

The Future of Religion and Religious Freedom in Russia

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Ascertaining the changes in the religious thinking of Russian citizens since the collapse of the Berlin Wall is difficult for several reasons. For one thing, during the Communist era, whatever sociological data there was (and there wasn't much) was collected, treated, and conformed to ideological presuppositions before publishing. There was no independent research or independent sociologists.

When Boris Yeltsin took the helm of the Russian government, the focus of East European scholars and politicians was on the political and economic changes. Russians and Westerners alike marveled that Solshenitsyn's works could now be published in Russia, the monuments of Lenin were crashing down and "private enterprise" appeared to be developing. Sovietologists were rebuked for their inability to forecast these developments. But now that we have reached the end of the 1990's it is clear that Communism and its way of thinking has not disappeared at all and in fact is more tenacious in its hidden forms.

Today we know that the economic changes since the collapse of the USSR are not as great as we had hoped. Central planning may have been crushed, but the free-market system that replaced it proved to be as corrupt and more harmful to Russia than the system it had replaced. Today we feel foolish for our expectation that post-Soviet "democracy", bureaucracy, and capitalism should have resembled its counterpart in the West. In their desire to be "successful" like America, Russian citizens grasped at everything American: politics, economics, and even religion in the effort to emulate the West. As a result we have seen the aggressiveness of Communism transformed into the aggressiveness of nationalism. In the absence of an independent court system, the media, political establishment and private enterprise bears little resemblance to their Western counterparts. Despite the increasing awareness of the limited change in this part of the world, there is one sphere of life where changes in the post-Soviet era is quite real, and that is in the arena of religious consciousness.

In April 1997 Tatyana Kutkavets led a research team of sociologists from the Institute of Sociological Analyses to study how Russian religious thinking has changed since the downfall of Communism. They focused on three things: faith, values, and the political aims of modern Russian Society.¹ They polled 1593 people from all regions of the country and asked a political sociologist (Denis Dragunsky) and a Russian Orthodox theologian (Andrey Zubov) to formulate questions to reflect three attitudes toward religiosity: (1) "Russian Orthodox," (2) "Protestant," and (3) "Secular." Westerners might interpret these categories to imply (1) "pietistic," strict, or even repressive; (2) "common sensical," rational, or "free;" and (3) "secular," cynical, or even anarchical, respectively.

The first question concerned one's understanding of life in general and included three possible answers: (1) "We only live once, so we should not waste time on pleasure" (Russian Orthodox); (2) "We only live once, so we must be responsible for all our actions and do as much as we can in all spheres of life" (Protestant); and (3) "We only live once, so we should eat drink and be merry for as long as we can" (Secular/anarchical).

The sociologists were puzzled to see that most respondents had no difficulty selecting one of these three points of view. In all questions combined, the answer "I don't know" was used by less than 1% of the respondents. The sociologists were fascinated to see the consistency with which the majority of respondents (about 60-65%) consistently selected the "Protestant" position. The repressive "Russian Orthodox" position attracted about 10% of the respondents and the "Secular" position about 25%.

Admittedly, we may be seeing the researchers' own simplified interpretations of "Protestantism" and the "secular spirit", as well as the stereotypes that Russian intellectuals have about the West. "Protestantism" to the Russians means freedom to be responsible. They see in the secular "a-religious" view the individual's privileges without obligations and a corresponding absence of moral strictures to confine the individual will. The Russian Orthodox or strict pietistic position views the burden of the strict, almost ascetic, life shifted to the institutional Church. It is interesting to note that most all intellectuals, including the Orthodox theologian who helped devise the questions, viewed the Russian Orthodox view as the most infantile and paternalistic position of the three.

Another study done at the same time involved the collaboration of Russian and American sociologists. They polled 4000 young people aged 17, 24, and 31, to ascertain their views of private property rights. One question asked whether individuals should be able to (1) sell land, (2) to sell land with restrictions, or (3) to sell land without restrictions. (In Russia the freedom of what one may do with private property is still highly debated and questioned and not at all taken for granted as it is in the West.) In Moscow all land is still the property of the city government. You may own a building on the land, but not the land itself.

Ten percent of these respondents said they were totally against the private ownership of land, 25% said that owners should be able to sell land with no restrictions, and 53% favored private property of land with restrictions.² In Russia, the defense of private

¹ Andrey Zubov, "Yedinstvo i razdeleniya sovremennogo russkogo obschestva: vera, aekzistentsialniye tzennosti I politichesliye tseli" (Unity and division of the modern Russian society: Faith, existential values, and political aims), *Znamya*, 1998, #11.

² Svyatoslav Grigoryev, "Semnadtsatiletniye rossiyane 1997 goda: sochetaniye liberalnykh I antiliberalnykh

property is a mark of liberalism. Opposition to the ownership of property is considered to be “conservative”. Issues pertaining to the private ownership of land in Russia also have a definite religious meaning. Whereas the Western Thomistic tradition contains the idea that land belongs to God and mankind has the right to own, use and sell the land as they wish, the Russian (cultural Russian Orthodox) believes that man cannot “own” land and determine its use as in the Western Thomistic sense.

This helps to explain the Communist media’s argument against private ownership of land. All land belongs only to God. Russian liberals usually answer that (a) Communists are atheists, so they have no right to appeal to God or religion in defense of their viewpoint in any case, (b) that under the pretext of giving land to God, the Communists (past and present bosses of Russia) really have given the land to a handful of agricultural bosses who practically own Communist *latifundies*, or *kolhozes*.

On the bases of these studies we cannot say that 65% of the Russian population are “pro-freedom”, the party of common sense or liberals, 25% are cynics of all sorts, and 10% are “fundamentalist” types of Orthodox, Communists, or collectivists. The majority of respondents favor “freedom of personal expression” and order. But it is understood that personal freedom must take second place to public order, and it also must be one of the means to achieve public order. So the restriction on moving one’s residence without obtaining the necessary *propiska* are not perceived as infringing on one’s personal freedom. In fact it is seen as supporting it. Sixty-five percent of the population (Zubov’s “Protestant” category) agrees that freedom should be limited to increase safety. Ten percent (Russian Orthodox “pietists”) believe restrictions are the essence of freedom, and only 10% (secularists or cynics) are “pro-freedom” in the Western sense. The latter group is looked upon as anarchists.

Let us look at Western notions of materialism and compare them to the Russian reaction to them. Thomas Aquinas, the pre-eminent theologian of the Catholic West, explained that material things are to be considered in two ways: first, in regard to their nature there is the view that material objects are not subject to the power of man, but only to the power of God whose mere will all things obey. God has sovereign dominion over all things. Second, in regard to the usage of things, “man has natural dominion over external things. Through his reason and will he may use material objects for his own benefit. God has directed certain things to sustain man’s body. Therefore man has a natural dominion (*dominium naturale*) over earthly things and has the power to make use of them.”³

These notions are considered to be quite high-minded and academic to most Russians. The issues are perceived as pedantic, dull, unnecessary, and a result of revolution and its accompanying anarchic mindset.

Religious “Revival” in Russia

It is commonly thought that since the collapse of Communism there has been a resurgence of interest in religion--a veritable revival of sorts. This is largely a myth. There are three views of the revival of religion in Russia. These conceptions may be called (1) *Individualistic*, (2) *Institutional*, and (3) *Cultural* conceptions of religious revival.

orientatsiy” (Russian youth: How liberal and anti-liberal positions combine), *Sotsiologicheskiye issledovaniya*, 1998, #8.

³ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, Iia/Iiae, 66.1.

Individualistic: This conception of religious revival is similar to the Great Awakenings in Anglo-American history during the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. Here the essence of revival is found in the conversion and salvation of the *individual soul*. Western missionaries working in Russia often operate with this understanding of revival.

Institutional: The institutional conception of revival is held by the Russian Orthodox Church hierarchs and intellectuals. Both are interested in the development of the Orthodox Church as an institution that maintains power over the individual. The individual is subordinate to the community and is safe only under her umbrella. But there is a difference and competition between the bishops' and the intellectuals' views. On one hand, priests relate religious life and revival to the catechism, the ritualistic living and in rebuilding the churches that were confiscated by the Communists. Intellectuals, on the other hand, stress theological development. This conflict is not of great concern to common citizens. Both cases envision a model with a superordinant/subordinant hierarchy where someone else inside the Church determines the course of the individual's spiritual growth and development.

Cultural: This conception of revival arose in Russia at the beginning of the twentieth century by a group of mainly Russian Orthodox religious thinkers. They called this movement a "religious-philosophical renaissance," stressing the desire to Christianize humanism and to personalize the secular world. They stressed that Christianity is not only a means of salvation, or a means to power, but also a means to creativity in all spheres of life. For them culture and the arts were not regulated by the community and by power, but by the inner drive and life of the individual connected with God. These were very artistic and creative individuals. The Christian pietistic movement within Eastern Orthodoxy as well as the political powers of the Church opposed this conception of revival because it was unpredictable and uncontrollable.

All of these conceptions of Revival are based on an evolutionist, progressive worldview perceiving the future in developmental terms. Protestant Revivalism and Russian Orthodox institutionalism have very different aims, however. Protestant Revivalism aims to reach everyone with the Word of God and convert them. The Russian Orthodox model wants to include the entire nation under its domain of power. This institutional model wishes to organize a ubiquitous net of parishes, monasteries, convents, and theological academies to fulfill its aims and extend its power base. After accomplishing their respective goals, both of these groups need only sustain the *status quo* until the Last Judgement. Psychologically both types believe that Judgement Day or a Day of Doom will come soon after such an accomplishment. The Cultural position of revival understands the future as a potentially endless series of creative acts which will continue after the end of time and which will remain so even in God's Kingdom.

Sociological methods can study and measure the *individualistic* and *institutional* perspectives of revival. Individualistic notions are reported by respondents/believers themselves, and leaders of parishes, churches and theological schools represent the second position. The cultural position, as a cultural movement is more difficult to quantify.

Growth of Institutional Religion

Today's Russian Orthodox Church (it can hardly be called "modern"), judges herself to be the chief player in any religious revival in the land. The explosive growth of interest in religion is often interpreted as proof of Russian Orthodox roots of the majority of the population.

The numerical superiority of Russian Orthodox parishes is *prima facie* evidence of the historic vital force of Russian Orthodoxy. The wide use of Christian and especially Eastern Orthodox mottoes and symbols in Russian literature is seen as irrefutable proof of the indissoluble bonds between Russia and Eastern Orthodoxy. It is a logical and natural deduction of the necessity to give political support to the Moscow Patriarchate. But the turn about is not fair play and the Patriarchate does not feel compelled to support the creative quests of the current Russian intelligentsia. As Iakov Krotov points out, “only the dead nightingale seems smart.”

The growth of religious bodies can be seen by looking at the official numbers of legally registered religious communities in Russia. In the last two years the numbers of registered religious bodies has grown from 5 to 10 percent. However, measuring growth of the denomination in terms of percentages is often misleading. For example, the largest growing group was the Presbyterians with 430% growth. This was due to the activity of Presbyterian missionaries from South Korea. Among non-Christian groups the fastest growing group was the Unificationists who grew 700%. This sounds like a fantastic figure until you realize that in 1997 the Moonies only had one group, and in 1997 they had 7.

In 1997 there were 54 registered denominations or confessions in Russia. The Moscow Patriarchate brand of Russian Orthodoxy had the most churches at 7,195. Alternative Russian Orthodox confessions included Old Believers with 164 churches, The Russian Orthodox Free Church had 98 churches, and The Only True Russian Orthodox Church, 26 churches.⁴ **The Roman Catholic Church had 183 congregations , and The All-Russian Union of Baptists was the fastest growing Protestant denomination with 677 groups. The Union of Evangelicals had 248 groups, Pentecostals: 351, and Apostolic Pentecostals: 22. Seventh-day Adventists had 222 congregations, Presbyterians: 129; non-denominational Protestants: 213, and Charismatic: 136.**

Non-Christian groups included the Buddhists with 124 groups, Jews with 80, and Muslim with 2,494. New Religious Movements (NRMs) were quite small. As indicated, the Unification Church had 7 groups, Jehovah’s Witnesses: 129, and Mormons: 9. We have no reason to think that some denominations underestimated their numbers. Very few groups, like *katakombniki* (Russian Orthodox Church in the Catacombs) totally reject government registration on principle—but there are very few of them.

Another difficulty attempting to quantify growth of religious groups in Russia. The Moscow Patriarchate, the dominant group in Russia, states that she has more than 18,000 parishes—which is twice as many as are registered. The discrepancy exists because now more than half of all Russian Orthodox churches has not registered the community responsible for them.⁵ There are some good reasons for this: (a) to cut red tape. Neglected churches may be restored to rightful owners more quickly if they do not register. Most of them have been nearly completely ravaged after decades of abuse, being used as shelters for pigs, cows and horses, dairies, and swimming pools, etc. (b) The second reason for not registering is to maximize the autonomy of parishioners. In the early 1990s many communities defected from the Moscow Patriarchate and joined the Russian Orthodox Free Church because of their discontent with official Patriarchal politics. Now the Patriarchate has taken steps to ensure that the Patriarchate will not lose control of church property and the community of believers attached to it. Consequently, all church property is legally the property of the *Moscow Patriarchate*, not of the

⁴ *Nauka i Religiya*, 1997, #1, p. 35.

⁵ In Russia, to operate an organization legally, you must specify who is responsible for the organization, or under whose auspices the organization functions.

parish. Defectors today are forced to leave everything to the Patriarchate and start over building a new church if they want autonomy—a near impossibility due to secular and church powers. Many churches and monasteries are registered as *podvorya*, meaning that it is the direct property of the bishop or priest himself. I expect that we will soon see laws prohibiting individual priests to register churches in their own names as well.

The Moscow Patriarchate actually owns nearly 20,000 churches. The average capacity of each church is less than 1,000 people and most are quite a bit smaller. No more than three services may be held in each building on a given Sunday. City churches generally are limited to two services. That provides a maximum number of about 20 million churchgoers within a population of 140 million people: or about 28%.

However, things are not as they may seem. Moscow, which is more “Russian Orthodox” than any other city in Russia, has more than 300 churches for a population of 8 million. Easter is the highest holy day of Orthodoxy...every bit as important as Christmas is to Westerners. During Easter of 1998, 170,000 people attended church. This statistic is pretty reliable because the Ministry of Internal Affairs had the militia guarding the church buildings during the all-night services and they counted every member in attendance. This provides a figure of only 2.1% of the population attending services. In comparison, a staggering 4 million inhabitants of Moscow rushed to the cemeteries to commemorate the dead during the Easter Sunday service—a *practice prohibited by official Russian Orthodox doctrine*. These numbers are quite significant and there is a message here. Various polls consistently agree that 2-3% of the population regularly attends the Russian Orthodox Church. This is much more than the numbers attending ten years ago by about ten to twelve times. Still, this is quite a low level compared to non-Communist countries, however secularized they are.

Patriarch Alexy II boldly claims that 90% of the Russian population is Russian Orthodox. This is quite an exaggeration. Russian Orthodoxy is certainly the largest of religious groups, but claims of this magnitude are highly misleading and exaggerated. In comparison, all other denominations are so small as to go practically unnoticed by the polls. For example, studies show that less than .5% of respondents claims to be Roman Catholic or Protestant believers combined. There are just too few of them to be noted in reports.

Fortunately, it is possible to trace the level of religiosity in Russia going back for decades. The Communists kept such data since the 1970s and the results are generally considered nothing short of fantastic. The average level of religiosity among the populace was at least 10%. This was thought by believers to be extremely high, after so many years of the state-sponsored pogrom of atheism. VtsIOM has been measuring religiosity since 1988, and the following figures demonstrate how religiosity has grown since the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁶

1988 – 18.6%
1991 - 39%
1993 - 43%
1995 - 64.2%

Below are results from another study that are consistent with VTsIOM’s above:

⁶ Viktor Garadzha, *Sotsiologiya religii*. Moscow, 1996, p. 226.

		Religiosity ⁷				
		1989	1993	1994	1996	1997
		N = 1300	N = 1930	N = 2957	N = 2404	N = 2406
Unbelievers		65%	40%	39%	43%	37%
No Trust in						
Church	no data	17%	16%	27%	30%	
Russian						
Orthodox	30%	50%	56%	44%	48%	
Trust						
ROC						no data 57%
						53%
						39%
						37%

According to Dubin, all studies of religiosity consistently report three findings: (1) believers tend to be female, (2) older than 55 and (3) tend to live in Moscow and St. Petersburg.

After 1995 the growth of religiosity seems to have abated. Atheists now constitute about 10% of the population, and 30% are uncertain about their beliefs. Most respondents claim to be "Russian Orthodox" because for them to believe in God is synonymous with being Russian Orthodox. However, they don't go church, nor are they interested in Christian teachings. Sergei Filatov, sociologist from the U.S. and Canadian Institute, says they are basically "uninformed" Orthodox.⁸

What are the reasons for the tremendous growth of religiosity during the mid-nineties? Two main factors are pointed out by Russian sociologists: (1) religion has become a symbol not so much of "spirituality" as much as an ethical opposition to communism; (2) religion has replaced Marxism as a sort of ideological shelter, a new common value to believe in, however it is understood.

Russian Orthodox sociologist Aleksander Schipkov states that both arguments are misleading and "vulgarily materialistic...Religiosity was simply transferred from one generation to another."⁹ But this contradicts the fact that most believers are converts and that the older generation is more atheistic than the youth. Some scholars think that the apparent religious "boom" of the mid-1990s in Russia was the result of *political* liberation, rather than the *missionary activities* of Western and indigenous missions.¹⁰ Now

⁷ Data taken from Boris Dubin, *Religiya tserkov, obschestvennoye mneniye* (Religion, Church, public Opinion) *Svobodnaya mysl*, 1997, November, p. 96.

⁸ Personal interview with Sergei Filatov, 1994. (SG)

⁹ Aleksander Schipkov, *Vo chto verit Rossiya (What does Russia Believe?)* Moscow, 1998, p. 5.

¹⁰ Cf. Sharon Linzey, *Directory of Indigenous Christian Organizations of the Former Soviet Union and East Central Europe*, Evanston, Illinois: Berry Publications, Inc. 1996.

missionary activities take place on a checked scale, but they are not generally very fruitful because the religious revival and of changing values in Russia, is largely a thing of the past.

Personal Revival

The quality of religiosity may be evaluated by studying the frequency of church attendance. This statistic gives a very different picture than the data shown above.

		Church Attendance ¹¹				
		1991	1993	1994	1996	1997
Once/mo	5%	5%	7%	7%	5%	
Several						
Per/yr	20%	35%	28%	17%	16%	
Less than						
Once/yr	--	--	21%	16%	14%	
Never						65%
						45%
						43%
						60%
						62%

There are no traces of a religious revival evident when looking at church attendance. Those who attended church before continue to go. Whatever increases in church attendance there may have been was only temporary. Statistics do not pick up the relatively small figures of those who joined Protestant groups in the last few years, however. In general, we can say that Russian society is not simply in transition from Communism to democracy as the West knows it. Russia is in a state of “stable instability”. Former values have been lost. One of the most striking examples is the tremendous growth in the suicide rate of Russians. In 1990 the number of suicides was .334 per 1000 persons. Since 1996 the rate has been .53 per 1000. The growth of suicide has been higher in the villages than in the cities and higher among men than women. In 1990 the proportion of men to women’s suicides was 3.9 to 1. Now it is 5.3 to 1.12 **Orlova thinks that this growth can be explained by the massive loss of the meaning of life.**¹³ Emile Durkheim calls these “anomic” suicides.¹⁴

¹¹ Dubin, 1997, p. 99.

¹² Orlova I. “Samoubiystvo – Yavleniye Sotsialnoye” (Suicide as a social phenomena), *Sotsiologicheskiye issledovaniya*, 1998, #9.

¹³ See Victor Frankl, *Man’s Search for Meaning*, New York: Washington Square Press, 1985.

A Look at the Russian Orthodox Church in Light of the Polls

In April 1995 the Central Institute of Public Opinion (VTsIOM) conducted a poll of 1,500 people regarding their views of the roles of the Russian Orthodox Church. Thirty-three percent of the respondents thought that it was the responsibility of the Russian Orthodox Church to "save" its country in difficult times. Twenty-three percent disagreed with this notion and 44% hesitated to answer the question at all. Fifty percent thought that the Church had little influence on politics and morals and 19% thought that its influence was "large". Sixty-eight percent felt that people wanted to be linked with the Church and faith, but the number of actual believers was small.

The majority of people felt the Church to be an important social institution that (1) embodies nationality. Development of Church institutions is connected with the general development of the country. (2) Tolerance of religion is an important aspect of state deference to religion, and the Moscow Patriarchate is the cultural symbol of religion in general. State deference to religions shows the degree of state deference to freedom in general these days. (3) The Church embodies an all-embracing ideology and as such is a peril to secularism, freedom, and rationalism. Cults are also viewed as a peril to secularism, freedom, and rationalism, and symbolize this side of religion. But Russian Orthodoxy and Christianity are looked upon as potential enemies to freedom of thought and expression of personality.

These three attitudes embody three different values of the mass consciousness of Russians: the value of nationality, the value of religious freedom, and the value of secular freedom. The order or hierarchy of these values, however, is not clear.

In general the "simple people" of Russia are not as uneasy about freedom as are the intellectuals. They don't see the Church as a real danger to freedom of thought. They feel that there is a safety device that will prevent the Moscow Patriarchate from becoming fully identified with the state. Inside the Church itself, the necessity of faith is obvious now even to the most nationalist elements. But in this culture, it is thought to be out of control and without any sense of order. (This may be due to the communist mentality that is accustomed to controlling all expression and activity.)

The confusion of mass thinking as it pertains to the various cults and sects is evident. During the last presidential campaign political maneuvering revealed an attitude of open enmity toward all non-Russian "cults". (All non-Russian Orthodox religious groups are considered to be cults whether or not they fit the sociological description.) While some politicians demonstrate tolerance toward cults, public opinion is always against them as well as non-Russian religions, against demonstrative tolerance, and against attempts to use state force against them. Yeltsin embodied an ideal position regarding religion: he gave formal signs of respect to the Moscow Patriarchate, but nothing more.

The Patriarchate may demonstrate its contempt for public opinion by defrocking Fr. GlebYakunin (former Parliamentarian and outspoken dissident) or refusing to expel KGB agents from the Church hierarchy after it was revealed who they were. Although the majority of clergymen are anti-Semitic and anti-intellectual and hardly know Church theology, the Church cannot be officially or openly anti-Semitic, nor can they openly condemn the followers of assassinated Fr. Alexander Menn whom they loath. The public will criticize the Moscow Patriarchate, but people (even intellectuals trained by the Bolsheviks) tend to subordinate theoretical criticism to practical passivity. Simple people or the

¹⁴ Emile Durkheim, *Suicide*, New York: The Free Press, 1966.

commoners will be strongly anticlerical as in any other century of Russian history. But they will all baptize their children in the churches of the Moscow Patriarchate now that it is no longer forbidden, and will overwhelmingly look to the Church as the symbol of their national and cultural identity. On the whole, Russia remains a country of atheists, but citizens look to the Church in general, and the Moscow Patriarchate in particular, to which they maintain a modest respect, as the cultural leader of Russia.

The Battle of the Russian Orthodox Church regarding the "Cults"

In the Russian language the word "cult" (*kul't*) means "worship". The word retains the same positive connotations as the words "culture" and "cultivation" (of land). In fact, "culture" means much more in the Russian language than it does in Western languages. It means "mindset," "mentality," and "civilization". Yet, the word "civilization" to a large extent has negative connotations in Russia. "Civilization" is something that has been imported from the West to replace the indigenous culture of Russia. Russians have a romantic view of their heritage and tend to view "civilization" as something mechanical, "unspiritual" (in the Russian sense), "Western," and in opposition to "natural" progress.

It was not until 1956 that the term, "cult," took on negative connotations in Russia. That was the year Nikita Krushchev accused Stalin of promoting *kul't lichnosti*, the "cult of personality". He used the term "cult" as a substitute for "worship" to show that Stalin was looked upon as an idol. The idiomatic expression "personality cult" is still alive in Russia. But it is now a cynical saying that refers to a person's baseless pride and arrogance. Christian preachers have often compared the cult of Stalin with religion, mocking communism as a kind of false church. This mocking has backfired on Christianity because now many Russians reject Christianity itself as a sort of ideology and personality cult, saying that God, as he is depicted in the Old Testament, appears as cruel and totalitarian as Stalin does.

In the mid-1990s American missionary organizations brought numerous books about cults to Russia. Translators who were chosen on the basis of confessional identities attempted to translate these books into the Russian language. Missionaries searched primarily for "born again" believers to take on the task of translating and only secondarily were concerned with their professional qualifications. As a result, translators literally translated "cult" as the Russian word, *kul't*, and this uncommon word began appearing in the mass media. The term *sekt* is the more acceptable, and among academicians, historians and sociologists, *sekt* is used to designate what Westerners mean by the word, "cult".

The history of Russian terms for religious dissent is complex. Peter the Great introduced new terms and concepts relating to religious dissent at the beginning of the eighteenth century. The meaning of these terms and concepts changed radically under communism and state atheism. This situation is extremely complicated now because the new terms co-exist with the older terms and new meanings of the older words now co-exist with their older definitions.

The government still officially uses and applies the term *sekta* (i.e., cult) when handy. Any religious organization that tries to avoid contact with the government and maintain autonomy is labeled as "cult". Terms used by the government for religious groups should not be taken lightly. Terminology spells out policy.

The Religious Freedom Act

When *Gorbachev first introduced Perestroika and Glasnost*, it was looked upon in the West as an abrupt change in religious politics. However, those policies were originally designed for public (Western) consumption, and were not actually intended to change social and political policies much at all. President Yeltsin made clear in his 1994 autobiography that Gorbachev was himself surprised that things got out of control and Communism came crashing down.¹⁵ **In any case, religious freedom was finally granted the citizenry. By 1997 it became obvious even to Westerners that these changes were only cosmetic and temporary. Communism and atheism had been set aside and buried, but the policy of supporting and persecuting certain religious organizations remained.**

We cannot address the future of religion in Russia without focusing on the latest Religious Freedom Act and ask what this Act portends for the future of religious groups in Russia. In October 1997 the Religious Freedom Act was approved by the Parliament and signed by President Yeltsin. This Act seriously restricted what is commonly called the “freedom of conscience” of indigenous and foreigners alike because it mandated that only religious groups in existence for fifteen years could be legally registered. It divided religious organizations into two categories: (1) those called “religious groups” with no right to own property, and (2) religious organizations” with full rights. This law was justly criticized by Russian and Western defenders of human rights and judged to be a victory for the Moscow Patriarchate in its struggle to dominate society.

The Religious Freedom Act of October 1, 1997, which replaced the more democratic Act of 1990. The new law restricts the rights of foreign missionaries and all newly established religious groups. The best proof of such policy is “The Conception of the National Security of the Russian Federation,” officially approved by Yeltsin on December 17, 1997 as a governmental program. The policy applies to the activities of the FSB (Federal Security Bureau and former KGB and GPU). It states:

The activities of the Russian Orthodox Church and churches of the other confessions play an important role in the preservation of traditional spiritual values. At the same time different religious cults [*sekty* in original Russian text] play a destructive role. They are a great danger for the life and health of the Russian citizens and often screen illegal activities.

What is meant by “illegal activities?” Espionage. The old communist phobia of spies resurrected. Activities of American missionaries are ascribed to financial motivations and tasks of the CIA; activities of South Korean missionaries in Sakhalin are ascribed to the orders of secret services of the Japanese government. Thus the word “cult” has received one more meaning: a tentacle of foreign power.

Since the State Duma of the Russian Federation passed the new Religious Freedom Act and President Yeltsin signed the bill, Western Protestants now know the truth of Yeltsin’s religious rights rhetoric of the past years. Both Yeltsin and Gorbachev may possibly have never been sincere or rational liberal democrats at all, but merely defended “democratic freedoms” when it was politically advantageous.

The passage of this bill has had disastrous effects on Orthodox-Protestant relations. Only the most gullible of Protestants still believe in the democratic good will of the Russian government and its authorities. Many Protestants now feel that the Moscow

¹⁵Boris Yeltsin, *The Struggle for Russia*, New York: Random House, 1994, pp. 16ff.

Patriarchate is waging war against them. Visas are good for only three months at which time Western missionaries must leave the country and re-apply for new visas. Religious communities have had their legal statuses reversed, and contracts for rental of public halls and worship facilities have been declared to be null and void.

Of course, restrictions on the various confessions and denominations will vary by region. Indigenous Protestants will likely return to the status quo of the communist era when they kept low profiles and made few demands on society. American Protestants may leave Russia voluntarily, or become “domesticated” by turning much of the control of the local churches over to local Russian leaders who most certainly understand the workings of Russian society better than they. This is actually not a bad idea. Domesticated indigenous religious groups do not irritate the Russian Orthodox Church and secular authorities nearly as much as independent groups who are free from their control—unless, of course, it is obvious that those indigenous groups are receiving good amounts of money from the West. This latter situation invokes envy on the part of the Orthodox who do not receive such funds. In retaliation, they could very well find ways to persecute these groups. The newly organized Protestant groups who choose to jump through the numerous hoops enroute to registration (without resorting to bribes) and are willing to tolerate severe restrictions of their rights for fifteen years, may eventually be accepted by the government—assuming it is the same government that they started their registration process and official relations with in the first place. Of course, this is the big question. Life in Russia is currently unstable, depression has set in among the citizenry, and there is fear about the future. When one’s own savings are lost by defaulting Russian banks and money laundering, when the value of pensions are cut, and wages are significantly slashed due to the devaluation of the ruble, the need to survive supercedes any need for religious freedom. It is not just the Church that suffers when national problems are so pervasive, *everybody* suffers.

In the fierce debate surrounding the new Religious Freedom Act, the issue of “totalitarian cults” was a major focus. The Russian Orthodox Church pushed for the restriction of religious freedom on the grounds that “the simple Russian people are defenseless to the onslaught of totalitarian cults.” On November 18, 1998 there was a meeting of religious leaders in the Presidential house on Staraya Square. The Presidential Committee for Collaboration with Religious Organizations met to discuss the numerous anti-missionary laws that have been adopted in thirty regions of Russia. The General Prosecutor of Russia declared all of these laws to be unconstitutional for violating the constitutional right of the freedom of religion. Valentin Yumashev, head of the presidential administration, recommended to the committee to vote against these laws. But Metropolitan Yuvenaliy Poyarkov, vicar of the Patriarch, defended these unconstitutional and discriminatory laws as a “natural and necessary reaction of self-defense.” Poyarkov said that one could not put Russian Orthodoxy on an equal basis with foreign missionaries who came to Russia with money and experience.¹⁶

Because the Moscow Patriarchate can’t tell the difference between “totalitarian” cultic groups and the tolerant, they tend to lump them together. Defenders of religious freedom respond by cynically calling the Moscow Patriarchate the worst possible example of “totalitarian cults”.

Although it succeeded in enforcing the restrictive Religious Freedom Act, the Russian Orthodox Church hasn’t yet become the

¹⁶ Ivan Arakelyan, *Russkaya Mysl*, November 28, 1998, p. 21.

“official” state Church in the full sense of the term. Its political influence is not as great as it would like, though it has a presence at all important state meetings. The Church does not speak out against abortion, though that is its traditional stance. And it receives only those privileges that do not hinder the interests of the secular elite.

Most Russians consider the debate over religious freedom to be a fruitless debate over a non-existing God. They focus on the economic and social breakdown of the country and their chances of survival within it. According to the Russian Center for the Standard of Living, 79 million of 147 million Russians now live in poverty. The new religious freedom law will affect only small “insignificant” religious minorities and therefore is not of great importance to the general populace.

There is always the possibility that Western Protestants may be forced to leave Russia permanently. In an unstable political environment—which has been the state of Russia since the collapse of communism—this has always been the case.

This does not mean that dialogue and partnership is impossible between Protestants and the Russian Orthodox. But it may mean that the quality of dialogue will suffer depending on who is talking to whom. With the Religious Freedom Act being applied each day in various new ways in new locations by differing local authorities, the Moscow Patriarchate may look triumphantly upon foreign Christians who lost the religious freedom battle. It is no longer incumbent upon the Moscow Patriarchate, for example, to “dialogue” with anyone. There was always an underlying degree of resentment on the part of the Russian Orthodox Church when it was humiliated into meeting as equals with any minority religious group. They are not accustomed to the egalitarian values of democracy, and they certainly do not feel compelled to humiliate themselves by taking small sectarian groups seriously.

Cults such as the Krishnaites and Unificationists will likely suffer the most severe restrictions because they are fewest in numbers and can easily be dealt with. American Protestants who have been unconcerned about the cults may have made a fatal mistake. They have not understood that despite all the educational seminars they stage to educate the leaders of Russian Orthodoxy, they are still numbered with the cults.

As stated earlier, the new Russian Law changes the whole context of dialogue between the Russian Church and foreign Protestants. The spirit and attitude of the established Church may negatively impact independent theological research and grass roots interconfessional contacts and relations. Russian Orthodox theologians, teachers of Sunday schools, and church historians will likely come under the control of the Church hierarchy. The new law forbids independent religious education. It may be a matter of time before all non-commercial and non-governmental organizations will again be re-registered in order to make all religious organizations come under the umbrella of established and acceptable religions and churches. Operating under the confines of this intrusive law may make for cold and inauthentic dialogue.

The future of Western Protestant missions may depend upon whether they are considered to be newcomers or whether they have an indigenous flavor and history attached to them. If they have recently begun their work in Russia, police control may resemble the treatment of foreigners during the communist era. “Tent-making” works will likely not protect missionaries, and the communist inspired practice of bribing officials to carry on meetings and engage in other works will likely be brought to a halt if they aren’t already.

It may be too late for Western Protestants to “indigenize” their missions. But if it is not too late, they should now do what should have been done long ago: team up with local indigenous Christian bodies and work through them with the idea of eventually turning the ministry over to the nationals. And they should do this without delay.

Conclusion: the Future of Religion and Religious Freedom in Russia

Russia is now standing at another crucial moment in history. Feudalism (transition of power from central government to regional leaders) of the country will deepen, and the autonomy of national regions will grow. The lack of reforms after the collapse of communism led to the profound economic crisis in 1998. Instead of giving people freedom of economic behavior, the government has used the Serbian crisis to arouse nationalistic feelings. The active minority may lead the passive majority, who is tired of life since no changes have been realized. Such was the case in Germany in the 1930s.

There is little likelihood of electing a reformist President to implant democratic ideals in different fields of life, including the religious. The short period of freedom between 1990-95 resulted not from deliberate reformist policies, but from the downfall of classic Bolshevism from its inner weakness, including corruption.

One possible scenario might be a continuation of the present religious situation in Russia. This is called the “African scenario” by Russian politologists who compare Russia with the Upper Volta with the addition of the H-bomb at her disposal. The crucial factor in the fate of this or that religious organization will not be the degree “foreignness” or “indigenousness”. Under this scenario any religious movement may be persecuted simply as a scapegoat. For example, the Jehovah’s Witnesses became a symbolic enemy of the Russian Orthodox Church as they were during the Communist era. This explains why Russian Orthodox and secular authorities now hand in hand bait the Jehovah’s Witnesses. Religious development may be handicapped as a potential rival to the one that is close to the heart of the local authorities. The most persecuted group in Russia today are not the Jehovah’s Witnesses, Mormons or Pentecostals, but none other than the Russian Orthodox Free Church, against which the police act directly while bypassing the court system altogether.

It is important that in modern Russia where all resources are in the hands of state officials, persecution may arise not only in the form of direct aggression, but in the form of passive unfriendliness. The mayor of any city may verbally order his people to refuse to rent a hall, or sell a piece of land, and then the religious organization will forever be confined to the walls of someone’s private flat. Even if they have money, the leaders of a congregation may be helpless. Oddly enough, in certain areas the Moscow Patriarchate is among the victims of such passive persecution. In Tatarstan, Yakutiya, and Ekaterinburg officials refuse to aid the Russian Orthodox Church, but instead assist Islam (Tatarstan), paganism (Yakutiya) or Buddhism (Ulyanovsk). And we must remember that the penetration of Protestant missions in modern Russian society is overall rather insignificant.

The second possible scenario for the future of religion in Russia will mean real catastrophe. Again, the criteria will not be the “foreignness” of this or that religious movement, although religious movements which demonstrate “alien” influence, (Western influence from Mormonism to Scientology) could be banned immediately and quickly. The rise of Primakov-Zhirinovskiy type leaders will mean the

extermination of all Russian indigenous groups that are not completely subservient to state authorities in all areas of life. For example, now in Russia there are two kinds of religious movements: "nomenclature-oriented," and "independent". Leaders of "nomenclature-oriented" Muslims and Protestants (not to mention Russian Orthodox) condemned the "NATO aggression" in Serbia. Independents either remained silent (as Protestants tend to do) or even dared to support the Kosovars like some Muslims have. In the last few years state officials and their assistants in the media have used the term "fundamentalist" to designate those believers of any confession who dared to have their own opinion on political issues. Some Russian politologists and scholars feel that the ideological basis for a future persecution may be in place. Citizens are either bracing themselves or turning a deaf ear to one more round of persecution grown all too accustomed to.