

Religion and Society in Russia: Online Sources

by Alexander Verkhovsky

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This short essay makes no pretense of providing a complete survey of sources on Russian religion available on the Internet or on all matters relating to religion. A long list of such web-sites can be found under the religious section of such basic listings of Russian web-sites as Rambler [<http://top100.rambler.ru/top100/Religion/>].¹ Yandex [<http://yaca.yandex.ru/yaca/c43-0-0-0-0=0.html>], Mail.Ru [<http://top.mail.ru/Rating/Mysterious-Religion/>], Spylog [<http://dir1.spylog.ru/index1.phtml?offset-140&group=3642>] and others. We are limiting ourselves to the more informative and serious sites.

These can be subdivided into three categories:

1. Web-sites of religious unions or their sub-sections.
2. Web-sites claiming expertise - containing both primary documents and specialist analysis.
3. Mass media web-sites - that is, those that include news, reporting, analytical essays etc. though not necessarily always immediately. (If such a site indicates a confessional position, we will consider it together with the first category.)

1. Web-Sites of Religious Unions

The web-site of the department for internal church relations of the Moscow Patriarchate [<http://www.russian-orthodox-church.org.ru>] is adequately informative, and is especially useful for its news pages [http://www.russian-orthodox-church.org.ru/news_ru.htm], an archive of which has been maintained since August 1997. There are no other official sources for the Moscow Patriarchate, though of course, there are diocesan (eparchial) web-sites, as well as for some of the departments of the Patriarchate.

¹Translator's note - URL entries are entered in Latin script, hence often also the shorthand name of the web-site, though the content will be in Cyrillic, sometimes with a choice among codes (for reading the fonts). Russian titles are given according to Library of Congress rules of transliteration, often with a translation in parentheses.

In truth, the web-site for the “Orthodox Encyclopedia” Center, “Sedmitza.ru” [<http://www.sedmitza.ru/>], containing publicity news, can also be considered official.

It is a different matter to cover the separate groups of the split away Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (ROCA) and the Russian Orthodox Autonomous Church recently split away from it (ROAC, centered in Suzdal). These, together with groups of “Catacomb” churches that are affiliated, or not affiliated, with them, are usually called “alternative Orthodoxy”. A conditional unity among these "alternatives" is symbolized by the agency “Vertograd” [<http://www.vertograd.ru/>], that provides news about anyone of the “alternative” jurisdictions.

Official news and documents can be seen through the web-site of each jurisdiction:

- Bishops’ Synod of the ROCA (Lavra) [<http://russianorthodoxchurch.ws/>];
- Russian True Orthodox Church, the jurisdiction of the bishops’ synod (ROCA) [<http://www.ipc.od.ua/>]. This is the mouthpiece of bishop Agafangel of Simferopol and Crimea, which contains an electronic version of the journal *Vestnik Istinnno Pravoslavnaia Tserkvi*, and a directory of the Russian parishes (ROCA Lavra);
- Central web-site of ROCA (Vitalia) [<http://www.russianorthodoxchurchinexile.com/>];
- Web-site of the group of Russian supporters of bishop Varnavy, “Rubezh” [<http://www.rubezh.ru/>].
- The web-site of the Russian section of ROCA (V) under the administration of Archbishop Lazarii and bishop Veniamin, “Tserkovnyi vedomosti” [<http://catacomb.org.ua/>].

Completely separate is the Apostolic Orthodox Church (formerly Orthodox Church Reborn [vozrozhdeniia]), founded by Fr. Gleb Yakunin who was excommunicated from the Russian Orthodox Church [<http://www.russianchurch.info/>].

Within the Russian Orthodox Church various currents have their own information sources. The so-called Kokchetkov stream that is most informative is the web-site of St. Filaret Institute [<http://www.sfi.ru/>].

The conservative circles of the Russian Orthodox Church are practically not represented on the Internet. But then, the web-site of the conservative Deacon Andrei Kuraev is one of the most popular Orthodox forums [<http://www.kuraev.ru/forum/>], which therefrom makes it an interesting source.

Also very widely represented in the Internet are the fundamentalist and extremely conservative nationalist groups in the churches. Instead of listing all of their web-sites, it suffices here to list the address of the listing by A. Verkhovsky [<http://averh.narod.ru/fundament/>] and name the basic ones:

- Web-site of the Sretenskii Monastery, “Pravoslavie.Ru” [<http://www.pravoslavie.ru/>];

-Web-site of one of the group of disciples of the late Metropolitan Ioann, "Russkaia liniia" [<http://www.rusk.ru/>];

-Web-site of the "Radonoezh" society [<http://www.radrad.ru/>];

and the most fundamentalist of all web-site:

- "Stoianie na istinnu" [standing on the truth] [<http://www.zaistinu.ru/>].

Old Believer web-sites are neither well maintained nor active, but they exist. The largest community, Belokrinnitsky, has an official web-site [<http://mitropoliya.org/>]. One can learn about the Belokrinnitsky, Pomorskoe and Spasovskoe communities through the "Drevlepravoslavie" web-site [<http://www.staroobrad.ru/>]. There are also several less significant web-sites.

The central web-site for Russian Catholics is "Katolicheskaia Rossiia" [<http://www.catholic.ru/>].

For Russian Protestants and Neo-Protestants there are many web-sites, so we will limit ourselves to naming some basic web-site listings (however, these listings are not restricted to Protestants). They are "Svetil'nik" [<http://www.biblelamp.ru/B0.html>], "In Victory" [<http://www.invictory.org/sites/result.phtml?cat=churches10&PHPSESSID=929448cb53d36047-a64eec53a986b37f>], and the Christian information portal [http://christ4you.org/modules.php?op=modload&name=Web_Links&file=index&l_op=viewlink&cid=9].

Just as the Muslims of Russia have no central structure, neither have they a centralized representation on the Internet. The most informative web-site is "Islam.Ru" [<http://www.islam.ru/>], which orients itself toward the Spiritual direction of Muslims in Dagestan, though one should note also the "Islam-Info" web-site [<http://www.islaminfo.ru>]. Unions that are basically in competition are - the Central Spiritual Administration of Muslims of Talgata Tadzhuiddina [<http://muslim-board.narod.ru>] and the Russian Council of Muftis Ravilia Gainutdina [<http://www.muslim.ru>].

As concerns the basic Jewish religious unions, there are no forums. As a matter of fact, they are generally semi-secular. For example, the web-site of the Federation of Jewish Congregations in Russia (FJOR) [<http://www.jewish.ru>] can hardly be called religious, though one can find religious themes there with some difficulty. Even less religious is the web-site of the second major Jewish organization - the Russian Jewish Congress (RJC) [<http://www.rjc.ru/>].

For the basic Buddhist organizations in Russia, there is a web-site maintained by the Buddhist traditional Sangha of Russia with headquarters in Buriatiia [<http://buddhism.buryatia.ru/>], as well as the Buddhist school of Gelugpa, namely the followers of the Lamma Tsonkapii [<http://www.buddha.ru/>] in Moscow, and [<http://www.specialtool.ru/teaching/>] in Petersburg, as well as a group of followers of Ole Nidal,

the most popular of whose web-sites is the Moscow Dharma Center [<http://www.samyedzong.ru/>].

Web-sites For Specialized Expertise

Here we are concerned with web-sites which provide a more or less systematic representation of official documents, projects, and commentaries to them. A particularly informative web-site is “State and Religion in Russia” [<http://www.state-religion.ru/>]. But one should point out that its creators take a strong position of state paternalism and stress the special status of the Russian Orthodox Church. To a great degree that is true also of two other web-sites: “religious security” [<http://stolica.narod.ru/indexr.htm>] and “defenders against sects and enemies of the church” [<http://www.religioved.narod.ru/>], although there are many interesting documents there.

Of the web-sites by experts studying freedom of conscience, there remains only the web-site of the Institute of Freedom of Conscience [<http://www.atheism.ru/lci/>], and the web-site Slavic Legal Center [<http://www.rlinfo.ru/>]. One might describe them more as defenders of rights than experts.

Specialized Mass Media Online

A basic source of original news in English from Russia (and of the countries of the CIS) is Keston News [<http://www.keston.org/knsframe.htm>], though it has ceased publication (possibly only temporarily). Since then there has appeared the news service from Forum 18 [<http://www.forum18.org/>]. Like Keston News earlier, Forum 18 consists of reports by writers and short analyses of some situations.

There are also several news agencies. The oldest of them is “Good News Info”, who provide their news through paid subscriptions, the remaining news is published for free on the web-site. The most popular of such web-sites is “Religious World” [<http://www.religio.ru/>], which, in addition to news, contains a small number of analytical essays. Some news is also reprinted in the religious section of the web-site Newsru.com [best link is: <http://www.newsru.com/dosjex.html?lid=154>]. For content of a confessional orientation see the news pages of “Radiotserkov” [<http://www.radiotserkov.ru/news/news.shtml>] and “Agnuz” [<http://agnuz.info/>].

The only specialized newspaper on religion is the biweekly supplement to “Nezavisimoi Gazeta” - “NG-Religii”. On its web-site [<http://religion.ng.ru>] back issues since October 1999 are maintained. Till the beginning of 2002 when he was dismissed, the editor of that supplement was Maxim Shevchenko, and since the spring of 2002, Mark Simonov has been chief editor. As

a result the newspaper has paid more attention to personal religious life, and less to societal problems concerning religion.

At almost the same time in 2002, two major web-sites were opened with serious news pages, interspersed with original texts. They provide the most complete coverage of resources in all areas for socially significant religious issues, and problems related to religion. The first web-site, "Religiia i SMI" [<http://www.religare.ru>] is maintained by the religious guild of media unions through a grant from the Ministry of Printing and Information. The guild is headed by the well-known scholar and journalist Alexander Shchipkov, and the editor-in-chief of the web-site is journalist and scientific secretary for the Theological Commission of the [Holy] Synod Alexander Kyrlezhev. In addition to news, the web-site publishes interviews, stenographic reports of round table forums (in part, with participation of the Russian Academy of State Service), analytical essays, questionnaires, and selective monitoring of newspapers and journals.

The second web-site, "Portal Kredo" [<http://www.portal-credo.ru>] is supported by a group of journalists headed by Alexander Soldatov. Most of them belong to the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad ("Suzdal Split"), several (Egor Kholmogorov, Konstantin Krylov) at the same time actively participate in ultraconservative nationalist publishing projects. But the views of the editors appear primarily in editorial commentary. Budget news, interviews to monitoring of the press and even some of the articles by individual authors are completely pluralist.

A new project began in January 2003, intended not so much to address all of the above named tasks, but to simplify access to information in the first place for those who are not doing systematic monitoring themselves. The project is called "Religion in Secular Society" [<http://religion.sova-center.ru>], or SOVA Center for short [<http://sova-center.ru>]. SOVA Center presents itself primarily with systematized and annotated catalogs of news and discussion publications in the area of social-religious problems. The authors also publish some analyses on the side.

Translated from Russian original by Walter Sawatsky.

