ORTHODOXY AND THE NEW RUSSIA
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Abstract: This paper examines the contemporary phenomenon of the re-emergence of the Orthodox Church not only as the leading religious institution of post-Soviet Russia, but also as a core marker of identity. The disappearance of the Soviet Union has produced a profound crisis of identity in Russia. Traditional markers of identity, particularly the Orthodox Church, have assumed an importance hardly anticipated before the collapse of the USSR.

The demise of the Soviet Union was one of the cataclysmic events of the late twentieth century. Hardly predicted even a few years before it occurred, it ushered in a new chapter in the long and turbulent history of Russia.¹ But the new sovereign state that emerged as the Russian Federation (Rossiiskaia federatsiia) remains an enigma for many observers: it appears to share significant characteristics of Western countries while displaying unexpected and prominent features that set it apart. One of these distinguishing features is a widespread devotion to religion that finds its expression in the Orthodox Church. In the paper that

¹ The same can be said mutatis mutandis of the other independent states that appeared on the territory of the former Soviet Union after the collapse of the USSR. There is no suggestion that Russia and the Soviet Union should be considered coterminous.
follows we shall examine the phenomenon of contemporary Orthodoxy and the reasons for its re-emergence as an important marker of Russian identity in the post-Soviet period.

Axiomatic to our argument is the understanding of religious doctrine enunciated by the American Lutheran theologian George Lindbeck. Doctrines, he says, function primarily 'not as expressive symbols or truth claims, but as communally authoritative rules of discourse, attitude and action'. Religion is thus to be understood as a cultural-linguistic phenomenon, and 'like a culture or language it is a communal phenomenon that shapes the subjectivities of individuals rather than being primarily a manifestation of these subjectivities'. There is thus an intuitive sense of how to be religious that is learned in the way children learn their own mother tongue. To learn this as an adult requires learning the doctrinal 'grammar', and the practice is never quite as natural and unstudied as the practice of the child or the one who has learnt as a child. The Orthodox Church in contemporary Russia has three or four generations to catechise who have not learnt their own doctrinal language in this immediate and artless way. It would be a mistake for western observers to underestimate the difficulty of this task, or to presume to assess or judge the Russian Orthodox Church without some attempt themselves to enter this intuitive dimension of what is or is not appropriate speech or behaviour. Lindbeck was thus able to foresee the present catechetical task of the Russian Orthodox Church in the post-Soviet context in which large numbers of people seek something to fill the 'moral vacuum' of post-Soviet Russia: 'to become religious... is to interiorize a set of skills by practice and training... The primary knowledge is not about the religion, nor that the religion teaches such and such, but rather how to be religious in such and such ways'.

**The Place of Orthodox Christianity in Russian Culture**

The current prominence of the Orthodox Church is not entirely new. The church has long held a special place in the religious and cultural life of Russia. It has been a rich source of spirituality and has had a deep influence on creativity of all kinds: literature, music, art,

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3. Lindbeck, 33.


5. Lindbeck, 35.
architecture, philosophy and political thought. At various times the leading role of the church in Russia has been contested and is once more the subject of public debate. But whether the reaction to Orthodoxy is positive or negative, it remains a powerful cultural determinant.

It is clear that Orthodoxy has left a concrete legacy in the Russian language: the Cyrillic alphabet and much of the abstract vocabulary, even certain grammatical forms, can be traced back to Church Slavonic. The very idea of literacy is associated directly with the missionary activity of the church. Such a close historical connection between literacy and Orthodoxy has important implications for the way in which national identity may be constructed. And it differs radically from the history of literacy in the West where the Roman alphabet predated the conversion to Christianity.

Russian literature can also be shown to bear a strong Orthodox imprint. At a rather simple level it is possible to point to the large number of Russian writers who have dealt explicitly with religious questions or been interested in such matters. Dostoevsky comes immediately to mind as an outstanding example, but even an apparently secular author such as Chekhov wrote a remarkable short story with a religious theme, Student ("The Student"). So numerous are the Russian writers who have been preoccupied with problems of spirituality that it is difficult to find comparable national literature in Europe that has treated spiritual themes so extensively. The same may be said of Russian philosophers. If one seeks an explanation for this phenomenon, then it is possible to surmise that it reflects the relatively late secularization of Russia compared with Western Europe and demonstrates the prolonged influence of the church as the major cultural institution in society.

In general one can argue that there can be no comprehension of Russian literary culture without an appreciation of the profound influence of Orthodoxy on Russian writers and thinkers. Whether these writers have embraced Orthodoxy or rejected it in some way, it represents the conceptual foundation of the Russian culture. This is not to say that all Russian writers can be described as Orthodox or anti-Orthodox in a simple sectarian sense,
but rather that their cultural milieu has been so imbued with Orthodoxy that it cannot be understood apart from it.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the Russian Federation the official government view of religion in Russia has been strictly secular. Not even a passing reference to God is made in the Constitution or the Preamble, and there is certainly no provision for an established church. The Constitution demands the absolute separation of church and state. Yet despite these constraints the Orthodox Church has become a vital component of Russian life and its prominent position has been much discussed.

The consideration of religion, and specifically of Russian Orthodoxy, does not however play a prominent part in many recent assessments of the new Russia. The Australian political scientist Leslie Holmes, for example, in a major introduction to post-communist Eastern Europe, makes very few references to the role of religion. The references he does make see religion as filling the already mentioned ‘moral vacuum’ left by the demise of communism, and as representing a temporary process of ‘retraditionalisation’ that can be expected to decrease as Eastern Europe becomes increasingly integrated into the world community, especially through travel. He sees some deplorable elements in the re-emergence of religion, as ‘greater tolerance by the state has in some cases been accompanied by greater intolerance by citizens, who use religious differences as a pretext for open conflict with their neighbors’. But this last statement is also a reason to take religion very seriously as a component, and more likely than not an enduring component, in the emerging Russian national identity.

At the same time it should be noted that even commentators who have attempted an objective and critical account of religion in the new Russia, while taking a firm stand on the need for a secular state, have come to acknowledge that the leading role of Orthodoxy in the search for identity is to be fully expected. As Alexander Agadjanian writes:

This enlisting of Orthodoxy in the shaping of the ‘new nation’ seems natural in Russia (if we take as our starting point the criteria [for the dialectical relationship between the identity of contemporary nations and religion] set out in the introduction), given its dominant position and clear links with a dominant ethnus.  

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9 Holmes, 5.
10 Holmes, 280.
11 Holmes, 278.
If contemporary Russia cannot be adequately understood without acknowledgement of the role of religion, and specifically Orthodoxy within the new Russia, it is equally important that an understanding of Russian Orthodoxy itself be informed by an appropriate feel for the nuances of the Orthodox worldview and piety. As a corollary, a failure at either level—in the acknowledgement of the place of Orthodoxy, or in the appropriate apprehension of its worldview and piety—will lead to misunderstandings and misinterpretations of the new Russia. Andreas Buss offers a number of past misinterpretations of Orthodoxy and consequent misunderstandings of Russia itself, and the danger is that such past misunderstandings may reassert themselves. Some examples given by Buss are a failure to understand differing notions of sovereignty operating in Russia in the 19th century, a failure of understanding that interpreted the 17th century schism as a sort of eastern Protestantism, and perhaps most fundamentally, an inappropriate nominalist gloss on traditional Russian communalism which, Buss argues, should be understood in a far more realist (in the mediaeval sense) fashion.

Assessments of the new Russia, and emerging national identity in this new context, cannot afford to overlook the religious element or to dismiss it as a passing phase. Rosenthal and Bohachevsky-Chomiak note the re-emergence of the religious philosophies of the late 19th century in Russian intellectual life from the 1970s onward. Agadjanian traces the post-Soviet religious resurgence to a larger social and cultural change beginning as early as the 1960s. It may well be that ‘retraditionalisation’ will fade into the background in time, obscuring but not fundamentally changing or replacing the underlying elements of Orthodox worldview and piety. It would be a mistake, for example, to consider the Orthodox Church as little more than a political player, or assume that because the Russian Federation has adopted a modern secular constitution that this accurately describes the national identity of its people. It may also be a mistake to consider the role of Orthodoxy in the new Russia as simply the equivalent of western, especially American, ‘civic religion’ characterised by religious behaviour of an essentially tolerant, lowest-common-denominator variety.

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14 Buss, 117 ff.
15 Buss, 22.
16 Rosenthal and Bohachevsky-Chomiak, vii.
18 Agadjanian, 'Revising Pandora's Gifts', 482.
The Construction of Identity in the New Russia

During the Soviet period a single ideology determined a particular concept of the nation, at that time constituted as the USSR. By contrast, in the post-Soviet period various sets of ideas have competed for dominance and the notion of Russia has been fiercely contested. It is a debate that is characterized by high emotion and intellectual virtuosity, but hardly corresponds to current public arguments in the West. It differs both in style and content. The issues involved are felt to be profoundly important and are often expressed as matters of existential significance.

When the Soviet Union disappeared and newly independent states were created in place of the constituent republics of the USSR, the experience of national independence was not the same in all the new sovereign states. For most countries the experience was a positive one of liberation from what was perceived to be an oppressive regime that stifled national aspirations. In the case of Russia the experience was very different. Certainly Russia became an independent sovereign state, but it also experienced a significant sense of loss. This was the loss of prestige and political influence that had been enjoyed when Russia and the Soviet Union had been closely identified with each other, certainly in the minds of many Russians. After all, the Russian Soviet Federal Socialist Republic (RSFSR) had been by far the largest and most populous of the Soviet republics, the Russian language had served as the lingua franca of the USSR, and Moscow had been its capital. So the conflation of Russia with the USSR, while not strictly accurate, was strongly embedded in popular thinking and was reflected at the lexical level in the common use of Rossiia or Russia to refer to the Soviet Union. The misconception that this entailed may be important in an academic sense, but does not diminish the psychological significance of the identification of Russia with the Soviet Union for the construction of the concept of the nation. Nor should the disappearance of the Soviet Union be underestimated as a factor contributing to widespread anxiety in Russia about the country’s place in the world. This situation would seem to reflect a deep crisis of identity induced by the demise of the Soviet Union and the passing of a clearly defined notion of what constitutes the nation. The current debate about identity in Russia is therefore driven by the pressing need to re-invent the nation.

What may be termed the official contemporary view of the nation is expressed in the Constitution of the Russian Federation. This is a model secular Constitution that eschews the rhetoric of nationalism and acknowledges Russia’s place in the world community. It defines
the nation in strictly constitutional terms as a democratic state governed by the rule of law in which power is vested in the people and all citizens have equal rights irrespective of their ethnicity. Such a view finds corresponding expression at the level of the lexicon in the deliberate and precise juxtaposition of the adjectives rossiiskii and russkii as distinct terms denoting national and ethnic identity.\textsuperscript{19} Even the Preamble to the Constitution avoids references to the glories of the past, but stresses the principles that should inform the present and the future. It affirms the multiethnic character of the population by describing the people of Russia as mnogonacional'nyi.

This official view of the nation depends for general support in Russia on widespread acceptance of the Constitution and the polity it defines as markers of national identity. Yet the Constitution lacks popular appeal and its status has been undermined. The previous Constitution of the USSR was seen by many as failing to guarantee the lawful conduct of political affairs, while in post-Soviet Russia there is also a widely held view of a discrepancy between the functioning of the political system and the requirements of the Constitution.

If the Constitution does not serve as a strong marker of national identity in Russia, then the quest for identity will encourage other markers to take its place. And there is a tendency for traditional markers of identity to emerge as substitutes, since they are already well-established as powerful labels of self-definition and have an emotional appeal and the weight of tradition that the recently written Constitution does not. Such a marker is the Orthodox faith.

Orthodoxy as a Marker of Identity

But while Orthodoxy functions as an important identity marker in this construction, it does not mean that it is confined to this role or that this role adequately represents it. There are significant doctrines of Orthodoxy that make claims to universality and that transcend notions of national and ethnic identity. Some within the Orthodox Church prefer to stress these doctrines, while others are more inclined to emphasize its national importance. It is too simple to see the role of Orthodoxy simply in terms either of idealist universalism or of (political) realism as a badge of identity giving rise to intolerance.

The official view of the church proclaims its universal and supranational character. While also encouraging national loyalty, the church affirms the equality of all peoples and the

\textsuperscript{19} This is discussed in greater detail by Jonathon Clarke, 'Language and the Construction of Identity in Russia' CERC, Working Papers Series, no.1/2005.
subordination of the state to God. This dual emphasis is expressed in the words of the official website of the Moscow Patriarchate:

By its very nature the Church has a universal and, consequently, supranational character. In the Church ‘there is no distinction between Jew and Greek’ [Rom.10.12]. …
However, the universal character of the Church does not mean that Christians should not have the right to national independence, to national self-expression. On the contrary, the Church combines a universal origin with a national one. Thus, the Orthodox Church, while universal, consists of a multitude of Autocephalous Local Churches. Orthodox Christians, acknowledging that they are citizens of a heavenly country, ought not to forget about their earthly homeland. …
Contrary to Orthodox ethics is the division of peoples into superior and inferior, the belittling of any ethnic or civil nation. All the more incompatible with Orthodoxy are doctrines which put the nation in the place of God or reduce faith to one of the aspects of national consciousness.  

If one seeks an explanation for the prominence of Orthodoxy in this construction of national identity, then it should be remembered that the Orthodox Church represents one of the very few public institutions from pre-revolutionary Russia that has survived the cataclysm of the Soviet period and continues to exist in the post-Soviet state that emerged after the disappearance of the USSR. In a country where the political structures have been subjected to two major social revolutions in less than eighty years, and where the polity has been fundamentally altered as a result, the church offers continuity with the past and a powerful means of self-definition.

But what Orthodoxy provides in contemporary Russia is a sense of meaning that is difficult to derive simply from the political and economic system. It offers a coherent view of the world that clearly defines the place of the individual and affirms human identity as the image of God.  

Orthodoxy imparts value to the nation through its long and close association with Russian culture and history. Because it has endured the trials of the Soviet period it remains a symbol of continuity. At a time when the search for identity in Russia is so pressing, the conceptual framework of Orthodoxy has enormous intellectual and emotional appeal.

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20 From the official website of the Moscow Patriarchate, available at http://www.mospat.ru/text/conception/id/50.html
21 ‘Man is considered to be the highest expression of God’s creative process, while God is regarded as the absolute value, the ultimate criterion of truth for all living creatures.’ (Bishop Hilarion Alfeyev, ‘Christianity and the Challenge of Militant Secularism’ Paper read at the Conference of the Australian and New Zealand Association of Theological Schools, 5-8 July 2004, Melbourne, 1.
The strength of this appeal is not hard to demonstrate. It is reflected in the programme of a political party like the Christian Democratic Party of Russia (Rossiiskaia Kristiansko-Demokraticheskaia part’ia) that shows the same reliance on the Orthodox view of humanity in relation to God:

The permanent Christian value and basic principle of Christian democracy is the freedom and sovereignty of the human individual as the image and likeness of God. The lawful social state, whose basis is a humane democratic constitution, must become the chief guarantor of the free development both of the individual and of the society as a whole.\(^{22}\)

References to Orthodoxy abound in the press and even representatives of Russian popular culture articulate their devotion to Orthodoxy as a source of inspiration and renewal. As the rock musician Konstantin Kinchev stated forcefully in an interview published in 1997:

Well, to speak now of culture in general is terrible. In as much as precisely what constituted the cultural wealth of Russia was being destroyed for seventy years. But, nevertheless, even today culture exists – in everything fundamental. The Orthodox Church exists, and there are creative personalities that understand the necessity of a Christian renaissance.\(^{23}\)

To this we could add the recent statement by President Vladimir Putin on his visit to Mt Athos that the revival of faith was the foundation of the current rebirth of Russia, and that he welcomed the restoration of the historic relations between the Holy Mountain and the Russian state – relations that ‘should be harmonious and based on absolute trust and common spiritual ideals’.\(^{24}\) It is the nature of these ‘common spiritual ideals’ and this ‘Christian renaissance’ in Russia that needs sympathetic but not uncritical theological exploration.

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\(^{22}\)See the Party’s Programme (in Russian), available at www.aha.ru/-rcdp/km_ains.htm


\(^{24}\)Cited in Europatica, N. 75 (October 2005) available at: http://www.orthodoxeurope.org/