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The Kremlin’s Religion Temptation

JAMES W. WARHOLA

Governments in the early twenty-first century have been confronted with issues of religion and public authority in a manner as complex and compelling as at any time in history, including the period of Europe’s “religious wars” in the early modern era. It was that era that spawned the concept of a secular state, which experienced its first concrete manifestations in the governments that emerged from the American and French revolutions. Yet matters of church and state have hardly simplified since—arguably they have become even more complicated in the late modern era. Human beings may or may not be incurably religious, but the plain fact is this: Contrary to nineteenth- and twentieth-century social theories that predicted religious faith would fade away as modernization continued and expanded, religion has emerged as one of the most significant aspects of politics and government today.

This is certainly the case in Russia. Over the past 15 years, various officials in both the public and religious spheres have suggested that Russia can serve as an exemplar to the world by showing how a society characterized by multiple divisions along religious and ethnic lines can nevertheless achieve productive harmony. Whether Russia will succeed in realizing this aspiration remains to be seen, of course. But the task is daunting in complexity and startling in scope. And it is a problem not just for religious and political leaders, but for the Russian Federation’s entire population.

The state that emerged in Russia from the Soviet Union’s dissolution was established with an apparently near-universal consensus in favor of a regime based on the principles of secular poli-

tics, religious freedom, and genuine freedom of conscience. Article 14 of the Russian Federation Constitution (ratified in December 1993) declares that the government is to be a “secular state. No religion may be instituted as a state-sponsored or mandatory religion.” It states that “religious associations are to be separated from the state, and are equal before the law.” Article 28 of the constitution guarantees “freedom of conscience and freedom of religion.” Implementing these provisions, however, has proved very hard.

Some of the difficulty has to do with the nature of the state that has emerged under President Vladimir Putin. But some of it also derives from complex factors—historical, social, and demographic—that the Kremlin did not create, yet must confront. These problems include a strong, long-standing tradition of governmental involvement in religious affairs that most Western countries would regard as unacceptably intrusive; complex divisions in Russian society along religious and ethnic lines that make national identity, and thus national political consensus, deeply problematic; violent Islamist movements that have made their presence felt to a degree and in ways that few predicted at the time of the Soviet Union’s collapse; and, on top of all this, demographic trends that promise to further confound efforts to reconcile the often-conflicting forces at play in the Russian landscape of religion and public authority. Taken together, these complications pose challenges that any government, regardless of democratic pedigree, would find forbidding.

A FAUSTIAN BARGAIN?

When the Russian Federation emerged from the collapse of the Soviet Union in late 1991 as one of 15 newly independent countries, it faced a staggering array of difficulties. The challenges went well beyond those faced by countries that, over time,

**RELIGION
AND STATE**
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have established political systems with a sense of identity, reasonably competent administrative capabilities, and broad public legitimacy. It was in this context that many of the difficulties of Russia's present interplay between religion and politics were born. Indeed, it is sometimes overlooked that the Russian state's response to religious issues at that time helped shape the character of the post-Soviet political regime that has emerged, especially under the Putin administration.

Since the spring of 2000, Putin has done precisely what he indicated he would do as president, namely, to "reassert vertical authority." The manner in which he has done so has, however, complicated church-state relations. His administration has truncated nearly every potential source of governmental checks and balances, formed an increasingly dominant single-party political system with marginalized opposition, and throttled genuine civil society. Putin's popularity among the general population may give pause to Western critics who dismiss Russia's claim to

democracy: He regularly garners approval ratings above 70 percent. These ratings, however, do not negate the political problems Russia faces—and in the realm of religion and politics, they may dangerously obscure the acuteness of those problems.

Some observers both within Russia and in the West fear that the state and religious leaders (especially those of the Russian Orthodox Church) have struck a sort of Faustian bargain in which nationalism and religious sentiment fuse, resulting in a domestically authoritarian and externally aggressive political mixture. Whether or not this has transpired is hard to say, but certainly such an arrangement remains a powerful temptation for a Kremlin intent on aggrandizing power. Meanwhile, a number of barriers stand in the way of Russia's realizing a more liberal conception of the relationship between religion and politics.

THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY

The first of these barriers is Russia's problematic sense of national identity. Despite the constitution's demand that the state be secular and separate from religious bodies, the fact is that the country's cultural identity is closely and deeply entwined with Russian Orthodoxy. This is so even though the overwhelming majority of nominally

Orthodox Russians do not attend church regularly. It is the case even though nearly one-fourth of the Russian population is non-Orthodox—including more than 20 million Muslims and numerous other religious minorities such as Protestants, Jews, and Buddhists.

Russia is composed of about 160 ethnic groups but, according to the 2003 Russian Federal Census, the vast majority of the citizenry—slightly under 80 percent—considers itself ethnically Russian. These "ethnic Russians" are overwhelmingly Orthodox by religious affiliation regardless of whether they attend worship services. Orthodoxy for them remains a significant marker of identity and also of historical-cultural orientation. Indeed, the Soviet regime's hostility toward religion seems to have had little if any long-term effect on Russians' strong tendency to view themselves as

Orthodox, even though their knowledge and practice of the faith are, judging by all available evidence, very limited.

The political ramifications of Orthodoxy are a matter of dispute

among Western observers. Some see the church as having a potentially democratizing effect in the long run, serving as a source of civic values that favor human rights, political participation, and limited government. Others see it as an institution serving to obstruct the emergence of Western-style democracy, including particularly the separation of church and state.

ORTHODOX AMBITIONS

It is noteworthy that both the Orthodox Church and major Muslim organizations in Russia have indicated some disagreement with Western concepts of church-state separation. In March 2007, for example, Father Vsevolod Chaplin, head of the Moscow Patriarchate Department for External Church Relations, issued a brief but telling article on "Five Postulates of Orthodox Civilization." The second of these postulates declares that "society, and ideally government also, should have a spiritual mission." The third postulate states that "the Church, the people, and state power (*vlast*) are a unified entity (*odno tseloye*)." This view is consistent with the historical Orthodox orientation, but it certainly complicates realization of the principles articulated in the 1993 constitution.

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The Russian Orthodox Church has played a large role in the cultural and political dramas of Russian history. Even during the Soviet era its presence and influence were substantial despite vigorous efforts by the Communist Party to keep that influence to a minimum, and ultimately to eradicate religion from society. In the post-Soviet period the role of the Orthodox Church in Russian society and governance has been complex and not easily captured in a few brief descriptors. This has especially been so since passage of the restrictive 1997 Law on Religious Associations, which was heavily shaped and endorsed by the Orthodox Church. This law was designed to control domestic and foreign religious groups and their activities in Russia. Yet the Orthodox Church supported it because it formally recognizes Orthodoxy, along with Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, as having a special place in Russian culture and society.

In general, one observes today a sense of increasingly hegemonic intent and behavior on the part of the Orthodox Church in relation to the Russian Federation's overall social, cultural, and political landscape. The church clearly sees itself as having a leadership role in the religious and cultural life of Russia. This includes exerting influence on the process of governance, such as lobbying heavily for religious education in public schools and for chaplains in the armed forces, and it sometimes includes providing advice (solicited and otherwise) on specific policy matters. The church's ambition to extend its influence has been obscured, in part, by the manner in which it has exercised its influence. The church has tried to be ecumenical and realistic concerning the presence of religious minorities, of which Muslims are by far the most sizeable and significant.

In contemporary Russia the issue of national identity deeply impinges on relations both among communal groups and between church and state. The clearest manifestation of this can be seen in the ethnic divide that parallels the religious divide between Orthodox and Muslim Russians. Whereas ethnic Russians are overwhelmingly Orthodox by religious affiliation, the community of Muslims is generally, albeit not exclusively, of non-Russian ethnic identity. Although they are geographically concentrated in the North Caucasus, the Volga River region, and major cities (especially of European Russia), Russia's Muslims are dispersed among several scores of ethnic groups. These facts are among

the most complicating elements in Russia regarding religion and politics.

This volatile mix of political psychology and ethnic identity has served as a platform and incubator for Russian nationalism, supported by the Orthodox Church, either actively or by passive assent. This is so despite frequent, impassioned, and evidently sincere calls for tolerance and harmony among the many religious and ethnic groups of Russia. Significantly, the major non-Orthodox religious organizations (such as the Council of Muftis, the Jewish Council, the All-Russian Council of Baptists, and so on) have all echoed the Orthodox Church's call for moderation in the face of growing extremism, for cooperation in the face of sometimes-violent discord, and for civil tolerance in the face of torturously conflicted ethnic, religious, and historical legacies. Despite these calls, and despite the generally high regard among much of the population for such responsible religious leadership, markers of identity continue to conflict, and all is not well in Russia's religion-and-politics realm.

THE "RELIGIONIZATION" OF POLITICS

A second barrier to realizing the constitution's liberal aspirations in regard to religion and politics has to do with Russian territorial integrity and what might be termed the "religionization" of politics. Shortly after the USSR dissolved in 1991, questions arose about the possibility of Russia itself fragmenting along ethnic lines. The First Chechen War (1994–1996) suggested such concerns were not merely academic. Russia is not the first country to perceive the need to secure its territorial integrity by brute force in the face of a determined, adventitiously aided insurgency. The issue of national integrity has loomed large in the Putin presidency, and it has done so in a politically tangled manner that affects relations between the Russian state and religion.

Indeed, Putin's 1999 appointment as prime minister was occasioned by the reignition of conflict in the North Caucasus, which led to the Second Chechen War. Since his election as president in 2000, as terrorism has escalated in Russia, Putin has been unequivocal that the nation's territorial integrity will be kept intact by any means necessary—and he has followed through on his words.

Yet the manner in which Putin has prosecuted the Second Chechen War (1999 to the present), given the larger context of relations between ethnic Russians and non-Russians, has produced

two unfortunate effects. It has infused a religious (Islamist) element into what was initially a more-or-less nonreligious quest for independence by Chechen separatists. And it has had the even more ominous effect of spreading support for radical Islam well beyond the borders of Chechnya—into neighboring North Caucasian regions such as Dagestan, Ingushetia, and Kabardino-Balkaria. There is also evidence that extremist Islam is spreading elsewhere within Russia, as outlined by Dmitry Gorenburg in his essay, “Russia Confronts Radical Islam,” in the October 2006 issue of *Current History*. The Orthodox Church has unequivocally supported the Putin regime’s policies in the North Caucasus, especially including the Second Chechen War, despite general calls for peace and reconciliation.

Meanwhile, demographic trends in Russia are aggravating this tendency whereby questions that were once political in nature begin to take on a religious content and character. The number of ethnic Russians in Russia is declining, both in absolute and relative terms, and rather quickly. In contrast, the absolute and proportional number of ethnically non-Russian Muslims has been on the increase since at least the 1980s, and is expected to continue rising for some time. The in-migration of Muslim peoples, along with a striking disparity in birth rates between ethnic Russians and ethnic non-Russians, contributes to this trend. The resulting ethnic and religious divides are exacerbated, moreover, by a general socioeconomic differential that favors ethnic Russians. Some observers consider this disparity a potentially powerful catalyst for political disaffection and radicalization among Muslims in Russia.

Abuses of governmental authority in the struggle against terrorism and extremism have not helped in this regard. The Kremlin predictably denies such abuses, despite substantial evidence that they are occurring. To the extent that abuses do exist and continue, intercommunal relations are certain to become even more strained, and church-state relations even more complicated. This is particularly so if abuses occur with the support, implicit or explicit, of the Russian Orthodox Church. The specter of more terrorism inspired by Islamic radicalism does nothing to assuage these tensions,

and will likely continue to aggravate them. This will make realization of the constitutionally stated ideals of a secular state, separation of church and state, and freedom of conscience increasingly difficult to achieve.

THE UNCHECKED STATE

A final complicating factor in Russia’s church-state relations has to do with current weakness both in the rule of law and, as a corollary of that, in the realization of citizens’ rights. The problem is that the Russian state, whose condition was so debilitated in the 1990s, has grown in strength and may continue to do so until its legitimacy is undermined.

Russia’s tradition of autocratic rule is long, but the people’s level of political awareness has risen considerably since 1917, when the Bolsheviks usurped power over a population that was overwhelmingly illiterate, rural, impoverished by

Western standards, and war-weary. By all evidence available, Russians today overwhelmingly support the 1993 constitution’s formal guarantees of

religious freedom and separation of church and state, as well as democracy. For these principles to be realized, however, a sufficiently strong state must exist in the first place. Such a state did not exist during the 1990s under President Boris Yeltsin—hence Putin’s determination to reassert central authority. It is not clear, moreover, that consensus exists on what the constitutional guarantees actually mean in the context of Russia’s conflicted political and religious domain.

In this situation, a serious danger exists that the public will develop an increasingly bifurcated sense of political legitimacy. Among ethnic Russians who identify themselves as Russian Orthodox, President Putin is enormously popular, and has been quite consistently since his first election in March 2000. Yet signs of serious discontent exist among the largely Muslim minority of ethnic non-Russians. They are increasingly subjected to xenophobic treatment. They have been experiencing growing discrimination, not only in employment and housing, but also in religious practice. A recent example is the government’s decision to ban Turkish theologian Said Nursi’s rather antimodern but politically innocuous book *Risale-i Nur* (Messages of Light). Putin’s

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popularity with ethnic and Orthodox Russians may even be fueling resentment among ethnic and religious minorities, for whom an increasingly strong and intrusive Russian state is unwelcome—or even unacceptable.

Neither has Putin's popularity entirely quieted the serious and concerted voices of discontent regarding the shrinking of civil society. The resurgence of Russia on the international stage, particularly in the former Soviet territories but not exclusively there, may please Russian nationalists. But this resurgence and the domestic vitality it provides to the Russian state have been accompanied by a shrinking of civil society. There is inevitably a point of diminishing returns, politically as well as economically, beyond which an increasingly robust Russian state cannot go without spawning other problems, including in the space where religion and politics intersect.

In particular, the Russian state runs the considerable risk of compromising its secular character by, de facto, favoring one religion, or perhaps a few, at the expense or outright exclusion of others. To some extent it has already done so—in the 1997 Law on Religious Associations, which formally favors Russia's "traditional" religions. Especially if terrorism and extremism increase, the prospect of the Russian state resorting to religious sentiments and institutions for support—as Josef Stalin did during World War II—will also grow.

The state also runs the risk of compromising the constitutional mandate to remain "separate from religious bodies" by becoming overly involved in religious affairs that, from a Western perspective at least, are outside the legitimate domain of the state. For example, national and more often regional public officials have at times hampered or disallowed altogether the registration of legitimate, peaceful religious groups. They have sometimes obstructed the distribution of peaceful religious literature, and placed numerous restrictions on foreign missionary activity.

Perhaps even more troubling, the constitutional mandate of freedom of conscience may be compromised or even trampled by an increasingly strong state whose concept of such freedom is circumscribed for ostensible reasons of national security. Under the threat of terrorism and rising communal tensions, it would be all too easy to maintain lip

service for "freedom of conscience" while in fact practicing repression.

IN SEARCH OF BALANCE

At a deeper level, there is nothing novel about Russia's issues of religion and politics in the twenty-first century: They involve, most fundamentally, a need for balance regarding state power and society's rights to security and liberty. Where and how to draw these lines will occasion some of the most important and defining questions of Russian political and religious life.

The Putin administration has responded to the increase in tensions among Russia's ethnic and religious groups in various ways, including the creation of several new political structures. These include the State Council, established in 2000 and composed of all regional governors, to provide a nationwide forum for the coordination of national and regional policies; the Social Chamber, established in 2005 and composed of representa-

tives from civil society organizations, to provide a forum for civil society leaders to work among themselves and with government officials; and the Unified Commission for National Policy and Inter-

relations Among the State and Religious Groups, a body of the Federation Council (the national senate) established in 2006. In early 2007, the major pro-Kremlin political party, Unified Russia, issued a "Charter on Counteracting Extremism." While not an organization per se, it testifies to the administration's perceived need to deal with political and religious extremism. In addition, a Committee on Social Groups and Religious Organizations already existed in the lower house of parliament (the State Duma) when Putin came to power.

These institutions and initiatives were created with the stated intention of advancing civil society, national security, and further democratization of the political process. Whether they will do so is not clear. Some civil society activists within Russia, and more than a few observers abroad, have sharply questioned the motives of the Putin administration when it comes to civil society. They accuse the Kremlin of creating and using these new bodies to co-opt opposition and throttle any challenges to its power, all behind the facade of increased political participation by relevant groups. In terms of church-state rela-

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tions, keeping civil society under control reduces the possibility of religious organizations' gaining unwanted influence or supporting dissent. It also opens the door for the Kremlin to use religious groups for its own purposes.

In any event, Russian trends at the intersection of religion and politics will continue to be complicated by problems of national identity, relations among religious or religious-identifying groups, and national security in the face of terrorism that is frequently carried out under the banner of religion. Dealing with these issues is inevitable: They will not go away by themselves, nor can the Russian state retreat into a simplistic "separationist" posture and ignore religious considerations. The Putin administration has not tried to do so, but rather has attempted to balance these contradictory forces, navigating the difficult waters of governance through a variety of approaches.

The attempt has not always been successful. Alexander Verkhovski of SOVA, a Russian research center devoted to the study of politics and religion, has identified a number of political and administrative difficulties and disputes that have arisen recently in the realm of church-state relations. The question of church property rights, for example, remains unresolved. So does the matter of religion's role in public schools. Some policies, meanwhile, have already had dangerous consequences. Had the Kremlin handled the separatist discontent in Chechnya differently, for instance, it might have left the religious dimension of the conflict more or less inert, instead of contributing unwittingly to the "religionization" of politics.

THE BAIT OF RELIGION

Worse still, the government could be enticed into taking the bait of religion by enlisting religious points of reference and symbols, and even the Orthodox Church itself, to advance the aims and interests of the state. Those aims and interests may or may not serve the interests of the population as a whole, of course, but such is the nature of short-term political temptation. The temptation is particularly potent because the Orthodox Church is one of the most widely respected institutions in Russian society.

This temptation should be avoided, perhaps at nearly all costs, in that it opens the door for precisely the sort of deleterious entanglement of public authority with religious matters that the intellectual founders of the modern secular state wisely counseled against. In the meantime, since religious leaders in Russia, particularly the Orthodox Church itself, enjoy a substantial reservoir of public respect and goodwill, they are perhaps in a uniquely powerful position to contribute to the public good by tempering immoderate impulses, ideas, and activities.

The challenge that confronts Russia, along with many other countries facing religious-based challenges to the rights of their citizens, is to continue building a state that is capable of exercising authority while leaving religious matters as far removed from its domain as possible. This will not be easy in the twenty-first century, as religious sentiments continue to inform and shape political processes in diverse manners across the globe. But it may be one of Russia's and the world's most pressing tasks. ■