980s and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet Union. The relatively brief Soviet experiment, while undeniably repressive, had failed to destroy Russian citizens’ religious identifications. As the chapters in this volume demonstrate, the longer and more complex history of Russia has profoundly influenced how its religious, ethnic, and national groups think of themselves in the early 21st century. Most notably, Russia’s two traditionally dominant religions, Russian Orthodoxy and Islam, have regained and reinforced their statuses as potent sources of political, social, and ethnic solidarity in the post-Soviet era.

This book focuses on the roles of Russian Orthodoxy and Islam in constituting, challenging, and changing national and ethnic identities in Russia. Its contributors were participants in a unique Collaborative Research Network (CRN) sponsored by the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) that joined together Russian and North American scholars interested in questions of national, religious and ethnic identifications. The collection brings an innovative blend of sociological, historical, linguistic, and geographic scholarship to the problem of post-Soviet Russian identity.

In 1999, Andrzej Tymowski (ALCS), Peter Sahlins (Berkeley), James Scott (Yale), and Ron Suny (University of Chicago) took the lead in forming the CRN under the broad theme of *Official and Vernacular Identifications in the Modern World*. Funded by grants from ACLS and the Ford Foundation, the CRN consisted of scholarly teams focusing on three regions: Russia and the former Soviet Union, Southeast Asia, and France and its former colonies in the New World. The overarching goal of the CRN was to develop a new model of collaborative research. We sought to create neither a unified team examining a single set of research questions with a single director, nor a loose umbrella organization that simply gave individual scholars a common forum in which to present their independent research. Rather, the CRN tried to cultivate a research community that would facilitate ongoing, cross-disciplinary, cross-regional collaboration among scholars who would normally have little contact with each other. To do so, we had to overcome both linguistic differences and equally challenging disciplinary boundaries. This was often demanding, but always exciting.

The Russia section of the CRN brought together a diverse range of participants, including North American academics and graduate students studying the former Soviet Union, Russian scholars already immersed in Western social science, Russian academics with few Western contacts or experiences, and Russian

practitioners in government and civil society. Each group is represented in this volume, and each brings a different perspective to bear on the relationships between religion and identity.

Identity and Religion

Religion often forms a fundamental component of identity, but typically not in a simple or uncontested way. Indeed, religious identities may oppose state efforts at identification, be used or manipulated by states, or form the basis of political communities. Moreover, formal religious and state identifications are not necessarily accepted by their intended subjects, but may be resisted, reinterpreted, or adapted into vernacular identifications. Forms and narratives of identity are in a constant state of flux and negotiation despite efforts by both states and religious organizations to stabilize particular preferred versions of them. Nonetheless, identities that are deployed tactically or instrumentally to resist or enable political agendas can display considerable stability if they become widely accepted as markers of group solidarity.

Although it is depressingly common now to hear of the contrasts and conflicts between Islam and Christianity, this volume explores a number of important commonalities between Orthodoxy and Islam in Russia. The established institutions of both religions face challenges from traditional and/or extremist elements. Both religions are actively redefining their relationships with the state and their role in politics. Both religions form key components of national identity for different peoples of Russia. Both religions define themselves in opposition to “others”: to each other, and mutually to Judaism, Catholicism, and Protestantism.

We have included these particular essays in the volume because they explore these differences and commonalities in a variety of contexts. The studies cut across not only geography but time as well, with chapters examining both modern and historical dynamics of religion and identity in Russia. In particular, the chapters belie any simple opposition between Orthodoxy and Islam by illustrating how the same religion may interact with different national and ethnic identities in a variety of ways.

The first two chapters in the collection offer overviews of the broader themes of the book, discussing connections between Orthodoxy and Islam and comparisons among different regions of Russia. The remaining chapters are divided into two groups. Chapters three, four and five focus on Russian Orthodoxy, while chapters six, seven and eight examine Islam in Tatarstan and Dagestan. (We have not included a chapter on Chechnia both because of the complex nature of the conflict there and because substantial scholarship on Chechnia already exists.)

Juliet Johnson’s introductory chapter reviews religious repression during the Soviet period, examining how often-changing state policies affected religious and ethnic communities (and vice versa). It then discusses the ways in which these Soviet-era developments influenced post-Soviet patterns of belief and practice. In doing so, it explores the reasons behind the rapid post-Soviet rise in belief, the persistent gap between high levels of belief and negligible levels of religious

practice among Russian citizens, and the greater extent of belief and practice among many traditionally Muslim peoples (particularly in Dagestan and Chechnia) when compared to ethnic Russians.

The second chapter, by Marietta Stepaniants, examines the effects of the disintegration of the Soviet Union on Russia's social solidarity and self-conception. The break-up sparked widespread discussion among Russians, as they negotiated new concepts of self- and group-identity. The chapter suggests that religion, because of its close ties to particular ethnic groups, is the most powerful basis of community formation in Russia today. It compares the ways in which this community building has occurred among ethnic Russians, Tatars, and Dagestanis, relating the differences to the contrasting histories and political doctrines of Orthodoxy and Islam in Russia.

Chapter three, by Liudmila Gatagova, discusses the development of Russian ethnic and religious identity through the prism of ethnophobias in the 19th century. In particular, the chapter focuses on Russian phobias against Poles (originating from the Polish uprising of 1863), against Germans (as reflected in the media in 1863), and against Jews in the southwestern regions of the Russian empire (after the murder of Tsar Alexander II by members of the People's Will movement in 1881). By "othering" such groups, these ethnophobias reinforced both the identities of, and the lines of demarcation between, Russians and these non-Orthodox nationalities.

Father Georgii Chistiakov offers an insider's and practitioner's view of the modern Russian Orthodox community in chapter four. He argues that while mainstream Orthodoxy is defining itself primarily in opposition to Catholicism and Protestantism, on the religious fringes extreme nationalism, anti-Semitism, and xenophobia have accompanied the effort to forge a distinctive Russian Orthodox identity. Although such trends are explicit outside the Church, insider Orthodox consciousness has also become increasingly xenophobic, closed, and highly intolerant to the other faiths, and to the West in general. Orthodoxy has adopted the image of "the enemy" from Soviet consciousness, demonstrating how political ideology can unintentionally shape religious identity.

In chapter five, Svetlana Ryzhova argues that the Orthodox discourse that constructs and supports Russian ethnicity has escaped the semantic control of priests, bishops, deacons, and theologians, as extremist groups use ideologems (or "semantic blocks") of religious discourse in ways that contradict official Church teachings of tolerance. This chapter shows how politically strategic interpreters manipulate the multiple meanings of these ideologems to construct an intolerant and exclusionary version of Russian identity, focusing especially on their interpretations of the relationship of Judaism to Christianity, the murder of Tsar Nicholas II, and the importance of individual versus collective rights.

Chapter six, by Aidar Yuzeev, examines the role of Islam in forming the Tatar nation. It traces how Tatar ethnic and religious traditions have changed and developed in relation to each other, and discusses the contemporary effects of religious identity on the Tatar political project. During the transition from the 19th to the 20th century, their deeply rooted Islamic identity allowed the Tatar people to

resist Russian attempts to assimilate ethnic Tatars and convert the Tatars to Orthodoxy. In the post-communist period, Islam has again become central to Tartar national identity.

Linguist Suzanne Wertheim examines the role of religion in post-Soviet Tatar sociolinguistic identity in chapter seven. She focuses on three linguistic phenomena: borrowings, naming practices, and accent. Stalin-era language development replaced the majority of Tatar's Arabic and Farsi borrowings with their Russian equivalents, but there is now a movement to return to the "old" borrowings. Religion also plays a role in naming practices, with some observant Muslim Tatars going so far as to rename themselves when their original "international" names do not seem sufficiently Muslim/Tatar. Finally, accent (variation in pronunciation) serves as a marker of religious self-identification, where religiously oriented speakers sometimes pronounce a "super-backed" variant of the phoneme /k/ under the influence of "super-backed" consonants in Arabic.

In chapter eight, Zagir Arukhov, Dagestan's Minister for Nationalities Policy, Information, and External Relations, discusses the ambiguous role of religion in post-Soviet Dagestan. The ethno-cultural closeness of the peoples of Dagestan, their common historical experiences, and their closely intertwined economic life had all traditionally served to stabilize relations among nationalities and religious groups. In the post-Soviet era, this unity among Dagestan's ethnic and religious groups has gradually declined in the face of continued economic instability, falling living standards, an unfinished transformation, and a growing Islamic fundamentalist movement. Yet despite these pressures, Dagestan has so far succeeded in overcoming inclinations toward ethnic separatism, and has maintained institutional and territorial stability.

In the conclusion, Juliet Johnson returns to the broader questions addressed in the individual chapters, with a focus on religion and intolerance. Although religion's power lies in its appeal to traditional identities and practices, Islam and Orthodoxy have changed in response to political challenges, offering new ways for Russian citizens to connect to each other. This religious revival does not necessarily have to take on an intolerant or particularistic cast. However, the historical inheritance of the 19th century, vigorous (if ultimately ineffective) efforts at religious suppression by the Soviet Union, and contemporary political forces have opened a space for extremism and exclusionary forms of religious and national identities in the Russian Federation.

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By its nature many people contributed directly to the CRN, and hence indirectly to this volume. We would therefore like to offer our general thanks and appreciation to all of the CRN participants. A number of organizations and people made more direct contributions to this book as well. The ACLS and the Ford Foundation provided financial and logistical support for the CRN (particularly the Ford Foundation's generous grant for the *Situating Russia: Imperial Spaces, National Boundaries* project). The Dickey Center for International Understanding at

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Chapter 1

Religion after Communism: Belief, Identity, and the Soviet Legacy in Russia

Juliet Johnson

And how believest thou, if thou believest anything at all?
- Ivan, in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*

Many foreigners imagined post-Soviet Russia to be a religious wasteland in 1992, picturing it as a country full of “godless communists” yearning for salvation. I vividly remember a telling scene from that summer. During lunchtime one day, an eager group of young American missionaries, dressed all alike in (ironically) red t-shirts silkscreened with crosses, massed together in front of the *Izvestiia* building on Pushkin Square in central Moscow. As a curious crowd gathered, they began to act out in pantomime the story of the death and resurrection of Christ. Afterwards, they passed out pamphlets proclaiming the “Good News”. The Russian bystanders reacted mostly with amusement, although some took offense. Did these young people not know that Christianity had been introduced to Russia over a thousand years earlier, and that Christian imagery permeated Russian literature, painting, and culture? Moreover, did they not realize that the recent revitalization of religion in Russia had begun not with the Soviet collapse, but with Gorbachev's introduction of *glasnost* and *perestroika* in 1986?

In fact, by 1992 Russia's religious revival seemed firmly underway, with churches, mosques, and synagogues being built, rebuilt, and reopened all across the Russian Federation, and with more and more people publicly proclaiming themselves as religious believers every year. What Agadjanian (2001) has called an “energy of particularism” emerged as the universalistic Soviet identity was openly challenged, and a society-wide search for alternative ethnic and religious identities became both real and necessary. Moreover, the disorder, confusion, and creation of new states with old boundaries after 1991 forced people to rethink who they were and to which groups they belonged. Russian citizens actively sought stability, looking for symbols and identities around which to unite. In this atmosphere, religious belief flourished once again.

Russian Orthodoxy and Islam, historically the two predominant confessions in Russia, were at the forefront of this process. Not only had 70 years of state-sponsored atheism failed to uproot religion, but the Soviet state had not even consistently tried to do so. Despite the state's Marxist-Leninist doctrine that officially considered religion to be the "opiate of the people", the extent of religious repression in practice had been varied, nuanced, and highly dependent upon broader political circumstances. In turn, religious belief, religious practice, and religious institutions had both defied and adapted to the ever-changing state policies.

As James Scott (2003) reminds us, multiple, overlapping, and even contradictory aspects of identity coexist in each individual, with some felt more strongly than others at any given time. So when we observe what appears to be a change in an individual's fundamental identity (for example, from atheist to believer, or Soviet to Russian), we may in fact be seeing a shift in *emphasis* among that person's varied identities in reaction to a change in context. Scott ties this explicitly to state policies: "If, say, the presence of the state and its officials becomes progressively more intense over time, the identity appropriate to interaction with the state will be observed more frequently; actors will deploy it more frequently". From this point of view, for many Soviet citizens a latent religious affiliation may have existed in their "identity kits", but not been activated until religion became more politically and socially acceptable in the Gorbachev era and after the Soviet collapse.

The broader point, however, is that state policies and individual identities are mutually constituted. The state tries to constrain and mold individual and group identities, but alternative conceptions will slip the bounds of what state actors find permissible and comfortable. While reacting to these challenges, state policies (and sometimes ideologies) will undergo change, just as the identities of citizens simultaneously adapt to state pressures and persuasion.¹ Similarly, state actors use carefully chosen *mélanges* of powerful, previously existing symbols of group identity both for self-legitimation and to promote particular conceptions of the nation.

To understand the nature of the post-Soviet religious revival, therefore, we need to examine the fate of religion in the Soviet period, looking at how the state's policies molded and reacted to vernacular practice and vice versa.² Although the

¹ It is also important to remember that the state (official) and the private (vernacular) are not necessarily coherent, fully opposing categories (Forest *et al.* 2004). Bitter debates on identity politics may take place among state actors, while responses to state policies by individuals and societal institutions may include the extremes of full acceptance, violent dissent, and the entire range in between.

² This review primarily discusses Soviet policies towards Orthodoxy and Islam, as these are the two predominant religions in Russia and the focus of this volume. This emphasis should not be interpreted as implying that other religious faiths were not targets of Soviet policy – indeed, minority religions such as Judaism and Catholicism typically came under even harsher repression.