

ORTHODOX RESURGENCE: CIVIL RELIGION IN RUSSIA

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John P. Burgess, Professor of Systematic Theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, devoted a year's sabbatical (2004-05) to immersing himself and his family in the Orthodox Church in St. Petersburg. This paper was presented to the American Theological Society on March 12, 2009. Before coming to PTS he had served in the Office of Theology and Worship in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) And in 1984-85 had spent a year at the Protestant Seminary in East Berlin, GDR. A shorter version of this essay appeared in The Christian Century.¹

Winston Churchill famously said, "Russia is a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma." Any effort to make sense of the place of religion in post-Soviet Russia is equally elusive. From one point of view, the Russian Orthodox Church has successfully reestablished itself as an integral part of contemporary Russian culture. The Orthodox Church enjoys social and political privilege, and today an overwhelming majority of Russians identify themselves as Orthodox. From another point of view, however, Russia is one of the most secular countries of the world. The more than seventy years of Communist rule broke, perhaps once and for all, Orthodoxy's traditional grip on Russian cultural identity.

I write as a North American Protestant theologian trying to describe and make sense of these apparent contradictions. Such an analysis is important if for no other reason that post-Soviet Russia, although no longer driven by Communist ideology about world domination, still aspires to be a great nation. But there are also theological reasons to be interested in these developments, because they teach us something about the complexities of what H. Richard Niebuhr called Christ and culture. What role should the church play in shaping national identity? Where can the Christian community support the state, and where must it raise a voice of warning and even protest? What makes a person religious, and how does faith in Christ relate to forms of religiosity that fulfill particular social or political functions?

Developments in Russia offer a unique angle on the situation that Christians throughout the West share today: life in pluralistic societies in which the church, however respected or prominent, is just one voice among many and therefore always in a minority situation. In coming at these issues, I will draw not only on scholarly resources but also on personal experiences from a sabbatical year in Russia in 2004-2005 and a subsequent visit in the summer of 2006, and will interweave analysis with anecdote, in order to make as clear as possible what it does or does not mean to be Orthodox in contemporary Russia.

I.

On Sunday, March 1, 2009, Kirill, Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, celebrated vespers in Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow. Having been elected and enthroned only a few weeks earlier, Kirill now stood before four thousand people in Russia's largest Orthodox church, located only several hundred yards from the Kremlin. He no longer wore the bright raiments in which he had celebrated the liturgy that morning, but rather a black gown. As the prayers concluded, he suddenly fell prostrate before the congregation and asked for forgiveness.

The outsider might have wondered at that moment, just what was happening. Had Kirill

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been caught in a sexual scandal (it was rumored that his predecessor had once been married? Was he repenting of corrupt business dealings (some had quietly made such accusations while he was still Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad)? Was he apologizing for having cooperated with the KGB during the Soviet era (as was probably true of every priest who had risen to power in the church hierarchy in those years)? Was he confessing the need for reconciliation between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Roman Catholic Church (Kirill's predecessor had nixed efforts by John Paul II to come to Moscow)? Or had Kirill made some innocent blunder in the first days as Patriarch for which he now wished to make amends?

On this same evening, thousands of Orthodox priests across Russia's eleven time zones were falling on their knees and asking their congregations for forgiveness. I had seen the same thing happen in 2005, when I was living in St. Petersburg, studying the state of Christianity in Russia since the fall of Communism. My family and I, though Protestant, attended a small Orthodox church that under the Communists had been closed for sixty years. It did not have the fine, rich furnishings and appointments of Christ the Savior Cathedral. The iconostasis was constructed of plywood, and many of the icons were inexpensive prints with which the congregation would have to make-do until it could afford beautiful hand-painted ones. But a young, dynamic priest was already helping to bring the parish back to life, and now he stood before us—having changed during vespers first from a brilliant golden gown into a dark gown embroidered with golden thread, and then into the plain black gown that he normally wore as he went about his daily work.

Like Kirill, the priest spoke to us about the need for forgiveness, and like Kirill, he fell on his knees and confessed his failures: "I get so busy that I don't always give you the time that you need. I am not always sensitive to your feelings." Everyone in the parish looked up to this man. He was their spiritual leader. They loved him and his family. But here he was on his knees in front of them, humbled and small. "Forgive me, a sinner," he implored. He paused, until the members of the congregation with one voice called out, "God forgives." People then went up to him one by one and personally asked him for forgiveness. They also turned to each other, sometimes embracing, sometimes planting kisses on each other's cheeks, and exchanged the same words: "Forgive me, a sinner." "God forgives."

This ritual on the day known as Forgiveness Sunday marks the beginning of Orthodox Lent. For the next seven weeks, observant Orthodox will keep the Great Fast, abstaining from meat, fish, dairy products, and eggs. They will attend additional church services, such as the Liturgy of the Presanctified Gifts, typically celebrated every Wednesday and Friday with bread and wine consecrated the previous Sunday. They will remember the way of Jesus to the cross and will seek to be reconciled with those from whom they have been alienated, so that they are rightly prepared to take the eucharist. As Lent comes to a climax, they will participate in the events of Holy Week, following Jesus into Jerusalem, waiting with him in the Garden, watching the soldiers beat him and nail him to the cross, and accompanying his dead body to the tomb—until they gather for the Easter Vigil and discover that after weeks of climbing, they have finally arrived at the mountaintop, where they will again turn to each other, now declaring, "He is risen," and responding, "He is risen, indeed."

In the night of April 18-19, 2009, Patriarch Kirill will lead the Easter Vigil in Christ the Savior Cathedral. The church will be filled to overflowing, with more than 10,000 people in attendance, and the service will be broadcast nationally on television. Special places will be reserved for Dimitri Medvedev, President of the Russian Federation, Vladimir Putin, Prime Minister, Yuri Luhzkov, Mayor of Moscow, and their spouses. On Easter Monday, if past years are

any indication, top government and church officials will meet for brunch, at which they will enjoy the special foods, paskha (a cream cheese spread) and kulich (a sweet bread), with which Orthodox break the Lenten fast.

After nearly 75 years of Communist oppression, the Russian Orthodox Church appears to have reemerged as a significant cultural and political force. Even though the Russian Constitution provides for the separation of church and state, Medvedev, immediately after his inauguration on May 7, 2008, proceeded to the Cathedral of the Assumption in the Kremlin and participated in a prayer service in which he came forward to receive blessing from Patriarch Aleksii II and a copy of the Vladimir Mother of God icon, to which Russians over the centuries have turned for protection at times of national crisis. Both Medvedev and Putin identify themselves as Orthodox believers, and both Patriarchs who have served since the fall of Communism, Aleksii and now Kirill, have asserted that Orthodoxy is essential to Russian national identity and social stability.

But the Great Lent and Easter also expose the contradictions of the new Russian Orthodoxy. While Medvedev and Putin will join the Patriarch for Easter, they were nowhere to be seen on Forgiveness Sunday. While they will join in the Easter acclamation on April 19, they did not bow before the Patriarch and the nation, nor did they ask for forgiveness at the beginning of Lent on March 1. Russia's new political leaders cultivate good relations with the Orthodox Church, yet the place of the church in Russian society remains unclear. The reconstruction of Orthodoxy identity in Russia today has its perils, as well as its opportunities.

II.

Up to the time of the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, one would have called Russia an Orthodox culture, in the same way that at least until recently, one would have called the United States a Protestant culture.² Beneath the surface, religious life was diverse, but a particular Christian tradition enjoyed cultural prominence and shaped each nation's basic social institutions and sense of cultural identity. In Russia, Orthodox holy days were national holidays. Orthodox churches dominated every town and village; Moscow itself had been laid out as a holy city, a new Jerusalem.³ Orthodox monasteries attracted thousands of pilgrims, and for many peasants a trip to one of these monasteries for three days of work and prayer was a once in a lifetime experience, equivalent in significance perhaps to the hajj to Mecca for a Muslim.⁴

The czar understood himself to be a defender of the Orthodox faith, although with Peter the Great's abolishment of the patriarchate and subjection of the church to direct state control, the czars also ensured that the church would support their political ambitions. Russian ethnic identity,

² Historians, however, have pointed out that Russia like Western Europe had by the early twentieth century experienced powerful secularizing tendencies, especially among the intelligentsia and people in urban areas. See Hans-Christian Diedrich, *“Wohin sollen wir gehen” — Der Weg der Christen durch die sowjetische Religionsverfolgung: Eine russische Kirchengeschichte des 20. Jahrhunderts in ökumenischer Perspektive* (Erlangen: Martin-Luther Verlag, 2007), 23-24. I am guided by Diedrich in much of the general history that I lay out. Other important historical overviews include: Dimitry Pospelovsky, *The Orthodox Church in the History of Russia* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998); and Nathaniel Davis, *A Long Walk to Church: A Contemporary History of Russian Orthodoxy* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 2003). A seminal book that represents the shift in North America beyond a Protestant culture is Will Herberg, *Protestant—Catholic—Jew: An Essay in American Religious Sociology* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1955).

³ John Garrard and Carol Garrard, *Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008), 80. While I find the Garrards' book to be an insufficient analysis of the place of the Russian Orthodox Church in contemporary Russian society, I draw extensively from their observations and insights in this essay.

⁴ For the importance of Solovki as a pilgrimage site, see Roy R. Robson, *Solovki: The Story of Russia Told through Its Most Remarkable Islands* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), 132-145. Also see my essay, “Community of Prayer, Historical Museum, or Recreational Playground? Challenges to the Revival of the Monastic Community at Solovki, Russia,” *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* (August 2007): 194-209.

autocratic czardom, and the Orthodox faith were mutually supportive, and their tight grip on each other loosened only slightly in 1905 with cautious political reforms, including an edict providing for religious toleration. Further moves towards the separation of church and state resulted in the church's election of a Patriarch in 1917, for the first time in over 200 years and just five days before the Communist putsch in Petrograd!

The ensuing seventy years brought about persecution of the church on an unprecedented scale. In 1914, the Russian Orthodox Church administered more than 50,000 parish churches, 25,000 chapels (in schools, hospitals, orphanages, and other social institutions), and 1000 monasteries (men's and women's) both in Russia itself and throughout the Russian empire (so, including Ukraine, Belarus, and the Central Asian republics). By 1931, the total number of houses of worship had shrunk to 23,000, and by the fall of 1936, to 8000. By 1941, only 100-350 of these churches along with a handful of monasteries remained open.⁵ During this same period, more than 100,000 church leaders (bishops, priests, deacons, monks, nuns, members of other church offices, and associated family members) were killed.⁶ In the 1930s alone, as many as 80-85% of all priests were arrested, the majority of whom perished. By 1939, only four church hierarchs remained free.⁷

World War II brought limited relaxation of the state's anti-church policies, as Stalin turned to the church to help him ignite nationalistic sentiment against the Nazi invaders and, seeking the support of the Western allies, sought to project the image that believers in his country could worship freely. But a new wave of recriminations broke out after his death and with the rise of Khrushchev. Throughout all of these years, parish churches were forbidden any religious activity beyond celebration of the liturgy — there could be no religious education, no social or diaconal work, and no evangelistic or missionary outreach. According to Marxist-Leninist ideology, religion would gradually die out by itself as socialist society developed, but the Communist Party had to support this process by atheistic education and propaganda and restrictive administrative measures. Hundreds of thousands of believers suffered for their faith, and even in those periods when persecution eased, association with the church could disqualify one from university studies and key professions.

By the mid-1970s, a combination of factors contributed to a gradual change of policy. On the one hand, the state discovered that it did not have to eliminate the church, but rather could use it as a tool of state foreign policy, as the Soviet government touted its commitment to peace over and against the aggressive, militaristic West. Church leaders were allowed to travel to Western ecumenical conferences to represent the party line and to demonstrate how it accorded with Christian theology. On the other hand, the Soviet government, having signed the Helsinki Accords, had committed itself, at least in principle, to Western monitoring of its human rights record, including religious freedom. In 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev came to power, and his policies of glasnost and perestroika meant new freedoms for all of society, including the church. Of special significance to the church was permission to celebrate its millennium in 1988. By then, the church administered nearly 7000 parishes, 2000 of which were in the Russian Republic. By 1990, the corresponding figures were 12,000 and more than 3000.⁸

In June 1991, Boris Yeltsin was elected President of the Russian Republic and threatened to pull Russia out of the Soviet Union. When conservative Communist forces attempted a coup in August. Aleksii II, elected Patriarch only a year earlier, decisively allied himself with Yeltsin. The

⁵ Diedrich, 142.

⁶ Diedrich, 144.

⁷ Diedrich, 148.

⁸ Diedrich, 293.

coup collapsed, and by the end of the year, the Soviet Union itself had fallen apart, although the Russian Orthodox Church continued to exist in its previous boundaries. A new Russian Constitution provided for religious freedom and separation of church and state, and Aleksii led the church in a massive program of reclaiming and restoring church buildings and reestablishing religious life. No better symbol of this era was the reconstruction of Christ the Savior Cathedral, which Stalin had ordered destroyed in 1931.⁹

The parish church that my family and I attended in St. Petersburg, the Church of the Icon of the Mother of God Who Is the Joy of All Sufferers, is also representative of this history. In 1922, Father Grigori, the last priest of the Russian Orthodox Church to serve the parish, was arrested and exiled. When he returned in 1924, he could no longer serve in the Joy of All Sufferers parish because it had come under control of the Renovationists, a group of Orthodox reformers friendly to the Soviet officials. Over the next years, Father Grigori was arrested several more times and in 1939, under the pretense of counter-revolutionary activity, finally executed. The Joy of All Sufferers Church was closed, its exquisite golden iconostasis and precious icons were destroyed, and the altar area, the holiest part of an Orthodox church, was desecrated and turned into a military dispensary and later a cultural center, which however helped to save the church's basic architectural integrity, in contrast to other churches in St. Petersburg that were converted into factories and warehouses, even gymnasiums and swimming pools. In 1994, the building was finally returned to the church, and parish life was slowly reestablished.

III.

Today the Russian Orthodox Church is reclaiming its place as an integral part of Russian society. When Aleksii II died on December 5, 2008, commentators reviewed the changes of the last twenty years. The number of monasteries had jumped from 22 to 804. The number of parishes had grown to 30,000 (remember, however, that as many as one-half of these lie outside of the Russian Federation, especially in Ukraine). The number of active Orthodox churches in Moscow alone had risen from 40 to 872.¹⁰ Moreover, the percentage of Russians identifying themselves as Orthodox had increased from 20% to perhaps as much as 80%.¹¹ A recent book that traces Aleksii's achievements is aptly entitled *Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent*. The incomprehensible persecution of the church during the darkest years of Soviet rule is now matched by what seems to many Orthodox believers as nothing less than the miracle of its rebirth.

My own experiences in Russia offer anecdotal confirmation of these statistics. People in our parish told us that in the worst years of Communist persecution, the city of St. Petersburg and its three million inhabitants had only three functioning Orthodox churches (several small cemetery chapels also remained open). Most of the people who attended were the babushki, the elderly, head-scarved women that Westerners came to associate with the Orthodox Church during the Soviet era. Even in the late 1980s, only twelve churches held regular services. By the time my family

⁹ For a fascinating account of the history of the cathedral and the religious and ideological concerns behind its construction, destruction, and reconstruction, see Konstantin Akinsha and Grigorij Kozlov with Sylvia Hochfield, *The Holy Place: Architecture, Ideology, and History in Russia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

¹⁰ See "Russian Church Monasteries Increased Thirty-six Fold, Parishes and Clergy — More than Fourfold under Alexy II," *Interfax* (Jan. 27, 2008). See: <http://www.interfax-religion.com/?act=news&div=5632>.

¹¹ All these statistics, however, are highly imprecise. The Garrards (p. 245) put the current rate at 82%. A 2008 study by the All-Russian Center for the Study of Social Opinion puts the rate at 73%. See the Center's Press Release No. 938 (April 21, 2008), available on-line at: <http://wciom.ru>. A recent *Wall Street Journal* article claims that two-thirds of Russians count themselves as Orthodox. See Andrew Higgins, "Putin and Orthodox Church Cement Power in Russia," *Wall Street Journal* (Dec. 18, 2007). The rate of 20% affiliation at the end of the Soviet period is Diedrich's educated guess (p. 339).

and I returned to the U.S. in 2005, the number had grown to more than 250. Everywhere we saw churches being restored, their gold or silver onion domes again shining brightly. Churches were full of worshippers on Sundays, and many young people and families were in attendance, not only the babushki.

In the summer of 2006, I spent several days at the Solovki Monastery, located only sixty miles south of the Arctic Circle on an island in the White Sea.¹² Founded in the fifteenth century, the monastery came to be one of Russia's most famous. In the late sixteenth century, massive stone walls, twenty feet high and three or four feet deep, were built around the entire complex, marking the monastery's strategic importance to Russia's territorial claims on its vulnerable northwest side. Those fortress-like walls and the monastery's remote location also made it suitable as a prison for the czars' political opponents.

In the early 1920s, even before Stalin came to power, the monastery was transformed into the first Soviet concentration camp, where the Communists refined the principles and methods that they would apply to the entire gulag system. Ironically and tragically, the Solovki concentration camp specialized in holding religious believers. Conditions in the camp were horrendous, and 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, and until their recent restoration, one could still see their blood 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 sketes, smaller, semi-hermetical communities. Two churches in the main monastery complex have been restored and reconsecrated, and memorials have been dedicated to those believers who died a martyr's death here. As many as 30,000 Russian pilgrims and tourists now visit Solovki annually.¹³

This renewal of parishes and monasteries has been complemented by the church's commitment to social needs and issues, as reflected in a major document adopted at a bishops' council in 2000, "The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church." Kirill, now Patriarch, was a 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 military chaplains and religious education in the public schools. The church has privileged access to the mass media; while we were in Russia, Kirill was featured every Saturday morning in a half-hour television program about Orthodox belief and practice. Political leaders, as I have earlier noted, regularly declare the important role of the church in Russian society. Yeltsin's funeral took place in Christ the Savior Cathedral with Aleksii II presiding. Medvedev and Putin attended Aleksii's funeral in the same place, as well as Kirill's enthronement.

The authors of *Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent* conclude that the Russian Orthodox Church "has achieved a cultural dominance akin to Western Christianity's in the United States."¹⁴ They argue that Aleksii adroitly avoided making the church a department of the state, where it would only be manipulated for political purposes and never capture the hearts of the people; instead, Aleksii positioned the church to provide the key symbols for the construction of a post-Soviet Russian social identity. In "an almost perfect parallel to Constantine's slow and careful substitution

¹² See Robson, *Solovki*, for a historical overview of the significance of the monastery.

¹³ See Burgess, "Community of Prayer, Historical Museum, or Recreational Playground?"

¹⁴ Garrard, 245.

of the symbols of Christianity for those of pagan Rome," Orthodox narratives, holidays, and moral values have quietly but inexorably replaced the discredited social ideology of Russian Communism.¹⁵

IV.

But this view is at best half of the story. The other half is that Orthodoxy identity in Russia today can only be reconstructed from a tradition that was decisively broken. Church buildings can be rebuilt and restored; the scars and blank spaces in the social psyche reach deeper. Religion comes to play new functions; traditions have to be recast and even invented.¹⁶

I again reach into my own experience. When I visited Solovki in the summer of 2006, I met Tanya, an ambitious middle-class Russian who lives with her husband in a large apartment in a northwest suburb of Moscow. Tanya is an adjuster for an insurance company. She works long hours but makes good money. She and her husband are able to afford vacations in Greece and Turkey. When I met her, she had come to Solovki 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 historic churches are in the city center, requiring a long commute (an hour or more) for someone like 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 know how to get involved in the life of a congregation, even if she wanted to. Yet, Solovki had touched her deeply. She experienced a spiritual power there that she wanted to hold on to. 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 seemed to sweep her up into something larger than herself, a transcendent reality. She felt that she had stepped into Russia's great spiritual past and had found it still alive in her.

Tanya also knew that as soon as she returned to Moscow, the moment of magic would be gone. She would be consumed again by her work and busy life. She wondered what if anything the experience at Solovki would mean to her long-term.

Sociological studies illuminate the paradoxes of Tanya's religiosity. Most ethnic Russians now regard themselves as Orthodox; perhaps 70-80% have been baptized. Yet, Russians, more than almost any other people in the world, see religion as insignificant for their lives. According to one recent study, 89% of Americans regard themselves as religious; 62% even say that religion is very important to them. In contrast, only 50% of Russians consider themselves religious, and only 7% say that religion is very important to them.¹⁷ The riddle inside the mystery inside the enigma is only heightened when Russians are asked which institutions should shape their moral values: Only 4% mention the church, about the same percentage as those who look to the mass media (whereas the vast majority, 67%, cites the family).¹⁸

The common statistic that I heard from priests in Russia was that at most 5% of the population is regularly in church.¹⁹ St. Petersburg's 250 churches may be full on Sunday, but even if average attendance were 200 in each one (which would be on the generous side, by my

¹⁵ Garrard, 248.

¹⁶ For important reflections on how appeals to tradition function, see Eric Hobsbawm, ed., *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

¹⁷ Stefan Huber and Constantin Klein, *Religionsmonitor: Kurzbericht zu einzelnen Ergebnissen der internationalen Durchführung des Religionsmonitors der Bertelsmann-Stiftung, 2008*. Available on-line at: http://www.bertelsmann-stiftung.de/cps/rde/xbcr/SID-C50E51F8-530A53B4/bst/kurzbericht_internationale_ergebnisse.pdf.

¹⁸ All-Russian Center for the Study of Social Opinion, Press Release No. 789 (Oct. 11, 2007).

¹⁹ Diedrich (p. 340) puts the number at 2-4%.

observations), that would still be only 50,000 people out of a population of more than four million (or barely more than 1% of the population on a typical Sunday). Consider another statistic: Last year, 83% of Russians said that they would not fast at all during Lent, and only 3% that they would fast fully according to the church's rules.²⁰ This year's survey indicated that more Russians intended to keep the fast at least partially (21%) but, like last year, only 3% would keep it fully. The survey also revealed that while most Russians can identify the religious origins of the Great Fast, only 30% see it as a spiritual exercise. In contrast, 24% regard it primarily as a cultural tradition, 19% as a way of cleansing the body, and 22% as having no special meaning for people today.²¹

It is difficult to see one's way through all these statistics, but they do suggest that Russians' relationship to the Orthodox Church is complex. The Orthodox tradition clearly informs their cultural identity. What is less clear is whether it offers them a religious faith. These lines are notoriously difficult to draw, and how one draws them depends on one's own theological orientation. Some theologians may see the reconstruction of Orthodox identity as infusing Russian society with Christian values. Others may believe that the reconstruction of Orthodox identity in post-Soviet Russia offers the church a social space in which to proclaim the gospel. Still others may worry that the reconstruction of Orthodox identity has become a political tool by which the state more successfully manipulates both church and society for its own ends. I will not resolve these questions, but I will try to pose them as sharply as possible in order to make clear what is at stake theologically not only for the Orthodox, but also for Christians in any social context as they seek to relate Christ and culture.

V.

Orthodoxy offers Russians a cultural identity in at least three ways:

1. *In many Russians' minds, to be Russian is to be Orthodox.* They would argue that Orthodoxy is an essential part of Russian ethnic identity. Still influenced by Slavophile ideas of the nineteenth century,²² many ethnic Russians see Catholicism and Protestantism as Western imports that have belonged historically to their invaders from abroad (Catholic Poles, Protestant Swedes or Germans). Moreover, many contemporary Russians are suspicious of Western pluralism and the notion that the individual can construct an identity, including a religious identity (think of Robert Bellah's description of "Shelatism" or Wade Clark Roof's analysis of the contemporary North American religious landscape as a "spiritual marketplace"²³). Rather, many Russians would argue that individuals inherit an historical identity from the ethnos to which they belong. They are more easily able to acknowledge the unique religious identity of other ethnic groups within the Russian Federation (such as Muslim Tartars), than a plurality of religious identities among ethnic Russians themselves.

The Russian Orthodox Church reinforces such ideas when it speaks of the special and unique place of Orthodoxy in Russian history, or refers to the Orthodox Church's "canonical territory," which is presumably off-limits to other Christian churches. It took particular umbrage at John Paul II's creation of new Catholic dioceses within this canonical territory and has supported state legislation to limit Catholic and Protestant missionary work. When it speaks of religious

²⁰ All-Russian Center for the Study of Social Opinion, Press Release No. 938 (April 21, 2008).

²¹ "Каждый четвертый православный россиянин старается блюсти Великий пост – опрос," *Interfax* (March 5, 2009). See: <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=news&div=29136>.

²² For a good review of Slavophile thinking, see Joseph Frank, *Dostoyevsky: The Stir of Liberation, 1860-1865* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).

²³ The phrase is from Wade Clark Roof, *Spiritual Marketplace: Baby Boomers and the Remaking of American Religion* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

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 someone like Alexander Lukashenko, the leader of Belarus and perhaps Europe's last great dictator, can call himself, no tongue in cheek, "an Orthodox atheist." Indeed, a whopping 42% of self-identified atheists in Russia today claim that they are also Orthodox.²⁴ Orthodoxy seems in this case simply to function as a synonym for "ethnic Russian."

This equation of being Russian and being Orthodox must, however, be troubling to a Christian theologian on several grounds. First, it is simply not true historically. Catholicism and Protestantism, while never as large or influential as Orthodoxy, have nevertheless had an historical presence in Russia, in some cases for several centuries. While these churches did often come into Russia by way of immigrants from Western Europe, and while they did function at times to protect their distinctive ethnic identity, they have also helped to shape Russian culture (whoever learns a little Russian soon discovers the number of words that it appropriated from languages like German). Surely, too, there must be a Christian solidarity in suffering, for the Soviet persecution affected these little churches as much as the Orthodox.

Moreover, Orthodoxy itself has not been monolithic. The history of Baptist churches in Russia is instructive. While Baptist missionaries did come from Germany into Russia in the late nineteenth century, small indigenous religious groups with "free church" characteristics (Molokans, Stundists) also shaped the Baptist movement in Russia into a distinctively Russian phenomenon²⁵ (one might also note how an Orthodox culture has shaped the Baptist movement in unique ways, such that Baptists in Georgia have bishops!).

Second, equating Russia and Orthodoxy is theologically troubling to the extent that it underwrites Russian xenophobia. Russian Catholics and Protestants continue to suffer under a general social (and Orthodox) suspicion of being financed and used by Western political interests. They often have difficulty in getting building permits or holding public rallies or evangelistic campaigns.²⁶ Aleksii and Kirill have been careful in their public statements to call for religious toleration and to honor the leaders of other Christian groups, but the Orthodox Church has not yet embraced a vigorous social pluralism that would recognize the necessary and legitimate place of these groups in contemporary Russian society.

Third, equating Russia and Orthodoxy is theologically troubling to the extent that it reduces Christianity to a cultural identity and fails to recognize it as a faith that rests on a personal existential encounter with the gospel. Whether Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant, Christians can surely agree that the heart of their religion lies in individuals' personal conviction of salvation by God's work in Jesus Christ and God's call into a new way of life in communion with the risen Lord. The priests with whom I spoke all emphasized that the most pressing need before the Russian Orthodox Church today was education—so that people would really know the faith and commit themselves to the life and work of the church.

2. Orthodox identity provides for social harmony and unity in post-Soviet Russia. Having taken the place of Communist ideology, Orthodoxy gives Russians a new sense of meaning and worth in a post-Soviet world. While some Orthodox claim that this Russian cultural identity reaches back in time to foundational events that occurred more than a thousand years ago with the baptism of Prince

²⁴ Garrard, 245.

²⁵ Diedrich, 48.

²⁶ See Clifford J. Levy, "At Expense of All Others, Putin Picks a Church," *New York Times* (April 24, 2008).

Vladimir and his warriors in the waters of the Black Sea (988), it is also a recent social reconstruction in reaction to the failures and deficits of seventy years of Communist ideology.

Those historians and sociologists who emphasize the social uses of Orthodoxy argue that the dramatic changes of the last twenty years—the fall of Communism and the integration of Russia into the global marketplace—have left a social vacuum.²⁷ For a time perhaps, Communism successfully propagated powerful symbols and narratives that gave Russians a sense of pride and purpose. They could believe that they were creating a new, egalitarian society on earth. The Soviet Union would lead the rest of the world into true freedom, justice, and peace. But it became increasingly apparent to Russians over the course of the twentieth century that Communism was politically oppressive and economically dysfunctional. As ideological fervor slackened and as the Soviet Union itself began to disintegrate, a whole way of life and set of social assumptions broke down.

As one instance: Marxist-Leninist ideology spoke of Communism's commitment to people's full employment, and the Soviet Constitution guaranteed people a right to work. The reality was more complicated (as evidenced by underemployment and people's frustrations with jobs that were often state-assigned rather than self-chosen), but it was through the workplace that one had access to a wide range of social benefits, such as living space, health care, and transportation (mass transit). With the rise of a free market economy, people suddenly had to fend for themselves. A whole generation of men has been hit particularly hard. These men have had great difficulty in abandoning the social behaviors that worked for them in the Soviet era (lackadaisical work habits, stealing materials from the workplace for personal use or sale, conformity to artificial work plans), and adopting those of the capitalistic economy (self-initiative, self-promotion, entrepreneurship). The result has been not only loss of employment but also personal despair and meaninglessness. Combined with breakdowns in the health care system and widespread abuse of alcohol, the average age at which men die has actually declined since the fall of Communism to 59 years.

More broadly, Russia has experienced tremendous social demoralization. Once able to think of itself as one of the world's two superpowers, 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).²⁸ International watchdog groups classify Russia as among the world's most corrupt places for doing business. Social inequities are huge and stir up public resentment: On the one hand, Russia has the third most billionaires of any country in the world (after the United States and Germany); on the other, pensioners are barely able to survive on the miniscule payments that they receive from the state, and the general economic infrastructure lags decades behind the West (there is not yet a fully-built controlled-access four-lane expressway between Moscow and St. Petersburg, the nation's two largest and wealthiest cities).

Symbolic to me of the new Russia's social dysfunctionality and wild-West capitalism is its citizens' driving habits.²⁹ Everyone seems to be out to get what he can as fast as he can, even if it means running other people over. More than once, my family and I had a car blare its horn at us as we walked along a grid-locked street. We would turn around only to see a car careening down the sidewalk behind us, its driver was ready to shove us aside to gain a few feet on his competition.

²⁷ This is the line of thinking that *Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent* pursues.

²⁸ United Nations Human Development Report 2007/2008. See: http://hdrstats.undp.org/2008/countries/country_fact_sheets/cty_fs_MEX.html.

²⁹ For an interesting book on what Americans' driving habits say about U.S. culture, see Tom Vanderbilt, *Traffic: Why We Drive the Way We Do (and What It Says about Us)* (New York: Knopf, 2008).

In such a world of brute competition and indifference to individual rights, Orthodoxy represents a new, socially-unifying ideology. It promotes personal values that make community possible: committed work, honesty in relationships, and concern for one's neighbor. Its rituals give people a glimpse into a world of healing and peace, in a society that can otherwise be hard and cruel. Russians increasingly want the church to guide them through the major life transitions represented by birth (baptism), marriage (a church wedding), and death (a church funeral). They may know little or nothing of Christian theology, but they sense that Orthodoxy offers them hope for their lives individually and communally. Nineteenth-century Slavophile ideas are also at work here: that Russian identity as shaped by Orthodoxy represents a powerful alternative to Western individualism and social competition.

Robert Bellah has argued for the virtues of American civil religion, and perhaps Russians by way of Orthodoxy are also trying to construct a viable civil religion for themselves. Again, however, a theologian will want to raise key questions. Can a society simply construct a civil religion, or must it rise organically out of a particular people's history? More critically: As Western theologians trace the decline of "Christendom" (as it has come to be called in popular missiological literature), few argue for the possibility or desirability of returning to a world in which Christianity played a role of stabilizing society but the church lost a keen sense of itself as a distinctive community of faith and practice over and against society.

I am not interested here in playing out the debates between Niebuhrian realists and Hauerwasian "resident aliens." All sides can presumably agree that the church will play a responsible social role only to the extent that it is clear about its own theology and way of life. A theologian will have 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 familiarizing people with the Scriptures, the liturgy, and basic church practices (such as fasting!) is still just 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 globalization and the Western market economy.

3. *Orthodoxy gives Russians a sense of national mission.* While contemporary Orthodoxy reinforces Russian ethnic identity and functions as a socially-unifying ideology, its 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, the notion that they are not subject to the vices of the other nations but rather are uniquely able to realize a more perfect political order and have a unique mission to the nations. In both countries, religious language has easily gravitated into political rhetoric.

As historians have often noted, 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 found expression in a reconstructed Russian Orthodox worldview. Americans reach back to the Puritans for key political symbols and narratives (the city on a hill, the light to the nations, an errand into the wilderness, and the new Israel), as well as to the Founding Fathers (inalienable, God-given rights). They have spoken of manifest destiny and "one nation under God."³⁰ Orthodoxy directs

³⁰ See Robert N. Bellah, *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in Time of Trial* (New York: Seabury Press, 1975).

Russians to the fifteenth century, when the notion arose of Moscow as the Third Rome. The first Rome had been overrun by barbarians in the fifth century. The second Rome, Constantinople, fell to the Muslims in 1453. In Bishop Kallistos Ware's words,

Muscovy alone remained. To the Muscovites it seemed no coincidence that at the very moment when the Byzantine Empire came to an end, they themselves were at last throwing off the few remaining vestiges of Tartar suzerainty; God, it seemed, was granting them freedom because He had chosen them to be the successors of Byzantium.³¹

Moscow, then, would be the Third Rome, and the czar had the divine commission to protect and spread the true (Orthodox) Christian faith. As Abbot Filofei of Pskov wrote to Czar Visili III in the early sixteenth century, "[You alone are] 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."³²

This mythology has come back to life in post-Soviet Russia. On September 1, 2004, just a few weeks after my family's arrival in St. Petersburg, the Russian school year was starting up. September 1 in Russia is not just another day of the year. Children dress up in their best clothes, Orthodox churches offer special prayers and blessings for their safety and success, and parents accompany them to school. But on this September 1, 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 interior troops stormed the building two days later, more than 300 people, including 186 children, died.

As all Russia mourned these events, I watched Russian television broadcast footage of President Putin alone in a chapel in the Kremlin with an Orthodox priest saying prayers for Beslan's dead. The priest again and again swung his censer over a table-tray with a crucifix and candles that commemorated the victims. Then the camera panned in close, as Putin, wearing a tired, grim look, crossed himself and bowed. It seemed to me that in that moment, Putin was not simply identifying himself as an Orthodox believer and not simply appealing to Orthodoxy as a source of social unity in the midst of national tragedy. Rather, he was consciously or unconsciously evoking this deep symbolic mythology in the Russian national psyche that places Christian (Orthodox) Russia on one side and godless barbarian hordes on the other.

Putin and Medvedev have been careful to avoid language of religious war, and they have emphasized that the Russian Federation is a multiethnic, multireligious nation in which different groups must respect each other and work together. In the wake of Beslan, Putin called together prominent leaders of various religious groups to express their common commitment to peace. Beslan did not function in official Russian political rhetoric as an example of Christianity versus Islam, but rather of civilized order versus terrorist brutality. But Orthodox notions of Russia's unique historical mission are never far from the surface as the church cozies up to military leaders, bestows awards on them, 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 rapidly increasing.³³

³¹ Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, new ed. (New York: Penguin Books, 1993), 102.

³² As quoted in Garrard, 167.

³³ In recent years, the population of the Russian Federation has been declining by more than 700,000 people each year, making Russia demographically the most quickly contracting country in the West. These losses come primarily from among ethnic Russians; the Muslim population is growing, and some observers now say that Moscow has the largest Muslim population of any city in Europe. It is another question, however, what Islam actually means to these ethnic

Kirill, the new Patriarch, gives expression to Russia's unique historical mission when he today calls for the church (and the nation) to defend Christian moral values both in Russia and in Europe that he believes to be at the heart of Western civilization.³⁴ In this regard, he sounds similar to John Paul II and Benedict XVI, and Kirill's election has spawned widespread speculation that he will make common cause with Rome on this issue.

Theologians will, however, also raise critical questions about these developments. Christians can have a healthy sense of patriotism; even Karl Barth, critical as he was of the German Christians and Nazi manipulation of the church, argued that God might call particular nations to particular missions within the divine economy.³⁵ But if it is not to be captured and manipulated for crass nationalistic purposes, the church must also always be in the position of calling itself, society, and the state to repentance: to honest, contrite recognition of where they do not serve divine purposes but rather their own selfish interests.

It is not yet clear whether the Russian Orthodox Church has the theological and spiritual resources to speak a critical word to the state, and to remind the state of its responsibility to guarantee individual rights and foster international peace and justice. In 1943, Stalin relaxed his draconian measures against the church because he recognized it as a powerful cultural force whose symbols and narratives of Russia's unique historical mission could help mobilize the war effort against Germany. The church won new possibilities for its work, yet remained hopelessly compromised politically. The same opportunity and the same peril exist today.

None of us should render judgment on the path that the Russian churches took under conditions of persecution that no American churches have ever experienced. 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 a Western theologian does wish that the Russian Orthodox Church would provide for more vigorous debate and analysis of these issues than currently seems to be the case. Some critics worry that the church is simply returning to its historic role of aligning itself with the state in return for social and political privilege.³⁶

VI.

The reconstruction of Orthodox identity in Russia is characterized not only by opportunity but also by peril: the peril of underwriting ethnic Russian xenophobia, the peril of being reduced to a civil religion, and the peril of aligning itself too closely with the Russian nation. But in a few concluding remarks, I wish to return to the other side of things: namely, that the social influence of the church is difficult to gauge and may be much less than first meets the eye when it looks out across Moscow from the Kremlin and sees the massive Christ the Savior Cathedral and the dozens of glistening, newly-restored churches.

The Russian Orthodox Church is rebuilding Orthodox culture in contemporary Russia. The new possibilities for church work since the fall of Communism include a wide range of cultural expressions. Surely key to the construction of this new Orthodox culture are not only the social

Muslims. See Michael Akerib, "Where Have All the Children Gone? Can Russia Reverse Its Demographic Crisis?," *Russia Profile* (Sept. 6, 2007), published on-line: www.russiaprofile.org.

³⁴ See Leonid Sevastyanov and Robert Moynihan, "Kirill's Vision of a Great Russia," *The Moscow Times* (Jan. 29, 2009).

³⁵ See Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.4* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1961), 461-462.

³⁶ See Leon Aron, "The Prop of the Knout" [review of Garrard and Garrard, *Russian Orthodox Resurgent*], *The New Republic* (Dec. 31, 2008). Aron harshly criticizes the Garrards' book for failing to see the ways in which the Russian Orthodox Church has accommodated itself to the state.

initiatives that I have mentioned (health care, education, and military chaplaincy), but also the vitality of such phenomena as music (every monastery sells CD's of its chanting, and some forms of traditional chant, such as that of the famous Valaam Monastery, have won a degree of wider cultural popularity), film (a recent movie, *Ostrov* [Island], won popular acclaim for its portrayal of Orthodox monastic life), church newspapers, church museums, church youth clubs, and church summer camps.

Nevertheless, my own on-the-ground observations suggest to me that Russia is not on its way to becoming an Orthodox culture in the way that it was up to the early twentieth century. To be sure, the new Russia will not simply replicate the West. Russia for the foreseeable future will be less pluralistic and democratic than Western Europe or North America; the Russian government will "manage" democracy (a factor that will complicate U.S./Russian political relations) and will favor the Orthodox Church over other religious groups. But I doubt that a reconstructed Orthodox culture in Russia will anytime soon be anything more than one subculture among many. Its larger social and political influence will likely wax and wane, as has the social and political influence of Protestant mainline or evangelical churches in North America, which increasingly have had to recognize that despite their deep roots in U.S. history, they are now but one voice among many in the spiritual marketplace. So, too, many Russians—and many Russian politicians—will formally bow to Orthodoxy and even regard it as special part of Russian identity but will also feel free to try on other, sometimes competing cultural identities. The new Russia is a place not only in which Orthodoxy thrives, but also Western-style consumerism, Western sexual mores, and a multitude of Western-like religious, ideological, and lifestyle subcultures, most of which the Russian state gladly tolerates because none of it threatens its power.

Many Russians, probably most, are not on the way to claiming Orthodoxy as their primary identity.³⁷ Whatever being Orthodox will mean to them, it will not lead them into the deeper experience of faith that every Christian community seeks to proclaim and 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 the church from the hard work of shaping congregations in which people hear the gospel, participate in the sacraments, live with each other according to the new order of things in Jesus Christ, and work for a more just society.

In the end, the opportunities and perils that face Russian Orthodoxy 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 today faces these enduring challenges even as it fulfills special social functions. For better or worse, in a nation still finding its way after nearly 75 years of Communism, Orthodoxy is reminding Russians that they are part 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 on the stage of history to the nations of the world.

³⁷ James M. Gustafson has argued that the same is true of most North American Christians, and that theologians must therefore pay much more attention to the way in which the presuppositions of science and technology shape them. See James M. Gustafson, *An Examined Faith: The Grace of Self-Doubt* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2004).