

# 'MILITANT PIETY': FUNDAMENTALIST TENDENCIES IN THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX BROTHERHOOD MOVEMENT

by Stella Rock

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## Introduction

As the Patriarchate's newspaper observed in 1990, "Brotherhoods appear at critical moments in the life of the Church and society."<sup>1</sup>The brotherhoods movement in Russia gained particular strength in two critical periods; during the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth, as "bearers of the official politics of the Great Moscow Princedom"<sup>2</sup>, and in the 1860's –1920's, when they were revived to struggle with heresy and sectarianism,<sup>3</sup>and then with the new currents of revolutionary thought. The revival of the Brotherhood movement that occurred in the 1980's and early 1990's reflected a complex response of Russian believers, both lay and clerical, to the newfound freedoms of the so-called *glasnost* and 'transition' periods. Lay believers, mostly moved by a desire to restore the material and spiritual fabric of Orthodox life after decades of repression and official atheism, recreated or initiated brotherhoods around individual clerics or projects, such as the restoration of a local church or the establishment of a Sunday School. The creation of the Union of Orthodox Brotherhoods in 1990, instigated by the Patriarchate to coordinate the activities of flourishing lay organisations, marked in some ways the spiritual peak of the movement. Despite a promising beginning, the movement has been plagued by the xenophobia, antisemitism, intolerance and political conservatism visible in many areas of the

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1 *Moskovskii tserkovnyi vestnik* No. 23 (41) October 1990.

2 Archpriest Ioann Sviridov "Est' li mesto bratstva, v sovremennoi zhizni Russkoi Tserkvi?" *Russkaia mysl'* No.4061 19-25 January 1995 p.16.

3 *Polnyi pravoslavnyi bogoslovskii entsiklopedicheskii slovar'* (Moscow 1992) Vol.1, col.407.

Russian Orthodox Church, and the Union of Orthodox Brotherhoods has arguably become a symbol of the worst aspects of post-Communist Orthodoxy.<sup>4</sup>

Various commentators have attempted to find a label that will appropriately cover these negative traits prevalent within the contemporary Russian Orthodox Church. Collectively, they have been described as 'Black Hundredism',<sup>5</sup> 'clerical fascism'<sup>6</sup> and 'Russian Orthodox fascism',<sup>7</sup> terms that have very specific resonances and are not broad enough to cover the spectrum of ideas indicated. Recently, 'fundamentalist' - a term that has attracted a good deal of criticism and debate, although not in the Russian Orthodox context - has become a popular label for this wing of the Church.<sup>8</sup> This article aims to explore the fundamentalist tendencies of the movement, focusing on two brotherhoods often identified as belonging to opposite ends of the 'fundamentalist wing' - the radical Union of Orthodox Banner-Bearers and the more moderate Radonezh.

## Defining Terms

The term 'fundamentalism' was coined in 1920 by the American editor of a Baptist journal, to describe the evangelical desire to return to Biblical 'fundamentals'.<sup>9</sup> It is now popularly

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4 See for example Dimitry V. Pospelovsky "The Russian Orthodox Church in the Postcommunist CIS" in *The Politics of Religion in Russia and the New States of Eurasia* edited by Michael Bourdeaux (M.E.Sharpe, New York & London 1995) p.52

5 Wayne Allensworth *The Russian Question: Nationalism, Modernization and Post-Communist Russia* (Rowman and Littlefield Publishers Inc.; Oxford 1998) p.130

6 Thomas Parland "The Rejection in Russia of Totalitarian Socialism and Liberal Democracy: A study of the Russian New Right" *Commentationes Scientiarum Socialium* 46, 1993 p.187

7 Paul D. Steeves, "Russian Orthodox Fascism" a paper presented to the Conference on Faith and History, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 8 October 1994 available online at <http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/rusorthfascism.html>

8 See for example Stephen Shenfield's *Russian Fascism: Traditions, Tendencies, Movements* (M.E.Sharpe, New York, London 2001) pp.61-72 and Alexander Verkhovsky's "September 11 and the Orthodox Anti-Globalism of the Moscow Patriarchate" in *JRL Research and Analytical Supplement* Issue No. 3 (Special issue on themes relating to September 11 December 2001), available online at <http://www.cdi.org/russia/johnson/5592.cfm> (accessed 15/04/02)

9 Martin Riesebröt *Pious Passion: The Emergence of Fundamentalism in the United States and Iran* (University of California Press; Berkley & London 1998) p.10

used to describe the 'militant piety'<sup>10</sup> which rejects the values of the modern Western world and - in some cases - promotes armed struggle against this world. The six-year Fundamentalism Project of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences acknowledges the limitations of the term, but offers a working definition of fundamentalism as:

...a tendency, a habit of mind, found within religious communities...which manifests itself as a strategy, or a set of strategies, by which beleaguered believers attempt to preserve their distinctive identity as a group. Feeling this identity to be at risk in the contemporary era, they fortify it by selective retrieval of doctrines, beliefs, and practices from a sacred past. These retrieved "fundamentals" are refined, modified, and sanctioned in a spirit of shrewd pragmatism...[and] accompanied in the new religious portfolio by unprecedented claims and doctrinal innovations.<sup>11</sup>

The Fundamentalism Project also concludes that:

...fundamentalism intends neither an artificial imposition of archaic practices and lifestyles, not a simple return to a golden era, a sacred past, a bygone time of origins – although nostalgia for such an era is a hallmark of fundamentalist rhetoric. Instead, religious identity thus renewed becomes the exclusive and absolute basis for a re-created political and social order that is orientated to the future rather than the past.<sup>12</sup>

Furthermore, the directors of the project identify in fundamentalist movements 'a dual commitment to the unfolding eschatological drama (by returning all things in submission to the divine) and to self-preservation (by neutralizing the threatening "Other").<sup>13</sup> The project, in the conclusion to its final volume *Fundamentalisms Comprehended*, identified nine ideological and organisational characteristics of fundamentalism. Due to limitations of time and space I have selected three key traits based on their working definition of fundamentalism, and in this article

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10 Karen Armstrong *The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (HarperCollins, London 2001) p.ix

11 Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (eds) *Fundamentalisms and the State: Remaking Politics, Economies, and Militance* (University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1993) p.3

12 Marty and Appleby (eds) *Fundamentalisms and the State* p.3

13 Marty and Appleby (eds) *Fundamentalisms and the State* p.3

explore the extent to which they are in evidence in the ideology and strategies of the brotherhoods selected:

- 1) A sense of religious identity under threat, from the modern world and the enemy 'Other'
- 2) A nostalgia for a sacred past, and a desire or strategy to construct a future society based on religious identity
- 3) A selective retrieval of doctrines, beliefs and practices from this sacred past, which are pragmatically refined, modified, and supplemented by innovations

### **The Union of Orthodox Banner-bearers**

The Union of Orthodox Banner-Bearers (*Soiuz pravoslavnykh khorugvenosstev*)<sup>14</sup> was co-founded in 1993 by Leonid Simonovich, who is also the current head of the Union of Orthodox Brotherhoods. Simonovich describes the Banner-Bearers as a 'charismatic' and 'military movement', and based on a pre-revolutionary organisation, the Society of Banner-Bearers.<sup>15</sup> While this organisation certainly existed, and bore some resemblance to the current Union in terms of activities, the rules of the Banner-Bearers appear on their website under the name 'the Union of the Russian People, infamous as the largest and best organised Black Hundreds group.<sup>16</sup> The contemporary Union of Banner-Bearers follows the Black Hundreds precedent<sup>17</sup> of denying membership even to converted Jews. It is also hardly coincidence that the pre-revolutionary Union of the Russian People called for the formation of counter-revolutionary military units,<sup>18</sup> and Simonovich's Union profess to be training a military unit who can be

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14 An unregistered organisation which identifies itself as a brotherhood

15 Leonid Simonovich (Interview, Moscow, May 13 2001)

16 <http://www.rus-sky.com/horugvenosec/oprichnina/ustav.htm> (last accessed June 10, 2001)

17 Wayne Allensworth *The Russian Question: Nationalism, Modernization and Post-Communist Russia* p.129

18 Wayne Allensworth *The Russian Question* p.129

mobilised "at any moment", and to have at their disposal Siberian, Zaporozhian, Don, Kuban and Ural Cossacks.<sup>19</sup>

Shenfield observes that "the main division [in the ROC] is between a liberal or modernizing wing that draws inspiration from the philosopher-theologians of the Silver Age, and a fundamentalist or reactionary wing that looks back to a golden age of true Orthodoxy under the Tsars".<sup>20</sup> While Simonovich's Banner-Bearers are consciously modelling themselves on an organisation that belongs to this particular mythical 'golden age' of Russian Orthodoxy, they are pragmatic about which elements they carry into the modern world. Their website proudly shows a contemporary Banner-Bearer standing next to his pre-revolutionary counterpart, who wears a long, ornate kaftan. The contemporary uniforms of the Union are black and military in style, more suited to the battleground of the modern world.

For Simonovich and the members of his Union, we are living in the Last Days, and politics is an irrelevance. The battle-lines are religious:

...in the contemporary world, politics... does not play any role. Nowadays, religion and the national idea have begun to play a role; this is happening everywhere, literally around the whole world, and wars, when they occur, have a religious character. The Chechen war is a purely religious war. No one talks about it of course, it's not nice [to]. It is a war between Orthodox and Muslim, without any doubt. And the same thing is happening in Serbia, in Kosovo...<sup>21</sup>

America is castigated as a secular Satan, whose crime in bombing the Serbs is not her interference in the affairs of another state, but her decision to take up arms against an Orthodox country:

The Holy War that John the Evangelist spoke of is upon us, and will leave none of us untouched. "There is no greater love, and nothing more pleasing in the eyes of God, than to lay down one's life for one's brother", teach the Apostles. Our Serbian brothers have drawn upon themselves the fire of the Satanists, and are

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19 Leonid Simonovich (Interview, Moscow, May 13 2001)

20 Stephen Shenfield *Russian Fascism: Traditions, Tendencies, Movements* (M.E.Sharpe, New York, London 2001) p.64

21 Leonid Simonovich (Interview, May 13 2001)

showing the world that holy Apostolic love, by sacrificing their lives for us. How can we remain deaf to their suffering? We must give all of our strength and abilities, however small they may be, like the widow's tithe in the Gospels, to the suffering people of Yugoslavia. "Russia's mission, given to her from on high, is to block the way of worldwide Satanism and hold out to the end, until God's proclamation of victory over Satan. Amen."<sup>22</sup>

The Union's primary aim is to 'resurrect the spirit' of Russian Orthodoxy, by conducting processions with banners and icons (*khrestnye khody*) in Moscow and the regions. They appear to have some measure of success in their missionary aims – a procession organised by the Union in July 1999, which covered around 1000 km in the Moscow, Tver and Tula regions, allegedly began with between 30-35,000 participants in Moscow.<sup>23</sup> Patriotic organisations from Nizhnii Novgorod, Sergeiev Posad and Tver joined their Moscow brethren to march along the Kremlin embankment, and were filmed by around 20 television companies. Fundamentalist organisations could not account for such a large crowd, and popular support for the canonisation of the Tsar's family played a significant role. More recently, over 3000 people joined the Banner-Bearers to commemorate the 85<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Tsar's abdication on March 16, 2002, where Simonovich called for "a struggle against the genocide of the Russian people".<sup>24</sup> The numbers present at these events indicate the success of the organisation in manipulating modern communications and achieving mass mobilization, and that they have some appeal to those outside their membership.

Like other fundamentalist religious groups, the Union retrieve a somewhat eclectic mix of sacred fundamentals from the past. Divine order, and respect for hierarchy support their monarchist ideology:

...if you go against the Patriarch you transgress the principle of hierarchy itself, violate a sacred principle. Its the same with the monarchy – it is forbidden to go against the Tsar, against the Emperor...Who is it that goes against the Emperor,

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22 A public speech by Simonovich, reported in "The Faithful vs. TV" *Sovetskaya Rossia*, 20/04/1999

23 "Os' vremen" in *Russkii vestnik*, No.40-41, 1999

24 UCSJ news <http://www.fsmonitor.com/stories/032202Russ3.shtml>

Tsar or King? Revolutionaries, traitors, Satanists, in our understanding, [according to] the Church.<sup>25</sup>

Adhering to this fundamental does not prevent them opposing the Patriarch however. During the course of our interview Simonovich mentioned several circumstances in which they had to 'go against' him; when he declared that individual tax numbers (the notorious INN) were safe for believers to accept,<sup>26</sup> when he addressed the American Rabbis in a spirit of brotherly love in November 1991, when he condemned an attack on a Moscow synagogue as an attack on a House of God. At this point Simonovich resurrected a more important fundamental – the Patristic declaration that a synagogue is a refuge of demons.<sup>27</sup> Simonovich's organisation also seeks to resurrect the medieval myth of Jewish ritual murder as evidence of the Jewish threat, publicly calling for the canonisation of Andriushy Iushchinsky, whom Jews were accused of murdering in 1911, and declaring that the murder of Tsar Paul I bore the hallmarks of a 'Masonic' ritual killing.<sup>28</sup>

Simonovich and his organisation also reveal as characteristic fundamentalist fear that the true identity of Russian Orthodoxy is under threat. He perceives true believers in the Church to be outnumbered and threatened by what he calls 'the left wing' of the Church, and his articles make clear that he equates this left wing with Jewish converts: "it has long ceased to be a secret that in our contemporary Church there is, as it were, two parallel churches – the church of Hellenes, that is the Russians, and the Church of the Jews..."<sup>29</sup> Jews above all are the threatening 'Other' in Simonovich's ideology, infiltrating the Russian Orthodox Church, constantly engaged in a struggle to destroy Holy Russia. The organisation actively campaigns to 'neutralize the threat':

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25 Leonid Simonovich (Interview, Moscow May 13, 2001)

26 See Alexander Verkhovsky's "Radical Orthodox Anti-Globalism in 1999-2002: Electronic Tax Codes – A Topical Theme for Fundamentalists", a paper given at the University of Sussex April 2002, for a full discussion of the campaign against INN.

27 Leonid Simonovich (Interview, Moscow May 13, 2001)

28 Blagovest-Info/*Sobornost*, 28 March 2001

29 <http://www.rus-sky.com/horugvenosec/Simonovichichich/heresy.htm> (last accessed April 2001); my translation.

...The prophet monk Avel said, that on Rus there were [imposed] two yokes – the Tartar-Mongol and the Polish-Lithuanian, and there will be one more – the most terrible – the JEWISH. And we, brothers and sisters, are suffering it now with you. But one should never remain indifferent, one must never sleep, never simply pray – one must fight, brothers and sisters, we need to fight for the freeing of our homeland from the Jewish yoke!<sup>30</sup>

Further threats to the integrity of Russian Orthodoxy are offered by Roman Catholics, NATO and the West, and the Union have been active in organising and participating in many political demonstrations against these enemies. The Union exhibit the characteristic fundamentalist tendency to "seize upon opportunities provided by the process of secular modernization...[such as] the means of communication and recruitment".<sup>31</sup> They maintain a large and distinctive website, which gives visitors instructions about events to attend, such as the 2001 march against the Pope's proposed visit to Ukraine organised by the Union of Orthodox Citizens, and the Victory Day marches where they mingle with Communists and in 2001 carried a banner declaring "Freedom for Colonel Budanov", the Russian officer accused of raping and murdering an 18 year old Chechen girl. More recently, Simonovich and Vladimir Osipov of the Union of Christian Rebirth headed a march to celebrate the birthday of the Mother of God and the victory over the Tartars on Kulikovo field, at which Simonovich declared that the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 were "the revenge of the Lord Jesus Christ for the bombardment of Orthodox Serbia".<sup>32</sup>

Simonovich's organisation fits the model of "militant piety" well – he describes the faith of his foot-soldiers as "aggressive", and perceives the need for an active rather than contemplative faith in a world of religious conflict:

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30 <http://www.rus-sky.com/horugvenosec/Simonovich/heresy.htm> (last accessed April 2001). Simonovich used the offensive adjective 'zhidovskii' from 'zhid' - yid or kike.

31 Gabriel A. Almond, Emmanuel Sivan, R. Scott Appleby "Fundamentalism: Genus and Species" in *Fundamentalisms Comprehended* ed. Martin E. Marty & R. Scott Appleby (University of Chicago Press; Chicago and London 1995) p.405

32 Blagovest-Info news report 21.09.01 .

Now above all is a time for practical work, it is not a time for theory, now is not a time for theology, but for witness...Theology is when you sit and write, but witness is when, like yesterday,<sup>33</sup> you go out against, or for...<sup>34</sup>

## **Radonezh**

If the Union of Orthodox Banner-Bearers key strategy is to carry Orthodoxy out onto the street, Radonezh's strategy has been to bring Orthodoxy into people's homes. This brotherhood is part of perhaps the largest Orthodox social organisation, incorporating an effective mini media empire - a radio channel, newspaper, video production unit and website. Also one of the oldest religious lay organisations, Radonezh was formed in 1988 by Vyacheslav Rodionov, a former political prisoner and co-editor with Vladimir Osipov of the samizdat journal *Zemlia*. It falls firmly within the group of fundamentalists who consider themselves patriotic, conservative and monarchist, but do not propagate an aggressive nationalism or overt antisemitism. They stress their non-political character, and portray themselves as moderates who are primarily concerned with the restoration of the material and spiritual fabric of Russian Orthodoxy. This has not always been the case – Radonezh have worked hard to improve their tarnished image since the mid-1990's. Today there is evidence of conflict between Radonezh and their former radical associates. According to Leonid Simonovich, Radonezh will no longer advertise the rallies and marches planned by the Union of Orthodox Banner-Bearers on their radio station, because – he asserts – their actions are too radical for Radonezh to stomach, and because Radonezh are too commercialised.<sup>35</sup>

The Radonezh brotherhood has a school, a fund to restore Church bells (the work of which has been blessed by the Patriarch), they organise exhibitions and restore Churches. The brotherhood consider themselves an 'open structure', and membership of the brotherhood is very fluid, with brothers gathering for particular activities but not 'kissing the cross' or taking any formal steps to join. Rodionov's wife, Elena Nomakova, counted around fifty employees of Radonezh who are members of the brotherhood, and guessed at a total membership of about one

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33 Simonovich is referring to a march against the Pope's proposed visit to Ukraine

34 Leonid Simonovich, (Interview, May 13, 2001)

35 Blagovest-Info 26.03.01

hundred.<sup>36</sup> They have affiliated brotherhoods in St Petersburg and other towns. Like several other brotherhoods, Radonezh have supporters in America, in this case, influential individuals in Washington. The wider organisation has a number of ventures including an independent finance company, also called Radonezh, a Christian medical centre and an Orthodox pharmacy.

Radonezh was one of the original members of the Union of Orthodox Brotherhoods, and is still technically a member although they are far less active within the Union today. Elena Nomakova, who despite her gender is clearly active in the management of the organisation (which indicates the moderate nature of their fundamentalism), explained that they don't have time to participate in the weekly or twice weekly meetings of the Union. She was not overtly critical of the Union, but observed that "it's a madhouse, there are some very good people there, clever, Orthodox, normal, [and] there are simply not normal [people], who simply shout."<sup>37</sup> On the question of radical or extremist brotherhoods, such as the Union of Banner-Bearers, they observed that this is pluralism, and everyone has the right to their own opinion. Similarly, despite an overtly anti-ecumenical stance, they did not participate in demonstrations against the Pope's visit to the Ukraine, observing that Ukraine is a separate State and had the right to invite the Pope if they so wished.

Nevertheless, Radonezh share the fundamentalist tendency to identify enemies who threaten the true Russian Orthodox identity. Evgenii Nikiforov, the editor of *Radonezh*, has called Polish citizens of Russia and Byelorussia "the fifth Catholic column".<sup>38</sup> Curiously, these enemies are as often fellow Orthodox as alien 'Other' - either internal 'heretics' such as Fr Kotchetkov, who has attracted significant hostility for his celebration of the liturgy in modern Russian, or foreign Orthodox:

The ecclesiastical dispute between Moscow and Constantinople in the beginning of 1996 was nothing more than a quarrel between two sisters, as N. A. Struve correctly pointed out. And as he suggested, this would not have been too significant except for the reaction fomented by the communo-patriotic types of

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36 Elena Nomakova, Radonezh (Interview, Moscow, May 30 2001)

37 Elena Nomakova, Radonezh (Interview, Moscow, May 30 2001)

38 Maxim Shevchenko 'Starye metody, novoi epokhi' *NG religii* No.14 (85) 25/07/01

media. *Sovietskaya Rossiia*, *Zavtra*, *Russkii vestnik*, as well as (which is especially sad) the Orthodox paper *Radonezh* with the similarly named youth organization, literally fell all over themselves rushing to prove that the Ecumenical Patriarchate fell away from Orthodoxy some time ago, that Vladyka Bartholomew for some time has not been the Constantinopolitan but a Turkish patriarch, that neither he nor his patriarchate has any influence in the Orthodox world, etc.<sup>39</sup>

Maxim Shevchenko points out that over the years, Radonezh have campaigned against Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad - guilty of betraying the interests of Orthodoxy; against Metropolitans Filaret of Minsk and Valdimir of St Petersburg – guilty of ecumenism; Hegumens Ioann Ekonomtsev and Ilarion Alfayeev - guilty of heresy; and the priests Frs. Aleksandr Borisov and Georgii Chistiakov - guilty of 'Renovationism'.<sup>40</sup> The relationship between Radonezh and the Moscow Patriarchate has – unsurprisingly - not been a smooth one, although Rodionov stressed in interview that the Church is a unity, and therefore there cannot be any other kind of relationship other than one sanctioned by the Church. The Patriarch was troubled enough by their propaganda to announce publicly that Radonezh does not express the position of the Church, and in 1997 and again in 1998, withdrew his blessing from the newspaper *Radonezh*.<sup>41</sup> The brotherhood leadership were however quick to declare that their strength lies in their independence:

In this is our strength, that we have the right [to criticise]... not one priest of the Patriarchate, nor one Bishop has the right to criticise the actions of the Patriarchate, and this is correct - strict subordination, obedience...but we are an independent organisation, and we can criticise that which then, incidentally, as a result of our criticism, the Patriarchate changes...like we struggled for ten years for the canonisation of the Tsar's family. The Patriarchate was of a different opinion, which as you know, changed.<sup>42</sup>

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39 Fr Georgii Chistiakov 'Whence this Anger?', published in *Russkaia mysl'* (Paris) October 10, 1996; available online at <http://www.agape-biblia.org/prpakety/agapreab/Whencang.htm>

40 Maxim Shevchenko, 'Starye metody, novoi epokhi' in *NG Religii*, No.14 (85), 25/07/01

41 Alexander Verkhovsky 'Tserkov' v politike i politika v tserkvi' in *Politicheskaiia ksenophobiia* ( Panorama, Moscow 1999) p. 94, 99

42 Elena Nomakova, Radonezh (Interview, Moscow, May 30 2001)

Radonezh are no doubt correct in their assessment of their influence. Their successful manipulation of modern media has to some extent won them the propaganda war at parish-level, and the hierarchy are wary of challenging their ideology outright. Those who do challenge Radonezh, such as Maxim Shevchenko, former editor of *Nezavisimaya gazeta religii*,<sup>43</sup> the religious news agency Blagovest-Info,<sup>44</sup> and the Sretenie Brotherhood of Father Georgii Kotchetkov, may on occasion win the intellectual argument or seize the moral high ground, but they are not reaching the grassroots to the same extent. In 1996 Hegumen Innokentii Pavlov complained that

our home-grown 'orthodox fundamentalists'...have their own active-enough strength...As a practicing parish priest I have more than once been talking to people who are not long coming to the Church but are already showing signs of spiritual zombification from the radio programmes of Radonezh, which, evidently, many regard as an official Church radio channel. It becomes painful when a still-young person or a lady of pensionable age begins in conversation with you to dream about 'orthodox monarchy', to see in all the troubles of Russia 'the intrigues of the masons'...<sup>45</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the working definition of the Fundamentalism Project, it seems legitimate to use the term 'fundamentalist' in the Russian context to indicate groups who aggressively reject most of the modern, secular values introduced during the Soviet and post-Soviet period, who desire to return to a past that is perceived as holier than the besmirched present, and to selected principles of that past as evidenced by 'holy tradition'. As Father Sergei Hackel has pointed out,<sup>46</sup>

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43 See for example (and there are many!) *NG religii* 23/02/00

44 See *Ruskaia mysl'* (Paris) 10/02/00

45 Hegumen Innokentii "Vsegda ia rad zametit' raznost'" in *Segodnia* No.186, 10/10/96

46 Presentation on Russian Orthodox Fundamentalism at the University of Sussex, 10/04/02

the fundamentals of Russian Orthodoxy are perceived by this element of the Russian Orthodox Church to be embedded not solely in texts, but in rite and ritual too.

Nostalgia for a 'sacred past' - often the nineteenth century but in some instances the pre-Petrine period, the reign of Paul I or that of Ivan the Terrible - and the determination to re-create a political and social order based on religious identity, is a key element in the ideology of the Brotherhood movement, and of other groups within the Russian Orthodox Church. In Tver in March 2000 Valentin Lebedev, Chairman of the Union of Orthodox Citizens<sup>47</sup> and editor of the popular *Pravoslavnaia beseda* (Orthodox conversation) opened a conference on 'Monarchy in Russian Life: The Return to Self' with the statement: "The revival of Russia is impossible without a reconstruction of the monarchy; you see only in this case can the country execute the mission commanded by God - construction of the Third Rome".<sup>48</sup> For the fundamentalists, Russia is and always was 'holy', a bulwark against the forces of evil (be they the Golden Horde, fascist, communist or capitalist) with a special mission for the future. This mission can only be realised if she resurrects her religious identity and the essential components or fundamentals of that identity; the monarchy, Orthodox family life (marriage between a non-working Orthodox wife/mother and an Orthodox husband), the ritual trappings of 'pure' Orthodoxy (a liturgy in Church Slavonic, use of the Julian calendar, appropriate dress in Church<sup>49</sup> for example), Patristic antisemitism, a respect for the military and a vigorous patriotism.

A sense of beleaguered religious identity, under threat from the modern world and an enemy 'Other' is often found in contemporary Russian Orthodox organizations. Father Georgii Chistiakov has called the enemy-centred Orthodoxy that he sees as having over-run Russia 'inimicentrism' (from the Latin inimicus, enemy). Fr Chistiakov argues that a similar enemy-centred ideology was prevalent in the Soviet period, but was also a feature of nineteenth century Russian Orthodoxy and earlier, and stems from an intrinsically pagan rather than Christ-centered

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47 Lebedev's Union is an umbrella organisation that incorporates brotherhoods and other Orthodox organisations, and unites them in public actions such as demonstrations against the Pope etc.

48 Ol'ga Zaitseva 'Za Tsaria, za rodinu, za veru' in *Tverskaia zhizn'* 04/04/2002

49 Women in headscarves and over-knee skirts, men with bare heads and long sleeves. This, of course, is not exclusively a Russian Orthodox 'fundamental'.

world-view.<sup>50</sup> Many brotherhoods have a clearly identified "Other" in the Jew; sometimes alone, sometimes in tandem with or supplanted by the West, the 'New World Order', America or, increasingly, globalization. Eschatological beliefs often form part of this ideology, usually in the perception of an immanent or current conflict between the Antichrist (whose role is played by 'the Other,' be it Jews, America or globalization) and the force for good - the fundamentalist believers.

The reasons for the growth of fundamentalist tendencies in the Russian Orthodox Church cannot be addressed comprehensively in an article of this length, but it is worth mentioning a number of factors that have contributed to the flourishing of fundamentalist groups in contemporary Russia. The lobbying power of the fundamentalists within the Church is significant, and to a large extent this is as a result of their successful exploitation of mass media. While loudly rejecting the modern world, many fundamentalist groups have been quick to exploit the technological advances in communications, and maintain Internet sites in addition to more traditional media. Sergei Chapnin, who was formerly editor of the Internet journal *Sobornost* - which was created in an attempt to provide an alternative to the large number of fundamentalist publications and websites - observes that

The main problem is that here in Christian media there is no strong official publication of the Russian Orthodox Church. All the official publications are so weak and absolutely stupid that nobody reads them for the last four or five years. And these fundamentalists they caught the situation, and they put the emphasis on media, and it worked. The church is under their influence now, and I think the Patriarch himself is afraid of these people, of this ideology.<sup>51</sup>

The increase in fundamentalism has also been explained by some commentators as a result of the huge numbers of parishes opening for which there are not enough educated priests. In 1989 Moscow had 47 churches and around 100 priests – in 1999 Moscow had almost 400 churches, and the Russian Orthodox Church more than 19,000 parishes in all. In order to fill parish vacancies standards have been lowered, and young priests with little theological education are being given pastoral care of parishioners who are often without any Christian education

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50 Fr Georgii Chistiakov *Russkaya mysl'* (Paris) October 10, 1996

51 Sergei Chapnin (Interview January 2001)

whatsoever. In these circumstances, priest and parishioners turn to radio Radonezh, to the mass of cheap literature produced by active fundamentalists, such as pamphlets advising believers that to work as an actress or hairdresser is sinful, and that "wherever there is dancing, [there] the devil will be".<sup>52</sup> In part this problem has been aggravated by the continual republishing of many pre-revolutionary spiritual works, while in many seminaries and parishes the works of modern Orthodox thinkers such as John Meyendorff and Father Alexander Men' are banned, even burnt.

Finally, the Fundamentalism Project identified that religious fundamentalisms thrive in the climate of crisis and dislocation caused by "unsynchronised social, economic and cultural transformations and uneven schemes of development, by failures in education and social welfare systems, and ultimately by the collapse of long-held assumptions about the meaning and purpose of human existence."<sup>53</sup> While the Fundamentalism Project participants mostly focused on societies that had undergone a rapid and often brutal transition from 'traditional' to 'modern', Russia has experienced an equally dislocating experience in its transition from a global superpower to a 'second-world' state, in which obscene wealth and mass poverty are painfully visible. Hegumen Innokentii (Pavlov) observes that it is more appropriate to compare 'transition' Russia with the last years of the Shah's Iran than to compare it with Weimar Germany, as the former share an elite who flaunt lavish lifestyles and Western trappings of wealth, while the majority of the population live in poverty.<sup>54</sup>

Politically the role of the fundamentalists remains a marginal one. So far their limited electoral attempts have failed – although Evgenii Nikiforov, co-head of Radonezh and editor of their newspaper, has grown wiser since his failed attempt to be elected to the Duma in 1995.<sup>55</sup> Hegumen Innokentii concludes that we do not need to fear a fundamentalist take-over like

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52 "Priests interfere in the private life of parishioners" by Alla Snegina & Evgeny Strelchik in *Segodnia* 6 October 1999

53 Martin E.Marty and R.Scott Appleby "Conclusion: Remaking the State: The Limits of Fundamentalist Imagination" in *Fundamentalisms and the State* (University of Chicago; Chicago and London 1993)

54 Hegumen Innokentii "Vsegda ia rad zametit' raznost'" in *Segodnia* No.186, 10/10/96

55 Politicheskaiia ksenophobia (Panorama, Moscow 1999) p.33. The Bishops Council of 1994 also banned brotherhoods from practicing politics, although this ruling has failed to prevent them from commenting on political matters. (Ibid. p.106).

that experienced by Iran, but his comparison is nevertheless an enlightening one.<sup>56</sup> Russians are faced with failing education and social welfare systems, reduced life expectancy and its multiple causes, glaring economic inequalities, and most importantly, the collapse of long-held assumptions about themselves and their nation. They are seeking not just economic security but a new national idea<sup>57</sup> that will meet their spiritual needs and rescue them from humiliation before the West. A "theology of rage, resentment and revenge,"<sup>58</sup> such as that propagated by Simonovich and his fellow fundamentalists, could yet fill the vacuum felt by many. Their notable grass-roots presence is not just a comment on the state of the Church, but a comment on the state of the nation, and should not be ignored.

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56 It is worth noting that he remarks on the danger of interpreting Radonezh supporters as a significant socio-religious force, citing as evidence of this mistaken interpretation the 'noise' being created around the suggested canonisation of the Tsar's family. Four years later, Radonezh achieved their goal.

57 See for example Inna Naletova, "Religion, the State and Civil Society" *Perspective* Vol.XII, No.3 (Jan-Feb 2002) at <http://www.bu.edu/iscip>. This search began in the last decades of the Soviet Union – see for example Dimitry Pospelovsky's "The "Russian Orientation" and the Orthodox Church: From the Early Slavophiles to the "Neo-Slavophiles" in the USSR' in *Religion and Nationalism in Soviet and East European Politics* ed. Pedro Ramet (Duke University Press, Durham and London 1989)

58 Karen Armstrong *The Battle for God: Fundamentalism in Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (HarperCollins, London 2001) p.366.

