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EASTERN ORTHODOXY AND THE FUSION OF NATIONAL AND SPIRITUAL SECURITY

Christopher Marsh

The Orthodox church traces its roots back to the earliest churches established by the Apostles, and it remained a part of the united church until the Great Schism of 1054, at which point Christendom broke into Western and Eastern halves. While this is not the place to examine the theological reasons for the Great Schism, one of the main points of contention remains highly significant for Orthodoxy today, namely ecclesiastical autonomy. The East resisted the Pope’s claim to be able to speak on behalf of the church on theological matters, a power the Eastern churches considered the sole domain of ecumenical councils, bodies comprised of representatives from all of the churches.

Eastern Orthodoxy originally centered around the great churches of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. Moscow would later enter the ranks of these powerful patriarchal seats in 1589. Moscow’s ascension to autocephaly and the establishment of a patriarchal seat centered on Russia’s capital city did much to fuse state power with religious authority, and civic identity with religious identity. Henceforth, Russian national identity and Orthodox faith became almost inextricably linked in the minds of most Russians, from lay believers to the highest echelons of the state and the church.

Similar fusions took place in other Orthodox societies whose ecclesiastical boundaries were roughly co-terminus with their political borders, including Bulgaria and Serbia. Such a fusion of political and religious identity did much to link religion to security and goes far in explaining the many ways in which Orthodoxy and security have related throughout history and continue to do so today. It is this close church–nation tie that has determined Orthodoxy’s central tendency (though not its only tendency) on security matters—namely, Orthodoxy has tended to align with the power of the state and to sacralize its security interests.

Today Orthodoxy’s reach is global, and that means it has the potential to become drawn upon and utilized in conflicts and security issues stretching from Eastern Europe and the Balkans to Russia’s Far East and even Ethiopia. There are an estimated 215 million Orthodox Christians living in 133 countries around the world. The largest Orthodox populations are in Russia (80 million); Ukraine (27 million); Ethiopia (22 million); Romania (19 million); and Greece (15 million). The United States is home to some 2 million Orthodox Christians (or perhaps as few as 1.2 million or as many as 5 million, depending on the source).
Philip Jenkins (2002), in writing on *The Next Christendom*, puts forth the thesis that the center of global Christianity is moving southwards, and that Africa is likely to be the center in the future. While in Europe there are trends of decreasing religiosity, as Berger (1999) points out, much of the rest of the world is undergoing “desecularization” (or is rediscovering a robust religiosity that was there all along). The Orthodox world is an example of this *par excellence*. After 70 years of forced secularization in the Soviet Union, the end of the policy of militant atheism has seen an unprecedented religious revival (Marsh 2011). For instance, since 1992 the number of Orthodox churches in Russia has more than doubled, monasteries have been restored and a score of new ones opened, and even Orthodox colleges are becoming a popular facet of Russian higher education. Similar trends are underway in other Orthodox-majority countries in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, including Macedonia.¹

Not surprisingly, as Orthodoxy re-enters social and political life in these societies, it often finds itself being drawn into issues of security. This ranges from a simple connection to national pride and patriotism all the way to more nefarious combinations such as xenophobia and Islamophobia. As such, it is important to understand 1) the dominant historical patterns in Orthodox thought and practice *vis-à-vis* state security, and 2) the key contemporary manifestations of these patterns and their possible implications. As a full survey of global Orthodoxy far exceeds the bounds of this chapter, in what follows I focus on the case with the most security implications: Russian Orthodoxy. Russia is by far the largest Orthodox-majority country, and the post-Cold War resurgence of linkages—socially, politically, and legally—between Orthodoxy and the state has already had significant consequences within Russia and its immediate sphere of influence. Moreover, it could be relevant to the broader international community as well, given Russia’s increasingly aggressive foreign policy stance over the past decade (Lucas 2009).

**Orthodoxy and holy war**

The roots of thinking on war and killing in the Orthodox tradition are the same as those in the other Christian traditions, finding their basis in such scriptural passages as Matthew 5–7 and 26:52, and Luke 2:14, 3:14, and 6:29. In these passages Christians are exhorted to show mercy to those who persecute them, to love their enemies, to turn the other cheek, and to beware that anyone who commits murder is subject to judgment. At the same time, however, as Stoyanov (2009: 167) suggests, Orthodoxy inherited the potential for a non-pacifistic and even militaristic exegesis of certain passages, particularly those with imagery of heavenly war. Even the concept of laying down one’s life in war being a sacred act has deep roots in Orthodoxy. When St. Cyril, the celebrated missionary to the Slavs and author of the alphabet bearing his name, paid an ambassadorial visit to the court of Abbasid Caliph al-Mutawakki in 851, the Muslim theologians there asked him why Christians do not apply in practice the biblical precepts in Matthew 5:38–44 which preach non-resistance to evil-doers and call Christians to pray for their enemies. St. Cyril reportedly replied with reference to John 15:13, responding that “No one has greater love than this, to lay down one’s life for one’s friends,” explaining that Christians should be prepared to sacrifice their lives in defense of their neighbors, that they should fight to the last, and that if they fulfilled this pledge the church would qualify these Christian soldiers as martyrs and intercessors before God (Stoyanov 2009: 170–71).

Of perhaps greater significance was the Byzantine understanding of Christian holy war. In contrast to the West, ecclesiastical involvement and participation in warfare with some religious goals was important in the Orthodox/Byzantine world, but not essential. With the blending of Orthodox theology and Byzantine political thought, most Byzantine wars possessed an aspect of holiness, even those without ostensibly religious objectives and waged primarily for political
The sacred and security

Religion and security have been closely related from the adoption of Christianity as the official religion of Rus in 988 onwards. From the day that Kiev prince Vladimir converted to Orthodox Christianity and brought his subjects with him, the religion of the Rus and their politics have been almost inextricably linked. Not only was Vladimir canonized as ravno-apostalnii (equal of the Apostles), starting a long tradition of canonizing political leaders and heroes, but the distinction between political power and religion became forever blurred.

Current research into nationalism has begun to uncover what religious believers have long known—that there is a strong and long tendency for threats to national security to become framed as sacred causes (Juergensmeyer 2003; Marsh 2007). This is due to the fact that many nations tend to view themselves as a “chosen people,” a group chosen by God for a special purpose (Smith 2004). This can be seen in many nations throughout history, and the nations of the Orthodox world are no exception (though it is important to note that, when taken to an extreme, it can be considered heretical, as ethnophylitism). This propensity to see political events through a biblical lens was quite strong for many of the nations of the former Soviet purposes (Stoyanov 2009: 180). These wars were waged to recover formerly Christian lands and therefore to defend God’s kingdom on earth—they were wars, therefore, fought for God and Orthodoxy.

Conversely, military defeat was divine punishment for the sins of the empire and its leaders. Indeed, in the later years of the empire, they became part of the unfolding eschatological drama of Byzantium. Pleading for God’s intercession and protection, therefore, was crucial, as was the singing of hymnic cycles and summoning of the “invincible weapon” of the Holy Cross to grant Orthodox people and their rulers victory over their enemies.

The development of an Orthodox concept of holy war was slow to take root in Russia, despite seemingly favorable conditions for it. The great thirteenth-century battles waged by St. Alexander Nevsky and St. Dmitry Donskoi were not against their Tatar overlords of the Golden Horde, but against German, Swedish, and Lithuanian adversaries who came to convert the “heretical” Rus to the true faith (which for them was Roman Catholicism). The same is true for the seventeenth-century Polish invasion and siege of Moscow. While Dmitry Pozharsky, the hero who repelled the Polish forces, was not canonized by the Orthodox church, he did carry a religious banner into battle and was seen by the church as a holy protector. Nevertheless, the wars themselves were not seen at the time as wars of religion. The case of Russia’s Tatar overlords is even more surprising, but begins to make sense once one recalls that the Muslims did not intervene in the internal affairs of the church.

As Muscovy increased in power, however, and readied itself to battle the Muslims who ruled them, Orthodoxy was naturally drawn upon. The first battle where this became evident was the 1552 Battle of Kazan. As Romaniello recently explained, Orthodox rhetoric “dominated the call for the conquest of the Khanate of Kazan, becoming the public voice of Muscovy’s decision to expand to its east” (2007: 514). Metropolitan Makarii used his position and influence to portray the war as a religious struggle of the Church Militant. Makarii blessed Ivan’s army for their holy work, explaining that the Tatars had “shamed the word of God” and “desecrated” the true faith. In commemoration of the victory, a new icon was painted, the “Blessed is the Host of the Heavenly Tsar,” more commonly referred to today as the “Church Militant.” This icon, which hangs today in the Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, depicts the Archangel Michael leading Ivan IV and his troops back from their victory over Kazan, which is embroiled in flames, while hosts of angels bring martyrs’ crowns to the fallen Russian soldiers.
Union, particularly for Russians and Ukrainians, two peoples with a long history of looking to the Bible for clues to their past and future. At least as far back as the eleventh-century *Primary Chronicle*, the Rus looked to Scripture for such clues and found them from Genesis to Revelation. They were the descendants of Noah’s third son, Japheth, giving themselves direct lineage to the diluvian period, and they were of the tribe of Magog (or Gog), in the land of Rosh. (The implications of such identity as expressed in *Revelation*, where the Gog and Magog were both thrown out of heaven, apparently didn’t matter to those drawing these lines. Ancestors were found in the Bible, and that was enough.) Furthermore, the *Primary Chronicle* recounted that St. Andrew had visited Kiev and blessed the land and its inhabitants as early as the Apostolic period. Clearly, this was a land blessed by the Lord and the Rus were a chosen people, much like the Jews of the Old Testament.

Defense of the nation then became a sacred cause, and attacks by those of other religious traditions had more than one’s worldly existence at stake. In fact, from an Orthodox theological position, the existence of the church itself was at stake, and therefore of man’s ultimate salvation. Many of Russia’s security challenges throughout the previous millennium were easily framed in this way, such as the thirteenth-century Northern Crusades led by the Teutonic Order aimed at converting the “pagans” of Rus to the true faith (i.e. Catholicism). Likewise, the effort to defend Russia shortly thereafter against the onslaught of the Muslims from the Orient was also seen as a sacred cause, and their defeat this time was even interpreted as divine punishment by some for the persistence of pagan rituals among much of the populace. This propensity to see sacred issues interlinked with secular battles became a particularly crucial issue following the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453, at which point Moscow proclaimed itself the Third Rome.

Other battles and wars were less clearly sacred causes, including the defense of Moscow against the Polish Catholic forces in 1603 (for which the heroic prince Dmitry Pozharsky received the title “savior of the motherland”) or the defense of the Soviet “motherland” against the Nazis in World War II. *Prima facie*, the latter should not have been easily construed as a sacred cause; after all, the Soviet Union was in the midst of its period of greatest suppression of religion thus far, while the Nazis were not expressly endorsing any specific religious agenda (they mixed elements of everything from atheism to Zoroastrianism to paganism to Christianity, and twisted everything to support strong anti-Semitism). But the Russian Orthodox church so feared the German attack that the head of the church responded before even Stalin himself in calling upon the people of the “motherland” to rise up in defense of the nation. Two days after the German invasion, Stalin opened the Soviet press and radio to Metropolitan Sergii, who called on the faithful to rise in defense of the nation. And though the church was not a legal institution at the time, it began to raise money to support military efforts, and even received permission from Stalin to open an account in the Central Bank for this purpose. While this funding mostly went to assist hospitals and children’s homes, and to aid the families of soldiers, it also funded two military units, the St. Dimitry Donskoy Tank Column and the St. Alexander Nevsky Fighter Squadron, honoring two sanctified Russian historical figures known for their victorious battles against foreign invaders.

**The sacred and Soviet security**

On the very day of the German invasion Metropolitan Sergii penned a letter to the faithful in which he proclaimed that “The Church of Christ confers its blessing on all Orthodox believers in their defense of the holy borders of our motherland.” The clergy continued this message, appealing to their fellow believers “to join this holy struggle” (Chumachenko 2002: 4). Priests began to give lively sermons to groups of Red Army soldiers, while regimental commanders are
known to have led prayers among their soldiers before going into battle. Stalin recognized the value of these efforts, and quickly restored the church to a legal entity, a move which greatly facilitated its ability to collect even more money for the war effort.

These events not only marked the beginning of popular resistance to the German invaders, they also inaugurated a new era in church-state relations under Soviet rule. At the time of the Soviet Union’s entry into World War II, the Orthodox church had been almost completely destroyed throughout the country. There were only a few bishops who remained free, managing to survive in remote parts of the country or under the disguise of ordinary priests. Only a few hundred churches remained open for services. Nationwide, most of the clergy were either imprisoned in concentration camps or had already died there. Church property soon began to be restored, however, and churches that had been closed by the League of Militant Godless were allowed to reopen.

Russian Orthodoxy underwent a renaissance, albeit temporary and limited, during this period. Theological schools were quickly opened, and thousands of churches began to hold regular services (though the number of churches opened paled in comparison to the number of requests submitted by believers and the church). Many priests were released from prison, including bishops, and some of the priests who had been in hiding or who had been put to work in factories returned to their parishes. As Anderson described the situation, icons “reappeared from chests or under beds to hallow the common tasks of the household from behind the ‘lampadka’ in the icon corner” (1961: 300).

The rapprochement between church and state, generally referred to as the concordat, quickly began to develop into a “patriotic union.” On September 4, 1943, Stalin received Patriarchal Locum Tenens Metropolitan Sergii, along with Metropolitan Alexii (Simansky) and Metropolitan Nikolay (Yarushevich), in the Kremlin. Four days later 19 bishops assembled and elected Sergii Patriarch, filling the office that had been vacant since Tikhon’s death in 1925. The new Patriarch then wrote “The Truth about Religion in Russia,” in which he downplayed to the rest of the world the harsh suffering of the church under Soviet rule. Commenting on Soviet Constitutional guarantees of religious freedom, the new Patriarch said, “it may be said with complete objectivity that the Constitution, guaranteeing full freedom of religious worship, definitely in no way restricts the religious life of the faithful and the life of the Church in general.” At the end of the war, Patriarch Alexii (who succeeded Sergii in 1944 following the latter’s death) expressed similar sentiments, telling the world that “Russian Orthodoxy was never subjected to systematic persecution, the Christians were never killed as in ancient Rome. … To speak about intolerance and persecution of religion in the USSR means opposing the truth” (Chumachenko 2002: 53). For his role in these and other efforts, Patriarch Alexii would receive medals “For the Defense of Leningrad” and the order of the “Red Banner of Labor.”

The issue of Stalin’s use of the church during World War II is still a controversial one, but for present purposes it is safe to conclude that, in the face of war against fascism, religion was allowed to play a limited public role and was even seen as being able to function as a patriotic organization. One explanation that has been put forward to explain Stalin’s turn in religion policy is the idea that he might have thought about the use of the churches as a tool of control in the new Communist regimes of Eastern Europe. Pospelovskv argues that Stalin needed to “tame” the Catholic, Protestant, and Orthodox peoples of Western Europe, and he had to practice religious toleration at home in order to not scare them off (1998: 192–93). Once these regimes were securely in the Soviet sphere of influence, however, the Orthodox church once again was of little value to the regime (Chumachenko 2002: 54).

Once the war was over, Stalin found another role for the church—improving the Soviet Union’s image abroad, particularly in the international peace movement and its emphasis on
avoiding nuclear weapons proliferation. Stalin had also seemed to hope for a while that the Patriarchate might be able to develop into a “Moscow Vatican,” with the Russian Patriarch taking on a leading role not only in the Orthodox communion, but among all (non-Catholic) Christians in the world. Such would have allowed him access and leverage in the decolonizing societies of Africa, for instance, as well as helped develop a sympathetic voice in America. The Patriarch’s efforts in this regard, which centered around the establishment of an Ecumenical Orthodox Center in Moscow, never materialized, because to the Eastern Patriarchs it smacked of an attempt to build a Third Rome. While no ecumenical council or even preconciliar council could be held, Moscow did eventually hold a conference for leaders of Orthodox churches in 1948 in celebration of Moscow’s 500 years of autocephaly (Chumachenko 2002: 53–54).

Orthodoxy’s role in perestroika

From the period of Khrushchev’s renewed attack on religion in the early 1960s until the launching of perestroika by Gorbachev in 1987, Orthodoxy played little role in Soviet security affairs. Once Mikhail Gorbachev took over as general secretary of the CPSU in 1985, however, Orthodoxy would come to play a significant role in several events that would ultimately change the way people viewed the Godless regime that governed Holy Russia for more than 70 years—the Communist Party itself. It was two events in particular that resonated most saliently with believers—and even then non-believers—during the final days of the Soviet Union. The first was the 1986 nuclear disaster at Chernobyl, which was quickly interpreted as having been clearly predicted in the Bible in the book of Revelation, where the third angel sounded his trumpet and a star fell from heaven, “and the star is called Wormwood” (chemobyl in Ukrainian). The waters became “bitter” and “many men died of the waters” (Revelations 8:11). Anyone who has gotten a taste of hydrogen peroxide can immediately connect the idea of hydrogen-based nuclear energy fallout with bitter water. Such was seen by many as a sign of the Apocalypse, and the number of people who viewed the Communist Party as the anti-Christ increased dramatically.

The next connection was that of the millennial celebration in 1988 of the Baptism of Rus. One of the most important numbers in New Testament eschatology is the number 1,000, probably being used by as many different groups throughout the history of Christianity to predict the Second Coming. The simultaneity of the millennium of Christianity and perestroika and the liberalization of Soviet religion policy had a unique effect. Those who had been weaned on Soviet atheist propaganda even began to wonder which was truth: the scientific atheism propagated by the Soviet regime, or the beliefs of Christianity. Even the most convinced party member had to give pause and think twice, especially as he watched Mikhail Gorbachev standing beside Patriarch Pimen speaking favorably about the Russian Orthodox church.

In many ways echoing Stalin’s attempt to use the church for foreign policy purposes, Gorbachev sought to combine the millennial celebration with the issue of non-proliferation. The Soviet government arranged for an arms summit with the United States to coincide with the event, as the church was once again seen as useful in the foreign policy realm. In a joint letter to Gorbachev and Reagan, Patriarch Pimen encouraged them in their growing cooperation, and said he and the church were “praying for their success” (Moscow Patriarchate 1998a: 2). Patriarch Pimen then wrote to Soviet presidium chairman Nikolai Ryzhkov just following the summit, expressing the church’s support for their work in disarmament. “Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God,” Pimen wrote the Soviet leader, quoting from the Beatitudes. He also pledged the church’s continued support as the Soviet government worked to build peace among nations (Moscow Patriarchate 1998b: 4). Finally, he also expressed the church’s
desire that, by the time of the bi-millennial celebration of the birth of Christ, the world would be entirely free of nuclear weapons.

Orthodoxy and security in post–Cold War Russia

If during the Cold War the church’s role was limited, the collapse of Communism has allowed Orthodoxy to re-emerge into all facets of Russian life, including security. Examples include:

- assigning protector-saints to the Strategic Rocket Forces and individual tank battalions;
- using religious symbols in official and unofficial military/security capacities;
- constructing chapels on the premises of Russian governmental agencies;
- involving the Patriarch in the inaugural ceremonies of presidents Yeltsin, Putin, and Medvedev.

While some of these acts can arguably be dismissed as mere ceremony and not very egregious violations of Russia’s religion law, other events clearly signal a dangerously close collusion between secular and sacred authority. Foremost among these is allowing the church access to draft legislation prepared for the Duma, a move that suggests that the Russian Orthodox church is now well entrenched and developing into a *de facto* established church. The same can be said about the powerful role that Orthodoxy—and indeed the church itself—is playing in Russian public education, with the requirement for a course on Foundations of Orthodox Culture. Lisovskaya has referred to this process as a “clericalization” of Russian politics (Lisovskaya 2010; Lisovskaya and Karpov 2010). Such a tendency has long existed in Russia. In fact, one of Lenin’s greatest criticisms of the nascent democratic institutions of the 1910s was that the clergy were “clericalizing” the Duma. Something similar is returning today, with the Russian Orthodox church claiming the right to “review” legislation coming before the Duma.

More directly relevant to religion and security, however, is the state’s prohibition of possession of certain types of religious literature, including *The Watchtower* and the writings of the late Turkish Islamic revivalist Said Nursi. A group was even arrested for simply carrying copies of Nursi with them, probably having come from a reading group. This resulted in a violent backlash, and eventually the murder of an Orthodox priest—right in the middle of a religious service—by a group of Muslims. It seems that the government policy of restricting access to what the government considers radicalizing religious literature may be having an effect directly opposite from what was intended.

It is also important to point out that a fringe minority of Orthodox have been involved in violent acts against Muslims. Perhaps the most startling case is that of Artur Ryno, a young Russian student at an Orthodox icon-painting school who was arrested in June 2007 on 37 counts of homicide (see Marsh 2010a; Marsh 2010b). It turns out that he had spent more than a year targeting and killing members of minority ethnic groups in Moscow, mostly migrant workers from the traditionally Muslim regions of Central Asia and the Caucasus. For people such as Ryno—including members of some quasi-fascist groups associated with Russia’s “skinheads”—the combination of Russian nationalism and a perverted form of Orthodox Christianity is proving lethal (Laruelle 2009). National-level data demonstrate that the case of Ryno is not an isolated one, although it is certainly one of the most horrific and extreme cases. The number of murders has risen sharply in recent years. By far, Moscow is the primary locus of not only political extremism but also the violence that too often goes along with it. In 2006–08, official statistics record 146 murders and 649 beatings as being attributed to racist and neo-Nazi groups. For Russia as a whole, the respective numbers are 248 and 1,561 (Verkhovsky 2009). While Russia’s leaders and much of the Russian ethnic population seek an accord with their Muslim compatriots, facts
such as these make it little surprise that many Muslims themselves feel that it is little more than rhetoric and that they are second-class citizens.

Finally, there is one other dimension linking Orthodoxy with security, that of the emerging concept of “spiritual security.” As Payne (2010) has recently argued, the Russian Orthodox church has been collaborating with the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for the purposes of expanding and consolidating the Russian world. This is being done in the name of “spiritual security.” As stated in the 2000 National Security Concept, which outlines Russian national security strategy:

> Assurance of the Russian Federation’s national security also includes protecting the cultural and spiritual-moral legacy and the historical traditions and standards of public life … . There must be a state policy to maintain the population’s spiritual and moral welfare … and counter the adverse impact of foreign religious organizations and missionaries.

The idea that foreign missionaries were engaged in a “war for souls” with the Orthodox church is not a new idea, and had been clearly articulated by then-Metropolitan Kirill (now Patriarch Kirill), when at a meeting of the World Council of Churches he equated such activity with boxing, saying Western churches were entering Russia and competing for Orthodox souls “like boxers in a ring with their pumped-up muscles, delivering blows” (1999: 73–74). As Anderson (2007: 195) phrased it, these “competitors (especially Catholics and ‘sects’ [Protestants]) can be depicted as threats to the religion of the nation, and thus to the nation itself.” It was opinions such as these that led Russia to adopt a new law on religion in 1997, a quasi-establishment arrangement that affords special status to the “four traditional” religions of Russia—Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism—while in reality the other three are named only to deflect criticism of a single established church. Other religions, including Catholicism and various Protestant denominations, are afforded legal protections but face legal restriction on their activities. These religions are not thought of as “Russian” and therefore their members are seen as traitors, or Judases, those who turned their back on Christ.

The joining of forces of the Russian Orthodox church and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs is proving rather effective. For one, it has lead to an increase in professed Orthodox belief among members of the Ministry, and according to a recent survey (Institute of Sociology 2010), this trend is apparent throughout the nation’s police and security forces as well. This increased level of identification, however, has not been coupled with higher rates of attendance at religious services, reportedly because the service-members have no time to attend. The church recognized that problem and in March 2002 it consecrated a small chapel at the Lyubyanka, the old KGB headquarters and home of the current FSB (Federal Security Bureau). During the low-key ceremony, Patriarch Alexey II focused his remarks on the need for concerted efforts aimed at combating the current threats posed to Russia’s “spiritual security” (Payne 2010: 715).

This relationship is proving effective, mostly in attempts to reunite the various churches of the Russian tradition that exist throughout the diaspora and through the reacquisition of Russian church property that had been lost during the Soviet period. They have met some success in these endeavors, especially in the reunion of the Russian Orthodox church with the Soviet-era splinter church, the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR). The implications of such a relationship are significant. As Payne (2010: 727) concludes, “in order to be a world superpower once again, Russia needs an instrument that will serve as the unifying cultural factor in its self-identity. That instrument is the ROC”
Concluding observations

Many in the West, especially in the United States, see the advancement of sustainable security worldwide as inextricably linked with the spread and consolidation of democracy. The linkage between religion and security is therefore often understood as being mediated by democratization. Seen in this light, Orthodoxy is not a significant agent of long-term positive transformation in global security, because it has not mobilized in a major way to support democratization.

Lack of democratization (and of human rights that are part of liberal democracy) has been a source of strain in the U.S.–Russia relationship over the past several years. Vladimir Putin’s shift to the prime ministership in 2008, immediately after his eight-year presidency, led many to fear that democratic elections and transfers of power were mere window dressing. Those suspicions were confirmed in September 2011 when Putin’s successor as president, Dmitry Medvedev, announced at the congress for the United Russia party that he would not seek re-election and that the party should endorse Putin as its candidate. Putin in turn promised the prime ministership to Medvedev, meaning that, as of this writing, the two leaders were set to swap positions in March 2012.

If Russia’s democratic credentials were in question before, this move has made matters worse. As Gvosdev (2011) immediately pointed out, it shows how far Russia is from being able to replicate the electoral model of countries like Japan or India, states where a single strong national party was able to dominate national politics for a prolonged period of time. Unlike the Liberal Democratic Party in Japan or India’s Congress, Gvosdev points out, United Russia is neither a mass party with a strong membership base nor does it represent a series of powerful interest groups that use the party as a means of negotiating policy. Instead, “United Russia remains focused on the person and personality of Putin,” a situation that does not bode well for the country’s long-term development and security.

While the West has decried Putin’s maneuvers, major figures in the Russian Orthodox church have hailed them as an instance of “kindness and integrity”; it has described Putin’s planned bid for the presidency as a “peaceful, dignified, honest, friendly” power transfer agreement (Interfax 2011). Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, head of the Moscow Patriarchate’s office of external church relations, praised the event and argued that it was a sign of “integrity” in politics:

When else has it happened in Russian history that supreme power in the country was handed over in such a peaceful, dignified, honest, friendly way? It is a genuine example of kindness and integrity in politics, an example that, I believe, would have been a source of envy for our predecessors and people who lived in the Soviet period and, moreover, should be a source of envy for the people of the majority of countries in the world, including those that try to lecture us. (Interfax 2011)

It was actually in regard to peace and security that Archpriest Vsevolod justified the move. In a “country where peace, welfare, and even the lives of millions of people depend on the person who heads the vertical structure of authority,” he argued, “the handover of power must be extremely responsible, it must rule out any head-on clashes, not just between individuals but between large social groups that such individuals may persuade to take their side” (Interfax 2011). In this way, stability and security trump democracy and citizen participation in the political process. As we have seen, this propensity has deep roots in the Orthodox world, and in Russia in particular, and remains a challenge in developing a genuine democratic political order.

Two caveats are in order, however. First, it is important to put Orthodoxy’s tendencies toward frank realism and nationalism in historical perspective. Over the centuries the Orthodox
world has faced numerous security challenges in the form of non-Orthodox invaders, from pagan tribes and the Teutonic Order to Muslim Mongols and Turks. In particular, the threat of Muslim invaders looms large in the collective memory of many of the Orthodox-majority nations that neighbor Muslim-majority societies and/or are home to sizable Muslim minorities. Nowhere else on the planet do such larger numbers of Christians and Muslims live side by side as in the Orthodox world. This fact has forced the Orthodox church and the various states that protect their Orthodox subjects to seek an accord with their Muslim neighbors. In contrast to Western perspectives on a clash between Orthodoxy and Islam, this accord has worked remarkably well from a world-historical perspective. While the bloody history of the wars in Bosnia and Chechnya and even the Beslan Hostage Crisis come to mind, one must not forget that these are exceptions in a part of the world where historical animosities run deep and the challenges of political and economic development can often take on religious overtones.

Second, Orthodoxy is not a monolith, and some of its diversity may yet find channels of expression in pro-reform, pro-democratic directions. For example, the posture of Orthodoxy toward the protests following the December 2011 parliamentary elections in Russia shows that there is no single opinion within the church. At one end of the spectrum there were actually Russian Orthodox church clergy taking part in the protests, while on the other, Schema-Archimandrite Iliy (Nozdrin)—rumored to be the Patriarch’s personal priest—called the movement a provocation and claimed that the protests were funded by foreign sources. (The U.S. State Department is believed by many to be behind the protests in Moscow, as well as the Arab Spring.) Archpriest Vsevolod took an intermediate (albeit still distinctly conservative) position, stating that “it is imperative that all allegations of unfair ballot counting” and other irregularities be properly investigated, yet also stating his agreement with Prime Minister Putin that the election results themselves cannot be revised (Melnikov 2011).

In commenting on this situation, Russian journalist Andrei Melnikov summed it up thus:

Church representatives are forced to balance the desire to be at the forefront of public debate and, at the same time, to help the existing power to, as the Patriarch put it, maintain ‘unity in spirit.’ This balance is becoming increasingly more difficult to achieve [for clergy of all levels].

(Melnikov 2011)

Perhaps the same can be said about a healthy balance between Orthodox faith and national security in contemporary Russia. One can only wait and see how that balance will lean as the country either retreats further into the authoritarian tendencies of Putin or moves forward in line with the desire of the thousands of people—including Orthodox leaders and laity alike—who gathered in Bolotnaya Square calling for democratic change.

Note

1 While large sums of government funds have been used in the building of these churches, doing so has rarely come under criticism, as it is seen as the current Russian government rectifying the illegal destruction of the country’s churches during the Soviet era.

References


