Russian Orthodox Christians and Their Orientation toward Church and State

CHRISTOPHER MARSH

As the Soviet Union began to experiment with policies of liberalization under the leadership of Mikhail Gorbachev, the church was one of the first social institutions to benefit from the Kremlin's new policies. By 1988, Gorbachev had agreed to grant the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) the status of a legitimate public institution, thus ending the policy of militant atheism that had stood for almost seventy years. From that point on, official persecution came to an end and religion in Russia underwent a renaissance.[1] The new religious environment was soon codified with the 1990 "Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Belief," a very liberal document that introduced legal religious equality and the separation of church and state for the first time in Russian history. As Derek H. Davis points out, however, the 1990 law "was perhaps an idealized vision of what Russia might be in theory, but nevertheless an overestimate of what Russia was prepared to be in practice."[2] As Western religious organizations

---

•CHRISTOPHER MARSH (B.A., M.S., Central Connecticut State University; Ph.D., University of Connecticut) is associate professor of political science and church-state studies, Baylor University. He is author of *Unparalleled Reforms: China's Rise, Russia's Fall, and the Interdependence of Transition, Russia at the Polls: Voters, Elections, and Democratization*, and is editor of *Burden or Blessing? Russian Orthodoxy and the Construction of Civil Society and Democracy*, among others. His articles have appeared in *The National Interest, Religion, State & Society, Nationalism and Ethnic Politics*, and *Eurasian Geography & Economics*, among others. His research interests range from post-communist politics and society to religion and international affairs. The author would like to thank the following individuals for their comments and suggestions: Peter Berger, Gregory Klutcharev, Inna Naletova, Jerry Pankhurst, Ingeborg Gabriel, Irina Papkova, and James Warhola. Thanks go as well to Helen Albert and Amanda Napoli for their research assistance in completing this article.

---

1. Andrew Greeley, "A Religious Revival in Russia?" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 33 (1994): 253-72.
2. Derek H. Davis, "The Russian Orthodox Church and the Future of Russia," *Journal of*

began to operate in Russia and new religious movements began to emerge, they were met with resistance not only by many of their intended converts, but by government officials and the Russian Orthodox Church as well, where they were seen as presenting a threat to Orthodoxy and even to Russian national identity.[3]

This resistance soon resulted in attempts to change the 1990 law. The first such attempt was a 1993 amendment that sought to alter religious freedom in Russia fundamentally by restricting sharply the rights of foreign religious associations and by rendering state support to Russia's "traditional confessions," defined as Orthodoxy, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism.[4] Although it passed the Supreme Soviet, it was eventually rejected by President Yeltsin. With the situation no longer being addressed at the federal level, many regions began to take it upon themselves to draft and enact regional laws on religion which were more restrictive than the 1990 federal law. The first region to do so was Tula, which passed a restrictive law in November 1994. This law was quickly used as a model by other regions, and in a brief period of time, many regions placed on the books laws which violated the federal law and constitutional guarantees.[5] This situation was dealt with in 1997, not by the regional laws being brought into conformity with the constitution, but by the constitution being brought into conformity with the more restrictive regional laws, with the passage of a new religion law at the federal level. The new Russian law "Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations" followed the spirit of the vetoed 1993 amendment, and essentially set up a two-tier system, distinguishing between religious "organizations" (which have operated in Russia for at least fifteen years) and religious "associations." While the former are granted a broad range of privileges, the latter are permitted to worship but face restrictions on their property rights, educational activities, publishing, and evangelism activities.

While the situation in Russia has since evolved, with the Constitutional Court and other court decisions interpreting the law somewhat less restrictively than was initially anticipated, there are still regular and severe violations of religious freedom in Russia, ranging from the denial of visas to clergy and religious workers to the

---

Church and State 44 (Autumn 2002): 663.

3. Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk, "Gospel and Culture," in *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia: The New War for Souls*, ed. John Witte and Michael Bourdeaux (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books), 66-76.

4. Harold Berman, "Freedom of Religion in Russia: An Amicus Brief for the Defendant," in *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia: The New War for Souls*, ed. Witte and Bourdeaux, 275-76.

5. Laurel Homer and Lawrence Uzzell, "Federal and Provincial Religious Freedom Laws in Russia: A Struggle for and against Federalism and the Rule of Law," in *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia: The New War for Souls*, ed. Witte and Bourdeaux, 304. See also Marat Shterin and James Richardson, "Local Laws Restricting Religion in Russia: Precursors of Russia's New National Law," *Journal of Church and State* 40 (Spring 1998): 319-41.

"liquidation" of religious associations that fail to meet the requirements for registration as determined by the Ministry of Justice. Issues of religious freedom and church-state relations in Russia, therefore, remain some of the most critical issues surrounding the establishment of democracy and liberty in a state with a long history of struggling with authoritarian rule. As the U.S. Department of State notes in its most recent report on religious freedom in Russia, "Although the Constitution provides for the equality of all religions before the law and the separation of church and state, the Government did not always respect these provisions" in practice.[6]

The religious freedom situation and contemporary patterns of church-state relations in Russia are variously interpreted as meaning one of two things, and sometimes both. First, they are taken as an indication that Eastern Orthodoxy simply does not permit any more tolerant form of church-state relations than this, and that Russia and other Orthodox societies are therefore "burdened" by their religious heritage (incidentally, this is even the conclusion that many Russian reformers reached hundreds of years ago as they sought to bring Protestantism into fashion in the country).[7] Secondly, the situation is understood as simply a further continuation of a pattern that is as old as Russia's thousand-year history of Eastern Orthodox Christianity itself. While both conclusions are tempting for Western Christians to draw, they are equally erroneous. The historical record is actually quite clear on the matter. Scholars with intimate knowledge of the Orthodox tradition and a more nuanced understanding of the history of religion in Russia, such as James Billington, Nikolas Gvosdev, and Nicolai Petro, for example, have identified numerous positive attributes in Russia's religious heritage, focusing on the role of religion as a mobilizing force, Orthodoxy's traditions of a symphonic ideal between church and state, ecclesiastical elections, and the conciliar principle of *sobornost'*.[8] As for the much-touted subservience of the church to the Russian state, almost without exception it is overlooked or ignored that the elimination of the Patriarchate and the establishment of the Holy Governing Synod by Peter the Great in 1721 was actually a reaction to initiatives taken by the church during the seventeenth century as Patriarch Nikon sought to bring the state to heel. It is important to bear in mind, moreover, that Peter's actions were largely influenced by

6. United States Department of State, *International Religious Freedom Report, 2004.* Washington, D.C.: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, 2004.

7. Michael Radu, "The Burden of Eastern Orthodoxy," *Orbis* 42 (Spring 1998): 283-300.

8. James Billington, "The Case for Orthodoxy," *New Republic* 210, no. 22 (30 May 1994): 24-28; Nikolas Gvosdev, *Emperors and Elections: Reconciling the Orthodox Tradition with Modern Politics* (Huntington, N.Y.: Troitsa Books, 2000); Nicolai Petro, *The Rebirth of Russian Democracy: An Interpretation of Political Culture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

Western thought and even specific recommendations.[9] Peter's church reforms, therefore, broke with the Orthodox tradition of church-state relations and were an adoption of a more Protestant approach. The fact remains, however, that neither approach is an example of the symphonic ideal, where the church and state work together in harmony, with the monarch ruling the secular realm and religious leaders guiding spiritual matters.

One reason why there is such confusion and disagreement in much of the current research on Orthodoxy in the post-communist world is the lack of conceptual clarity over the specific object of study. Are we talking about the Russian Orthodox Church and the Moscow Patriarchate, or are we speaking more generally about Eastern Orthodoxy as a religion? While the politics of the Russian Orthodox Church is certainly an important topic of inquiry, as we will see from the data analyzed below, Russian Orthodoxy is more than the Moscow Patriarchate. As Naletova phrases it, Orthodox religious life also exists "beyond the church walls," through "external" or "under-institutionalized expressions of religiosity," including church fairs (*yarmarki*), processions, and such practices as bathing in holy springs, keeping holy water at home, and even having priests bless one's home.[10] As she rightly points out, the study of Orthodoxy in Russia has focused too much on churchliness (*votserkovlenie*) and not enough on other aspects of Orthodox religiosity. Moreover, as Russia continues to operate within a democratic framework—no matter how manipulated by power and wealth it may be—the views of the country's citizens regarding these issues become just as relevant as the political position of the ROC and the proclivities of various politicians. Popular conceptions of Orthodoxy, therefore, also have serious implications for Russia's new political and social order, and if we are to understand the context in which Russian church-state relations are evolving, we must not overlook the actual religious, civic, and political orientations of Russian Orthodox Christians.

---

9. Dmitry Pospielovsky, *The Orthodox Church in the History of Russia* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 111-12.

10. Inna Naletova, "Orthodoxy Beyond the Church Walls," doctoral dissertation in progress, Boston University, 2005. While similar to Pollack's concept of "religiousness outside the church," Naletova does not consider these forms "new" or less traditional, which are central components to Pollack's thesis. Cf. Detlef Pollack, "Religiousness Inside and Outside the Church in selected Post-Communist Countries of Central and Eastern Europe," *Social Compass* 50 (2003): 321-34.

RELIGIOSITY, RELIGIOUS PLURALISM, AND CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS IN RUSSIA

In a recent study of religion and politics across the globe, Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart find that, contrary to religious market theory, greater religious freedom in post-communist societies is associated with lower levels of religious freedom, and that religious pluralism is strongly and *negatively* related to religious participation and frequency of prayer.[11] This implies that the greater the degree of religiosity, the less religious freedom there tends to be in post-communist societies. This finding not only surprises and confuses Norris and Ingelhart, it also runs counter to the supply-side theory of religious competition. As Christopher Marsh and Paul Froese argued in their analysis of freedom in Russia, however, this makes sense when one realizes that what is happening is that, in countries like Russia with a hegemonic religious tradition, political actors at multiple levels seek to limit the religious freedom of members of minority religions.[12] Indeed, the U.S. report on religious freedom in Russia is replete with references to politicians at all levels lobbying for policies favorable to the ROC and discriminatory toward other traditions (not to mention cases of outright antisemitism). In order to understand the development of church-state relations in post-communist Russia, therefore, continued research must look at more than religion laws and political rhetoric coming out of the Moscow Patriarchate, and to actual political actors at all levels.

This study seeks to move even a step lower to determine the orientations of members of Russian Orthodox Christians toward issues of church and state. While the political maneuvering of the Moscow Patriarchate and the religious gesturing of the Kremlin are at the center of the study of church and state in Russia, the beliefs and values of Russian citizens regarding such issues remain seriously understudied. Do Russian Orthodox Christians look to the church to give answers about social problems, and perhaps even to advise them on how they should vote? And do they welcome the idea of the church playing a strong role in politics? By exploring such issues I hope here to finally begin to shed light on the views of Russia's citizens toward issues of church and state that have thus far remained unexamined with the use of empirical data.

---

11. Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart, *Sacred and Secular: Religion and Politics Worldwide* (Cambridge, Mass.: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 126-27.

12. Christopher Marsh and Paul Froese, "The State of Freedom in Russia: A Regional Analysis of Freedom of Religion, Media, and Markets," *Religion, State & Society* 32 (2004): 137-49.

Quantitative Analysis of Russian Religious Values

Sociologists of religion and others have long taken advantage of modern survey methods to tap into the religious orientations of people across the globe, and Russia is no exception. Since the onset of political openness to survey research in Russia and other post-communist societies over the past decade and a half, a wide array of studies has been undertaken to assess value orientations, both within individual countries and cross-nationally, on indicators such as religious belief, support for democracy, trust among citizens, orientations toward civic life, and other significant variables. Little if any attention, however, has been devoted to the critically important issue of how differing *types* and *levels* of Orthodox religiosity may be related to individuals' value orientations toward civic life, religion and politics, and church-state relations.[13] One of the primary reasons for this is that these studies tend to classify their respondents by how they answered a single question on religious belief or practice. For example, the major studies of the value orientations of religious believers in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union use the response to a question on religious denomination to code their respondents as Orthodox Christians. While self-identification is an accepted means of classifying religious believers in the West, in an environment like post-communist Europe where for decades a policy of forced secularization attempted to inculcate believers with "scientific atheism" while destroying religious life,[14] such an approach is problematic.

In the two most thorough analyses of Orthodox religious life in Russia, V.F. Chesnokova has shown that religiosity and churchliness are complex processes that cannot be gauged by any one indicator.[15] Her analysis explored the Orthodox religiosity of Russians using a complex array of indicators, including belief in God, regular church attendance, the taking of communion, making confession, fasting at prescribed times, praying at home with the use of church prayer books (*molitoslov*), and knowledge of Old Church Slavonic sufficient to understand the liturgy. Understood this way, it was clear that only a

---

13. While Greeley considered many of the factors I examine here, he compared East Germans with Russians, with no distinction between the respondents' religious preference, religiosity, or beliefs, making it impossible to determine the ways in which religious preference or adherence impact political and civic views. Likewise, in their analysis of religion and political choice in Russia, Hesli *et al.* grouped together all Orthodox adherents, regardless of their particular beliefs or levels of attendance at church services. Vicki Hesli, Ebru Erdem, William Reisinger, and Arthur Miller, "The Patriarch and the President: Religion and Political Choice in Russia," *Demokratizatsiya: The Journal of Post-Soviet Democratization* 7 (Winter 1999): 42-72.

14. Paul Froese, "Forced Secularization in Soviet Russia: Why an Atheistic Monopoly Failed," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 43 (2004): 1, 35-50.

15. V. F. Chesnokova, *Protsess Votserkovleniya Naseleniya v Sovremennoi Rossii* (Moscow: Fond "Obshchestvennoe Mnenie," 1994 and 2000).

very small number of self-identified Orthodox Christians were "fully churched," while the majority of respondents exhibited extremely low levels of churchliness. These findings, although perhaps more nuanced, are quite in line with the conclusions reached by several other Russian scholars who have argued that the number of "real," "traditional" or "churchly" Orthodox in Russia is no larger than 5-7 percent of the population, with other Orthodox believers being only "nominal" Orthodox, or as Varzanova has phrased it, Orthodox only in a "cultural sense."[16]

While Chesnokova and her team's work is a major contribution to the field of the scientific study of religion, the fact that their survey does not contain a sufficient number of questions on issues of politics, society, and economics means that it will be difficult to incorporate her achievements into studies that focus on such factors. In order to examine the religious and political value orientations of Russian Orthodox Christians, data from the World Values Survey is used. While today there are numerous surveys of Russia which one could employ, no other survey has the range of questions relating to religious belief, practice, and spirituality, along with accompanying questions on social values, civic engagement, and political orientations. This study uses data from the most recent wave (1999-2001) of the World Values Survey, released in the spring of 2004. This dataset gives us a reliable look at contemporary Russian society after more than a decade of social, economic, and political reform, including significant changes in the role of religion in individual and public life and the laws governing public religiosity.

Since my concern here is only with Orthodox Christians in Russia, as opposed to all religious believers of various persuasions, I initially coded all respondents as members of one of two groups; either Orthodox Christians (1,187 self-identified Orthodox believers) or non-religious Russians (those respondents who did not identify as a member of a religious community, 1,210). The remaining non-Orthodox believers are thus excluded from the analysis, a group which includes 75 Muslims, 3 Buddhists, 1 Jew, 7 Protestants, 6 Catholics, and 11 "others" (for a total sample size of 2,500). While it is unfortunate to have to exclude these cases from the analysis, the relative numbers of these respondents is insufficient to be able to

16. M. P. Mchedlov, "Religioznoe vozrozhdenie v Rossii: Prichiny, Kharakter, Tendentsii," *Obnovlenie Rossii: Trudnyi Poisk Reshchenii* (Moscow: Rossiiskii Nezavisimyi Institut Sotsial'nykh i Natsional'nykh Problem, 1992), 102-12; M. P. Mchedlov, "Novyi tip veruyushchego na poroge tret'ego tysyacheletiya," *Istoricheckii Vestnik* 9-10 (2000); M. P. Mchedlov, "Ob osobennostyakh mirovozreniya veruyushchikh v post-Sovetskoi Rossii," *Religiya i Pravo* 1 (2002): 15-18; T. Varzanova, "Religioznoe vozrozhdenie i molodyozh'," in V. I. Dobrinina, T. N. Kychtevich, and S. V. Tumanov, eds. *Kul'turnie miry molodykh Rossiyan: Tri zhiznennye situatsii* (Moscow: Moscow State University, 2000), 167-91; T. Varzanova, "Religioznaya situatsiya v Rossii," *Russkaya Mysl'* 4165 (1997).

generalize to their broader religious traditions (i.e. it is not possible to generalize to all Protestants in Russia based upon the 7 Protestants in the survey). The option of including all believers in a single category is also not a suitable solution, since the particular beliefs and practices of such diverse traditions may skew the results. These methodological choices, however, leave us with an excellent dataset to analyze Orthodox Christians alongside non-religious Russians, which together compromise around 95 percent of the population.

Religious Beliefs and Behavior

Before one can explore the civic, political, and social values of Russian Orthodox Christians, one must first probe issues of religious belief and behavior in order to determine the characteristics that comprise this group. The first set of questions I explore, therefore, relates to the role religion plays in the lives of Orthodox believers, in terms of their beliefs in God and sin, frequency of prayer, and church attendance (see table 1). While it is not very surprising that less than 30 percent of those who did not identify themselves as members of any particular religious tradition said that they believed in God, only 97 percent of Orthodox Christians felt the same way, meaning that 3 percent of Orthodox believers polled did not believe in God, despite identifying themselves as Orthodox Christians. While a less significant deviation from church teachings than not believing in God, only 85 percent of Orthodox said that they believed in sin, while less than 60 percent stated that they believed in life after death (54 percent) or heaven (58 percent). For the non-religious, these numbers were also quite low, 13.6 and 10.7 percent, respectively, although belief in sin was the highest of all beliefs held by this group, at almost 40 percent.

Table 1: Orthodox Christians and their Religious Beliefs

	Orthodox Christians (percent)	Non-Religious (percent)
Believe in God	97	29.6
Believe in sin	85	39.3
Believe in life after death	54	13.6
Believe in heaven	58	10.7

When looking at religious behavior as opposed to only beliefs, there seems to be a sharp disparity (see Table 2). While 86 percent of Orthodox Christians take comfort and find strength in their religion, only slightly more than 5 percent attend religious services weekly, although 11 percent do so at least once per month. This phenomenon

is in some ways similar to that of "believing without belonging," which Grace Davie identified as a trend in England after World War II,[17] although Naletova argues that many still take part in a vibrant Orthodox life connected to "external" forms of religiosity.[18] Evidence in support of her position is apparent when one considers that, although there are low levels of church attendance, more than one quarter pray at least once per day, while more than half (56 percent) regularly take moments of prayer or meditation. Nevertheless, there does appear to be a spiritual disconnect for many, as only 60 percent responded that God played an important part in their lives.

Table 2: Orthodox Christians and their Religious Feelings and Behavior

	Orthodox Christians (percent)	Non-Religious (percent)
Receive comfort and strength from religion	86	20.4
How important is God in your life[a]	60.4	12.4
Moments of prayer or meditation	56	10.8
Pray outside of religious services (at least once per day)	27.9	3.8
Church attendance: once per week (once per month)	5.4 (11.0)	.3 (1.3)

Note: [a] 7-10 on 10-point scale

As Table 2 makes clear, these levels of religiosity are much higher on every question for Orthodox Christians than for the non-religious, indicating that the categorization made between Orthodox Christians and non-religious people is a valid one. As Chesnokova's work suggests, the data also indicate that there are great divisions among those who identify themselves as Orthodox. For example, only a small percentage of self-identifying Orthodox Christians attend church regularly, while some even state that they do not believe in God, leading one to wonder how individuals construe their responses in their own minds. This observed variation in relative levels of religious devotion and the insights gleaned from Chesnokova's work suggest that it might be useful to categorize the respondents further, breaking the group of Orthodox believers down into two distinct categories. The first category we can label the devout Orthodox, and include only those respondents who identified themselves as Orthodox Christians, who also stated that

17. Grace Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994).

18. Naletova, "Orthodoxy Beyond the Church Walls."

they believe in God, and who also attend church services at least once per month, all key indicators according to Chesnokova. These selection criteria result in 186 devout Orthodox Christians in the survey. The remaining self-identifying Orthodox (1,001), some of whom do not even believe in God and none of whom attend church services more than a few times per year, we can label as cultural Orthodox. The third category remains the same, comprised of the 1,210 respondents who listed no religious affiliation.

The Babushka Factor

The specific characteristics of the survey respondents can be gleaned from these three groups. In terms of level of education and rural/urban setting, there is very little variation among the groups. When it comes to gender, however, the differences are remarkable. It is clear that the devout Orthodox are primarily comprised of females 55 and over (half of all devout Orthodox), with a slightly less likely chance to have ever been married. There are also many more female cultural Orthodox than male, with two out of three cultural Orthodox being women. The cultural Orthodox also tend to be slightly younger than the devout, with a larger percentage of cultural Orthodox in the 18-34 and 35-54 years old age brackets than the devout Orthodox. This trend is also apparent with the non-religious, with more non-religious in the two younger age brackets than either Orthodox group.

Table 3: Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents by Religiosity Category

	Devout Orthodox	Cultural Orthodox	Non-Religious
male/female	18/82	33/67	52/48
18-34 years old	18.3	22.1	31.8
35-54 years old	31.2	39	42.8
55 and over	50.5	39	25.3
Higher education (at least some)	21.5	19.7	21.5
City/small town	69.4/30.6	63.6/36.4	66.2/33.8
Married (widowed)	41.1 (16.8)	51 (13)	56.1 (12.4)

These characteristics suggest a few things. First, the phenomenon of the *babushkas* (grandmas) who stand guard over church services and ensure that codes of conduct are adhered to is real (as if empirical confirmation were necessary). More significant, however, is that a relatively large percentage of devout Orthodox are between the ages of

18 and 34 (just below 20 percent), confirming the trend being observed of the younger generation finding their way to church. These two factors combined indicate that churchliness among Russians may be on the rise, as there is not only a healthy number of women joining the church in later stages of their lives (and the large number of cultural Orthodox women are likely to become more devout as they age), but the younger generation appears to be finding the church earlier in their lives as well.

Views of the Church

Using these two distinct categories of Orthodox believers in Russia, we can now begin to examine their views of the church itself (see Table 4). Surveys regularly find that the church is the most trusted institution in Russian society, with around 60 percent of all Russians expressing confidence in this important civil society institution. Using our distinct categories, however, we can see that there is in fact great variation in levels of trust. Devout Orthodox have the highest levels of trust in the church, with over 92 percent saying that they have either a great deal of trust in the church (73.3 percent), or quite a lot of trust (19.3 percent). It is also significant that the devout Orthodox are the only group that has more responses in the great deal category than in the quite a lot category.

Table 4: Orthodox Christians and their Views of the Church

	Devout Orthodox	Cultural Orthodox	Non-Religious
Trust in church: great deal (quite a lot)	73.3 (19.3)	32.6 (43.9)	5.7 (30)
The church answers spiritual problems	89.6	75.6	36.3
The church answers moral problems	87.4	71.7	36
The church answers family problems	78.5	57.7	24
The church answers social problems	41.5	23.7	9.6

The cultural Orthodox still have a high level of trust in the church, with a total of over 76 percent for both positive responses, but more have quite a lot of trust in the church (43.9 percent) than a great deal of trust (32.6 percent). Interestingly, and something that has remained overlooked by those who look at trust in institutions, is the fact that very few non-religious Russians have a great deal of trust in the church, although a modest 30 percent do respond that they have quite a lot of trust.

In addition to trusting the church, Orthodox Christians in Russia also believe that the church provides answers to people's spiritual, moral, and family problems. While these numbers are significantly higher for devout Orthodox (89.6, 87.4, and 78.5 percent) than for cultural Orthodox (75.6, 71.7, and 57.7), the disparity in responses is not as great as for trust. Quite interestingly, more than one third of non-religious Russians still felt that the church provides answers to people's spiritual and moral problems. It is also significant to note that as we move away from the spiritual realm, the church is seen as having less relevance. Finally, although the church is seen as having a significant role to play in people's spiritual, moral, and family life, much fewer respondents in each group felt that the church could provide answers to social problems, ranging from 41.5 percent and 23.7 percent for devout Orthodox and cultural Orthodox, respectively, to under 10 percent for the non-religious (9.6).

Orientation toward Society

While the church might not be seen as having the answers to society's problems, Orthodox Christians in Russia are not distanced from community life and the plight of those around them (see Table 5). Nearly 80 percent of devout Orthodox responded that they were concerned with the sick and disabled, with more than 50 percent responding that they were even prepared to help in any way they could. Cultural Orthodox were not far behind, with nearly 70 percent and just below 50 percent feeling the same way. Finally, non-religious Russians were only a step behind the Orthodox, with nearly 60 percent and 45 percent, respectively, expressing concern and willingness to help the sick.

Table 5: Orthodox Christians and their Views of Society

	Devout Orthodox	Cultural Orthodox	Non-Religious
Concerned with sick and disabled[a]	78.7	67.6	58.5
Concerned with fellow countrymen[a]	28.8	18.8	19.7
Concerned with neighbors[a]	21.8	17.1	11.9
Prepared to help sick and disabled[b]	53.2	47.4	44.3
Prepared to help neighbors[b]	31.4	26.8	22.6

Note:[a] very much and much [b] absolutely yes and yes

When it comes to one's neighbors, however, all groups are less concerned and prepared to help than they are for the sick and disabled. For example, only 31.4 percent of devout Orthodox were prepared to help their neighbors, while 26.8 percent of cultural Orthodox and 22.6

percent of non-religious Russians responded the same way. Quite interesting, however, is the fact that all three groups were more concerned with their fellow countrymen than their neighbors. While 28.8 percent of devout Orthodox were concerned for their fellow countrymen, only 21.8 percent were concerned for the living conditions of their neighbors, with similar disparities for the cultural Orthodox and non-religious respondents. One possible explanation for this may be the ethnic dimension of Russian life, since respondents may have had in mind their ethnic kin when being asked about fellow countrymen. In this regard, there is a marked tendency for all Russians, no matter what their religious behavior, to identify more with their "imagined" national community than their actual neighborhood community.[19] To the extent that this is so, it raises serious and somewhat disturbing questions about the prospect of genuine democratization given the world-historical experience of the vibrancy of *national* level democracy being contingent upon the vibrancy of *local* level civic engagement.[20]

Church-State Relations and Religion in the Public Square

Having examined a range of religious, civic, and political orientations, we can now turn to the issue of church-state relations in Russia, a topic that has rarely been examined with the use of survey data. As noted above, a significant disparity exists among devout Orthodox, cultural Orthodox, and non-religious Russians in terms of their belief that the church can provide answers to social problems, with more than 40 percent of devout Orthodox feeling so while less than 10 percent of non-religious respondents agreed. These data suggest that the overwhelming majority of Russians simply do not view the Orthodox Church as a significant source of social improvement. They also imply that Russian public opinion is almost certain to be significantly divided regarding such issues as the separation of church and state and the role of religion in the public square.

To begin with an objective question, devout Orthodox are significantly more likely to believe that the church influences national politics, irrespective of whether or not they feel that this is a positive thing, with 43.8 percent of devout Orthodox and 39.6 percent of cultural Orthodox holding this opinion, as compared to only 31.4 percent of non-religious respondents (see table 6). And when asked whether they felt that religious leaders *should not* influence government decisions, 76.5 percent of the non-religious agreed, while

19. Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

20. In the Russian case, this issue has been explored most robustly by James Warhola in "Is the Russian Federation Becoming More Democratic: Moscow-Regional Relations and the Development of the Post-Soviet Russian State," *Democratization* 6 (1999): 42-69.

only 48.6 percent of the devout thought similarly. Finally, all respondents were less open to religious leaders influencing the way people vote, again with non-religious Russians more opposed to this practice than the devout (79.2 percent compared to 63.6 percent, respectively).

Table 6: Orthodox Christians and their Views on Church-State Relations

	Devout Orthodox	Cultural Orthodox	Non-Religious
Churches have an influence on national politics[a]	43.8	39.6	31.4
Religious leaders should not influence government decisions[a]	48.6	55.4	67.5
Religious leaders should not influence how people vote[a]	63.6	71.9	79.2
Politicians who do not believe in God are unfit for public office[a]	46	26.1	9.5
It would be better for Russia if more people with religious beliefs held office[a]	80.2	55.5	25.2

Note: [a]strongly agree and agree

When we look more directly at issues relating to the impact of religious belief, the disparities in opinion among the three groups become even clearer. While less than 10 percent of non-religious respondents felt that politicians who do not believe in God are unfit for public office, this number more than doubles for cultural Orthodox (26.1 percent) and reaches almost 50 percent for the devout. Similarly, only a quarter of non-religious Russians felt that society would be better if more people with religious beliefs held office, while 80 percent of the devout thought so, with 55.5 percent of cultural Orthodox agreeing.

What does all of this tell us about popular conceptions of church-state relations in Russia today? For one, there seems to exist a thin wall of separation between church and state, as a majority of all Russians polled believed that religious leaders should not influence government decisions or how people vote (although the devout Orthodox as a group were less resolute on the topic of influencing government decisions than their fellow countrymen).[21] In a country with no real history of

21. My conclusions here, using similar survey responses, differ significantly from that of Greeley, who found that Russians are the least anticlerical among all of the countries in the survey he analyzed, but found no sign of any separation of church and state. See Greeley, "A

separation of church and state, where politicians regularly try to enact policies favorable to the Orthodox Church, and the patriarch presides over the president's inauguration ceremony, the existence of even this thin wall of separation may be surprising to some. But as students of Russian history are acutely aware, the Russian (and Soviet) government's overtures to the church have almost always resulted in the subordination of the latter, resulting in the curtailment of religious freedoms more than the enactment of religiously-based policies.[22]

Although Russians appear to value a limited separation of church and state, we can probably also conclude that not many wish to see religion divorced from public life. Thus their version of a modern "secular state," to use the French term, may be more akin to the American or German models, in which church and state are distinct but somewhat interactive, rather than the French or Mexican models, in which that secular state presents itself as innately and demonstrably suspicious of institutionalized religious authority. For example, there is clear support among the devout Orthodox for religious individuals to involve themselves in political affairs, with well over three-quarters thinking that believers could make a difference for the society. Although the devout Orthodox may be more focused on other-worldly issues, they feel that in this world religious believers can make a difference, an opinion with which even a quarter of non-religious Russians can agree.

RELIGIOSITY, CIVIC ENGAGEMENT, AND CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS IN RUSSIA

The data analyzed above allow us to reach several tentative conclusions regarding religious, social, and civic life in Russia today. For one, Russian Orthodox Christians are considerably more religious than some have argued. While their regular church attendance might remain low by American standards, they are quite prayerful and religious people. Moreover, Russian Orthodox Christians tend to be more civic and socially-concerned than their non-Orthodox fellow citizens. The degree to which their interest in society and politics has thus far evolved into direct political participation, however, is still open to debate. While their membership in political organizations remains low, they are active in charitable activities and social programs. Quite interestingly, Stephen White and Ian McAllister have also shown that Russians who attend Orthodox churches frequently are more likely to

---

Religious Revival in Russia?"

22. Dmitriy Pospielovsky, *The Orthodox Church in the History of Russia* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998); Nikolas Gvosdev, *An Examination of Church-State Relations in the Byzantine and Russian Empires with an Emphasis on Ideology and Models of Interaction* (Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen Press, 2001).

participate in elections, a critical development in a country undergoing a democratic transition.[23]

In many cases, we observed very little difference in opinion between cultural Orthodox and non-religious respondents. This could suggest that, although identification as an Orthodox Christian varied among respondents, many actual underlying values may not have. That is, the minor differences identified by whether or not a respondent was a cultural Orthodox and his or her social or political values may be due to the fact that all respondents share common values based upon their culture and history. With a thousand-year history of Orthodox Christianity, it is only natural for religious and cultural values to become fused—even to the point that some identify themselves as "Orthodox atheists," such as Aleksandr Lukashenko, the president of Belarus. Moreover, the fact that fewer people in this survey identified themselves as Orthodox than in some other surveys (which typically hovers around 60-80 percent) suggests that there is another 25 percent or so of the Russian population that occasionally identifies as Orthodox and perhaps shares some similar cultural values. In this sense, it begins to make sense to speak of a large number of Russians as being "culturally" Orthodox, regardless of whether or not they ascribe to the church's teachings or participate in the life of the church.

Perhaps more clear than this is the finding that being culturally Orthodox does not equate with being a devout Orthodox Christian. While cultural Orthodox and non-religious Russians held similar views on a number of issues, there was a clear tendency for more devout Orthodox to hold views distinct from their fellow countrymen. Given their small numbers, however, which are perhaps somewhere in the area of 10-15 percent of the population, their impact is likely to remain limited. When considering the much-touted divide between Western Christianity and Eastern Orthodoxy, therefore, the values of this group cannot be considered representative of anywhere near a even plurality of Russians, let alone a majority. Likewise, the use of a simple dichotomy between Orthodox and non-Orthodox is clearly no longer an adequate means of classifying religious believers in Russia today. When discussing political and social orientations of Russian Orthodox Christians, we must also bring into the equation the varying degrees of religiosity.

The religious, civic, and political orientations of Russian Orthodox Christians have serious implications for Russia's new political and social order. And while Orthodox believers appear to have a unique conception of the role of religion in political life, the data above make it abundantly clear that it is not one of the church taking over society. As Lawrence Uzzell recently phrased it in his investigation of this topic,

---

23. Stephen White and Ian McAllister, "Orthodoxy and Political Behavior in Post-communist Russia," *Review of Religious Research* 41 (2000): 359-72.

the chances that Orthodox Christianity might replace "Marxism-Leninism as the compulsory state ideology" in Russia are not very good. As he concludes, state discrimination in favor of the Russian Orthodox Church may be common, but it is not based on any real theological concerns and it is a practice that has probably already passed its peak.[24] Rather than paying such great attention to some of the rhetoric coming out of the Moscow Patriarchate, therefore, we should pay more attention to the opinions of Russians themselves, because official pronouncements do not necessarily reflect actual popular opinion to any great degree. Indeed, declarations from the Moscow Patriarchate are intended to shape public opinion, not to accurately reflect it. But in any case it is critically important to avoid confusing and conflating official *ex cathedra* statements, including the *Basic Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church,* with actual beliefs among the population.

Finally, the Russian Orthodox Church itself might not be as bent on taking over as some think. At a conference in Vienna in March 2005, Bishop Hilarion of Vienna and Austria surprised his audience by stating that the church's support of the Putin regime was limited, and would only last as long as the regime retained popular support.[25] If the regime were to become authoritarian, he continued, the church would support the democratic opposition, recalling to mind the role the church played in Ukraine the preceding November and December during the "Orange Revolution," when Orthodox priests held vigils with the protestors.

As Davis pointed out in his commentary on church-state relations and the future of Russia, "the Russian Orthodox Church might expect to have a dominant *cultural* role long into the future, but it is the Russian people, in democratic course, who must ultimately deny the church the preferred *legal* position it seeks for itself."[26] Based on the evidence presented here, if given the opportunity to make democratic choices, the Russian people are not only likely to support such a cultural role, but perhaps a system that gives preferential treatment to the ROC as well. From the perspective of Western liberal democracy and the prospect of it taking root in Russia, the good news is that Russians themselves would prefer for such a preferential status to exist only within certain prescribed limits.

---

24. Lawrence Uzzell, "Centralization of Power, Fragmentation of Belief: Statist Relativism in Post-Soviet Russia," in *Burden or Blessing?: Russian Orthodoxy and the Construction of Civil Society and Democracy*, ed. Christopher Marsh (Boston, Mass.: Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs, Boston University, 2004), 45-51.

25. Statement made at the conference "The Orthodox Spirit and the Ethic of Capitalism," Institute for Human Sciences, Vienna, 9 March 2005.

26. Davis, "The Russia Orthodox Church and the Future of Russia," 670.