

## **RELIGIOUS MINORITIES IN RUSSIA: HELP OR HINDRANCE TO DEVELOPMENT OF CIVIL SOCIETY? ROMAN CATHOLICS**

by Daniel L. Schlafly, Jr.

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The greatest obstacle to civil society in today's Russia is its long tradition of state supervision and control, embodied both in the actions of government bodies and the attitudes of Russian citizens. Religious entities face particular challenges in this area. In 1991, the Soviet Union and the Russian Republic revoked the punitive 1918 and 1929 laws on religion, granting religious organizations<sup>1</sup> a wide variety of rights, including status as judicial persons, but reiterated the obligation to obtain official registration.<sup>2</sup> Article 14.1 of the 1993 Constitution of the Russian Federation stated that "religious associations (ob'edineniia) are separated from the state and equal before the law."<sup>3</sup> It was not until the "Law of the Russian Federation on the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations" was signed by Boris Yeltsin on September 26, 1997, however, that these associations' precise status was defined.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>The Soviet law used the term "religious organizations," while the Russian Republic referred to "religious unions."

<sup>2</sup>For the texts of the 1991 laws, see *La Documentation Catholique* 2023 (3 March 1991): 228-39.

<sup>3</sup>*Konstitutsiia Rossiiskoi Federatsii* (Moscow: INFRA.M---NORMA, 1997), 7.

<sup>4</sup>For the text, see *La Documentation Catholique*, 2176 (15 February 1998): 179-87.

The 1997 law recognized "the special role of Orthodoxy in the history of Russia,"<sup>5</sup> but attempts to give special status to four "traditional" religions of Russia--Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism--were rejected after protests from many quarters, including Pope John Paul II.<sup>6</sup> While individuals and unregistered religious "groups" were guaranteed freedom of religion, only "religious associations" were granted full legal rights, to be exercised only after formal registration, a complex and lengthy process.<sup>7</sup> Thus, like its predecessors, the Russian Federation continues to demand a special, albeit somewhat reduced, role for the state in religious affairs.

Another obstacle to the participation of religious bodies in civil society is what Professor A. YU. Grigorenko of the Herzen Pedagogical University recently called "the conflation of national and confessional self-identification."<sup>8</sup> Hence, on all levels the Russian Orthodox Church is accorded a special role, not so much in its spiritual capacity, but instead as the unique incarnation of national, cultural, and political values. The presence of Patriarch Aleksii II at Yeltsin's December 31, 1999 surprise resignation, government support for the rebuilding of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, or recent proposals to base religious education in state schools on Orthodox theology are but three recent examples. Other faiths also are viewed through a national lens, as when Fr. Vsevolod Chaplin, of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department of External Church Relations, recently referred to "national religious communities."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid, 179.

<sup>6</sup>Text of his 24 June 1997 letter to Boris Yeltsin in *La Documentation Catholique*, 2167 (5 October 1997): 804.

<sup>7</sup>On March 26, 2000, Vladimir Putin signed a law extending the deadline for registration until December 31, 2000 after widespread failure to meet the previous deadline of December 31, 1999. For a description of the registration hurdles faced by the Catholic parish in Samara, see Tatyana Titova, "Registration in Samara Region: Civic Code Versus Canon Law," *Keston News Service* (November 17, 1999): 1-9.

<sup>8</sup>Andrei YU'reviia Grigorenko, "'Religiia, obshchestvo, gosudarstvo v sovremennoi Rossii: nekotoryie aspekty problemy,'" in *Religioznye organizatii i gosudarstvo: perspektivy vzaimodeistviia: materialy konferentsii: Moskva, 22-23 fevraliia 1999 goda* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo "Rudomino", 1999), 27.

<sup>9</sup>Vsevolod Chaplin, "Tserkovno-gosudarstvennyie otnosheniia v svete pozitsii Sviashchennonachaliia Russkoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi," in *ibid*, 23.

It is not surprising, then, that any attempt by the Roman Catholic Church to play a role in Russian civil society is burdened by negative historical and national associations. All Orthodox share a perception of Catholic Western aggression, exemplified in the Fourth Crusade's sack of Constantinople in 1204. The Russian Orthodox Church and the nation as a whole continue to celebrate the successful defense of the Russian land, people, and faith against Swedes and Teutonic Knights in the thirteenth century, the Union of Brest in the sixteenth century, the Polish occupation of Moscow in the seventeenth century, and by extension, invasions by Napoleon in the nineteenth and Hitler in the twentieth centuries.<sup>10</sup> Prominent shrines and monuments are powerful visible reminders of past incursions by the Latin West and reinforce the need for continued vigilance; for example, the Aleksandr Nevskii Lavra and the Kazan and St. Isaac's Cathedrals in St. Petersburg; the rebuilt Cathedral of Christ the Savior and the grandiose new World War II memorial, including a chapel, in Moscow; and plaques, shrines, and exhibits in the Holy Trinity-St. Sergius, Tolga, and Kirillo-Belozersk Monasteries.

The negative image of Roman aggression inherited from tsarist times was given a new slant during the Soviet era, when the Roman Catholic Church was portrayed as the agent of Wall Street and Western imperialism in a concerted campaign against the Soviet Union and the Russian Orthodox Church, whose leaders both seconded official propaganda and participated in the suppression of Uniate churches in western Ukraine and Belarus. Nevertheless, since tsarist times, the state, the Russian Orthodox Church, and popular opinion has accorded the Roman Catholic Church a limited role in ministering to historically Catholic minorities on Russian soil, such as foreigners in major cities, Volga Germans, or Poles and Lithuanians. Too, there were ecumenical contacts between Orthodox émigrés and Roman Catholics in the 1920's and 1930's and between dissidents of various faiths in the Soviet Union since the 1960's. Khrushchev's permission for the Russian Orthodox Church to reach

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<sup>10</sup>For a fuller treatment of this legacy, see my "Roman Catholicism in Today's Russia: The Troubled Heritage," *Journal of Church and State* 39 (Autumn 1997): 681-96, and the works cited there. For the Soviet period, also see Roman Solchanyk and Ivan Hvat, "The Catholic Church in the Soviet Union, in *Catholics and Politics in Communist Societies*, ed. Pedro Ramet (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1990), 49-92 and Constantin Simon, "How Russians See Us: Jesuit-Russian Relations Then and Now," *Religion, State & Society* 23, No. 4 (1995): 343-57.

out to the West, including Catholics, and the Catholic commitment to dialogue with other churches begun by Pope John XXIII also boded well for friendly relations in the future.

The new freedom for religion in Russia since *perestroika* has enabled the Roman Catholic Church there to play a role impossible to imagine in Soviet times when it had but two parishes. After Gorbachev's December 1989 reception by Pope John Paul II, diplomatic relations were established between the Vatican and the Soviet Union.<sup>11</sup> In 1991, apostolic administrators were installed in Moscow, Novosibirsk, and Karaganda (now in the independent nation of Kazakhstan); that same year the Catholic College of St. Thomas was opened in Moscow, where in 1993 a major seminary also began classes. Two more apostolic administrators, one in Saratov and one in Irkutsk, were named in 1999.<sup>12</sup> There are now approximately 1,285,000 Catholics with 327 parishes and 51 mission stations served by 195 priests in the Russian Federation.<sup>13</sup> These and religious brothers and sisters, plus various official and unofficial Catholic organizations, in addition to conducting religious services, are engaged in a variety of previously forbidden publishing, education, and charitable works.

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<sup>11</sup>Solchanyk and Hvat, "The Catholic Church in the Soviet Union", 89.

<sup>12</sup>Apostolic administrations are groups of the faithful which "for special and particularly serious reasons are not erected as dioceses." *Annuario Pontificio*, (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vatican, 2000), 1924. The archbishop and bishops responsible for the Catholic Church in Russia have been named to titular sees rather than the cities in which they actually live and work to avoid the appearance of creating a parallel hierarchy to the Russian Orthodox Church. But Orthodox still have been quick to see their presence as evidence of Roman proselytism.

<sup>13</sup>Figures in *ibid*, *passim*.

In the formation of a civil society, the Catholic Church in Russia benefits, not just from personnel and resources from abroad but also from Roman Catholicism's long and successful experience of evangelization and survival in a variety of cultures. The Russian Catholic clergy and hierarchy are well-trained and well-educated, until very recently all products of established seminaries abroad. The new institutions in Russia are staffed by capable foreign professors and also maintain high educational standards. This is in sharp contrast to the often rigid and anti-intellectual Russian Orthodox institutions,<sup>14</sup> not to mention the many overzealous and unprepared Protestant evangelists active in Russia. Too, Catholicism can draw on a body of theological thought and social teaching to deal with contemporary issues Orthodoxy had no chance to develop in Russia and few Protestants can match. For example, articles in the Russian Catholic newspaper *Svet Evangeliiia* relied heavily on the papal encyclicals *Gaudiam et Spes* and *Centesimo Anno* to analyze the 1996 presidential election from a Christian perspective without endorsing particular parties or candidates.<sup>15</sup> In addition, Catholics are admired for charitable institutions that meet pressing social needs without overt religious content; for example, in 1996, Salesians staffing the Catholic Church of the Immaculate Conception in Moscow opened a children's shelter nearby.<sup>16</sup>

This success has awakened old fears of Catholic aggrandizement, however, particularly since the Church in Russia has introduced more Russian language liturgies to reach the increasingly assimilated Polish, German, and other historically Catholic foreign communities.<sup>17</sup> Even more controversial has been the Church's willingness to accept as converts secularized, usually unbaptized, Russians, although their numbers remain quite small. As early as 1991, Archimandrite Iosif Pustoutov, for many years responsible for the Moscow Patriarchate's relations with the Catholic

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<sup>14</sup>See the gloomy picture of Russian Orthodox seminaries painted by Hieromonk Hilarion Alfeyev of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Affairs, "The Problems Facing Orthodox Theological Education in Russia," Report delivered at the consultation of Orthodox theological schools held in Belgrade, Serbia, from 16-24 August 1997, [published in *REE*, XIX, 1 (February 1999).]

<sup>15</sup>*Svet Evangeliiia*, 9 June 1996, 5-6.

<sup>16</sup>Felix Corley, "Catholic Shelter Works with Vulnerable Children in Moscow," *Keston News Service* (22 January 2000): 4-9.

<sup>17</sup>The first Catholic Mass in Russian at the Church of Saint-Louis des Français in Moscow was celebrated 24 February 1991. Yuli Shreider, "Russian Catholicism," *Religion, State & Society* 24 (1996): 57. Shreider is one of the new Russian converts.

Church, expressed his "bitterness" that Catholics as well as other groups were giving the Russian Orthodox Church "very severe competition in the missionary field" and charged that the new Catholic hierarchy had been established "with no other goal than to create the conditions for future proselytism."<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup>Intervention at the Fifth Joint Session of the Conference of European Churches and Council of the Conference of European Bishops held at Santiago da Compostella, 12-18 November 1991. Quoted in *La Documentation Catholique* 2041 (5 January 1992): 24-25.

Thus, the Roman Catholic church's role in any Russian civil society continues to be burdened by association with past Western aggression and its image as a foreign, not a Russian, church; last year, Patriarch Aleksii II even was reported to have said that the only Catholics in Russia were diplomats in Moscow and St. Petersburg.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the Catholic population is small and scattered, still heavily dependent on foreign personnel, many Polish, with ethnic tensions among its multinational flock.<sup>20</sup> And while the Russian Orthodox Church faces its own problems, it still is regarded, officially and unofficially, as *the* Russian church, and Catholics, like other non-Orthodox faiths, are expected to acknowledge its primacy. Too, Catholicism and all other religions in Russia must deal with the legacy of seventy years of official atheism and with the perhaps equally antireligious contemporary challenge of consumerism and materialism.

Finally, as part of a worldwide institution, the Catholic Church in Russia must conform to the broader goals of the Vatican, in this case Pope John Paul II's continuing effort to foster friendly relations with the Orthodox Churches in hopes of eventual reunion. In contrast to Uniates in the Western borderlands, Latin rite Catholics in Russia are only too aware of their marginal status and not inclined to press their case too vigorously. Such ecumenical concerns have restricted the local church somewhat, as in its lack of a regular diocesan structure.

The past history and current situation of the Roman Catholic Church in Russia offer little hope that it can play a major role in Russian civil society, aside from the question whether there will be a functioning civil society in the foreseeable future. The Church is too small and too scattered to have a strong presence, either locally or nationally. It has never shaken the official and unofficial image of Roman Catholicism as a foreign and potentially dangerous entity, even though it has never attracted more than occasional Russian converts. As recently as January 2000, a decree signed by then Acting President Vladimir Putin enacted a "National Security Concept" which cited "cultural-religious expansion of neighbouring states into

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<sup>19</sup>Lawrence Uzzell, "Letter from Moscow," in *First Things* (May 1999): 16.

<sup>20</sup>Simon, "How Russians See Us," 354.

Russian territory" as a threat and called for "the counteraction of the negative influence of foreign religious organisations and missionaries."<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>Quoted in Geraldine Fagan, "Who Will Fight for Religious Freedom in Russia's New Duma?," *Keston News Service* (24 January 2000): 3.

Yet the small band of Latin rite Russian Catholics, a minority in a minority church, are convinced they have a role to play, in the words of one them, "as a community of Russians who are enriching Russian culture with a experience it lacks."<sup>22</sup> Whether Russia can develop a civil society willing to listen to them is another question.

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<sup>22</sup>Shrieder, "Russian Catholicism," 58.

