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Religion, the State and Civil Society

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On 14 December 2001 the World Russian People's Council met to discuss the role of religion in a world challenged by terrorism. Such gatherings take place every year and, admittedly, have nationalistic overtones. In previous times, however, they focused on the internal relations of religion, society and the state. Now, the focus shifted to the role of Orthodoxy in the outside world. Patriarch Aleksy II, the president of the council, entered the meeting together with Russian President Vladimir Putin.

In his speech, Putin emphasized the need to use "spirituality" to resist the "attempts to ignite a conflict of civilizations and religions." "Orthodox civilization," Patriarch Aleksy II said, "must become the center for adopting decisions in the world." Metropolitan Kirill affirmed this further: "We are able to teach many things to the restless world of today, for it is no coincidence that Russian culture has always inspired both East and West. ... We are able to offer the world a new system of interaction between nations and civilizations - a system based on sufficient representation of all nations in global power structures, on the harmonious co-existence of faiths and worldviews, on more equitable economic relations." Evoking the theme of the mission of the Russian nation, he added: "Russian... is not just an ethnic concept... it is a spiritual and cultural concept.... We do not possess a tenth of the financial resources of the West, ... our industry is experiencing a crisis as never before. But our spiritual and intellectual potential guarantees us a worthy place in the new world order."2

This emphasis on Russian spirituality did not constitute a startling development. In the new National Security Concept, Putin had linked the country's security interests in
maintaining the spiritual and moral welfare of the population with a need to counter "the adverse impact of foreign religious organizations and missionaries." This ominous phrase had an immediate practical effect, following upon earlier legislation discriminating against certain religious groups. Postponing the registration of Jehovah's Witnesses in November 2001, a Moscow prosecutor declared that the group represented a threat to Russia's national security. These developments dimmed the hope that mainstream Christian organizations, such as the Salvation Army, or other religious groups, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses and the Pentecostals, eventually would manage to function freely in Russia.

Putin's emphasis on the putative danger of "religio-cultural expansion" is noteworthy for another reason. It is not that he showed respect to religious tradition, but rather that he drew a tight connection between religion, culture and nationality and stressed its central role in Russian culture and social order. This approach finds fertile ground in Russia, which is groping for a new national concept.

The political use of the Orthodox religion illustrates the tension between the view of the state as a civic institution and the vision of the state as the expression of national will. There are two words for "Russian": Russky refers to Russian ethnicity, while Rossiisky indicates Russian statehood. The Russian Church regards itself as an ethnic church. The Moscow Patriarchate holds the view that Russkie (ethnic Russians), regardless of whether they practice the faith, belong to the Russian Church, that they have their "roots" in Orthodoxy. This belief in the ethnic church is different from the Western Christian understanding of religion as the faith of individuals voluntarily united in religious communities and is closer to the Judaic understanding of faith, namely as the religion of the Hebrews. This belief may explain the Russian Church's opposition to foreign missionaries.

At the same time, the church regards itself as a spokesman for the narod, a term that signifies not only ethnic Russians but a broader social union which can include Russian citizens of other ethnic and national groups as well. It is very significant that Putin
habitually uses the ethnic-oriented Russky, whereas former President Boris Yel'tsin preferred Rossiisky. Similarly two seemingly identical concepts - narodovlastie (the rule of people) and democracy - have very different connotations. Narodovlastie focuses on the uniqueness of Russia's national and cultural heritage in the political sphere, including the role of Russian Orthodoxy. In this context, demokratia is a foreign word, a Western invention - inapplicable to the Russian realities.8

The Orthodox Church's revival that began around 1988 appears to be gaining momentum. 9 After several centuries of gradual secularization - from Peter the Great's abolition of the patriarchate to the Soviet rulers' attempts to eradicate religion from society - a wave of de-secularization has begun to imbue Russian political and public life.10 The present situation presents the church with an enormous opportunity to enter politics as an autonomous actor and to facilitate the formation of civil society in Russia.

Never before has it enjoyed such a degree of autonomy from secular authorities. In contrast to the epoch of Emperor Constantin, when the church "needed the prince's sword for a time," today, claims Andrei Zubov, a professor of the Russian Orthodox University, it is the state that needs the church for moral support.11 He suggests that the church enter politics and civil society at the level of the local parishes. In the present situation, he writes, when the population has lost practically all trust in local officials, the parish may preserve elections from being turned into "buying votes for two bottles of vodka." Instead, by a decision of the Holy Synod, the patriarchate does not allow priests to assume political office or support political parties, thus imposing limitations on the political activity of individual priests. This protects the church as an institution from being used by political forces and ensures that the patriarchate, as a central body, retains control over the political activities of the individual priests.12

Church officials encourage individual moral responsibility in the political process, an endeavor that can be seen as expressing the values of both Christian moral teaching and, potentially, modern democracy building.13 However, the lack of firm theological ground for an Orthodox political doctrine opens up the possibility for religious
communities to enter into new democratic structures creatively, or, conversely, to resist such innovations by preserving old, empire-oriented Byzantine ideals. Hence the church is developing both within the framework of the legal separation of church and state and against it, in active opposition to the rights of other religions and with resistance to the autonomy of other social institutions. It is not clear which of these two tendencies will dominate.

This conflict became apparent in 1997 when then-President Yeltsin revoked the existing legislation on religious freedom. Yeltsin's 1997 law abolished broad legal protection for equality of all religions, created a hierarchy of religious organizations, and placed the Orthodox Church on the top of this hierarchy (affirming the church's status as Russia's traditional faith with all its rights and privileges preserved, while the rights and privileges of smaller, more recently introduced, and "foreign" religions were restricted.) The new law established a difficult registration process and opened an avenue for state interference into the activities of religious groups. While the 1990 religion law was viewed as establishing firm legal protection of religious freedom in Russia, the 1997 law appeared as a backward step.

Many have pointed to the need to revise the present legislation on religion. Some suggestions have been made to improve the law's various inconsistencies and bureaucratic complications to make implementation easier. The Slavic Center for the Law and Justice, a group of professional lawyers specializing in religion and human rights, is among the most visible champions of the rights of religious minorities in Russia. On the opposing side are those who would recognize the Orthodox Church legally as the "church of the majority" or "established church" in Russia.

The concept of "established church," in this debate, does not refer to the pre-revolutionary model of church-state relations where the church was a part of the state apparatus. "Church of the majority" refers to the preservation of a national idea through traditional religious symbols and through the development of church-based social organizations, in matters of charity, education and culture, similar to that performed by
the churches of Greece or England. Adopting the concept of the Orthodox Church as
the church of the majority would necessitate a new legal framework of partnership
between the state and the church - a framework that would have to express Orthodox
ethical values in concrete policies, laws and social structures. Moreover, redefinition of
the church-state legal relations would require that the church also redefine its traditional
ideal of a "symphony of powers," a vague understanding of cooperation with the state,
and come to terms with a new form of cooperation, a "social contract": concrete,
pragmatic and unprecedented in Russian history.

There is no political force in Russia that can claim the church's full and exclusive
support. The principle of separation from the state was expressed in the documents of
the Holy Synod prohibiting clerical involvement in political movements, election to
political office, and use of their ecclesiastical status to support any political party. The
excommunication of the human rights activist, Father Gleb Yakunin, who offered his
candidature for election in the Duma, served as a caution against other priests'
involvement in political affairs. It can be viewed also as the patriarchate's restriction of
the clergy's independent political initiative. With his excommunication, Yakunin found
himself in the company of Lev Tolstoy, perhaps Russia's most famous moral
philosopher. The restrictions on the activity of progressive-minded priests, such as
Father Georgi Kochetkov, its hierarchism and sensitivity to "heresies" - all these
"internal" features of Orthodoxy have been criticized sharply by liberal-minded society in
Russia and abroad. One has to emphasize, however, that these are viewed as internal
matters by the Church.

Today the church presents itself as a carrier of its own "civilizational project," its own
vision of social and political order, based on Orthodox tradition and ethics. This project
lacks concrete mechanisms of implementation and is vulnerable to misinterpretations.
Many analysts talk about it in terms of "empire-saving" or "empire-expanding" ideals
(i.e., the church's assistance to the state in regaining its lost imperial power and
resurrecting nostalgia for the lost all-embracing ideology). Thus it is claimed that after
the glue of Marxism-Leninism dissolved, the new glue of Russian traditional religion
appeared to hold the society together. This may be true - but the church's mission in the world cannot be reduced to that.

It is difficult to predict in which direction the church and state will develop in terms of legal, political and social cooperation. This is a new and challenging situation for both - a search for balance between the memory of the past, respect for religion and the aspirations to reunite Russians around some new common ideals.

This tension raises questions about the relationship between church and state. The church seeks to assist the state in "reuniting" the former empire in the so-called "canonical territory" of the Moscow Patriarchate. Such a "reunion" is based on the idea of common faith of persons of many nationalities and on the common canonical structure centered around Moscow and covering the entire territory of the former Soviet Union. The Ukrainian Orthodox Church is a part of the Moscow Patriarchate but independent in internal affairs. The Belorusian Orthodox Church and the Orthodox Church in Moldova, the Latvian and the Estonian Orthodox Churches also retain some independence of the Moscow Patriarchate in matters of finance and administration. There are dioceses of the Russian Orthodox Church in Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Lithuania, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

The Russian president's alleged religiosity and the patriarch's appearance on the political scene are viewed with reservations, indifference and, quite often, approval. "The fact that the president and patriarch were sitting together," commented Metropolitan Kirill on one event, "says nothing special about their relations. It does not mean that the church is leaning on the state or that it is trying to establish a special form of relations with the state in order to extract some benefits for itself. One simply must know Russia's history. The church has always been present in the center of the life of the nation. This is the church's historic place." Such a "cozy relationship" of the church with the president, one might say, does not allow the church to criticize the state.
Yet this relationship makes possible various forms of pechalovanie (i.e., appeals by religious leaders to state officials for assistance to the needy). It seems that pechalovanie rather then political criticism would better correspond to the church's mission in the world and better reflect its "historic place" in the Russian society. The question that remains open is whether this "historic place" should be preserved in a passive form or modified and politically activated.

Recent survey data provide insight into public perceptions of the church's changing role. The participants were asked what they thought about the influence of the Orthodox Church on Russia's political life, whether the church's leadership had increased, remained unchanged or decreased in the past decade. Fifty percent of respondents saw an increase in the church's influence.27

The Orthodox Church's relations with the state and civil society in Russia are complex, dynamic and controversial. If present trends continue the state will define itself ever more tightly with Russian ethnicity and Russian orthodoxy. It is unlikely that in the near future the church will lessen its public presence. Political observers and policy analysts pay even closer attention to its role in the international arena and in the sphere of church-state relations within Russia. The church, the only surviving institution of Russia's tsarist past, today aspires to restore its previous might and glory and appeals to the current generation with the strong voice of authority and tradition. One can certainly disagree with what it says, but one cannot ignore its influence.

Notes:
1 Inna Naletova is a Ph.D. candidate at the Department of Religious Studies, Boston University. At present, she is working on statistical data and background material for her dissertation on the Orthodox Church and its relations with contemporary Russian society.
2 The speech of Metropolitan Kirill is posted at the web page of the Moscow Patriarchate. See also a report posted in Stetson Religious News on 14 December 2001.

3 "Russia's National Security Concept."


5 Even after the first deadline for registration had been extended to 31 December 2000, 40 percent of the groups that had declared themselves to be religious in the early 1990s remained unregistered. These groups either dissolved or went underground. There are ongoing debates about the procedure for "liquidation" of the unregistered groups: It is not clear in the law whether these groups "may be liquidated" or "must be liquidated" and also to what extent the activities of these groups will be banned. See Rossiyskaya gazeta, 30 March 2000, posted at. The most recent case of liquidation involved the Salvation Army in Moscow because of its alleged similarity to a military organization. See Mir Religii, 6 December 2001, and Vremya novostei, 7 December 2001, posted at.

6 Supporting this view, a poll conducted by the Center of Education Sociology, involving 1,600 Moscow school students aged 15 and 17, concluded that the older school children are, the more they identify themselves as Orthodox Christians: nearly 80%, compared to an average below 50%. Their values, according to the poll, remain the same as those of atheists. This result proves that Orthodoxy is used as a sign of national identity, rather than a sign of religiousness. See Anna Fenko, "Teenagers Want the Empire Back," in Kommersant, No. 13; excerpts posted at.

8 For example, see Nikolas Gvosdev's "Making the World Safe for Democracy? The Outlook of the Contemporary Russian Orthodox Church," a presentation at the Harriman Institute, Columbia University, 26-27 October 2001. Materials of the conference are being prepared for publication.

9 Orthodoxy continues to be the largest and the most influential religious group in Russia, claiming about 50 percent of the population. (See data in NG-Religii, no. 10 (33), 26 May 1999.) In the interview, Metropolitan Kirill stated that a majority of the Russian population is baptized in Orthodoxy. However, Orthodox churches (with some American exceptions) tend to view sociological studies with suspicion. There are no sociologically reliable data on the Orthodox population in Russia. For a summary of the most reliable demographic data on religion in Russia, see the US Commission on International Religious Freedom, 2000 Staff Memorandum to the Chairman at .

10 There are several registered political groups with Christian orientations, such as Christian-Democratic Unity of Russia, Russian Christian-Democratic Movement, Christian-Democratic Party of St. Petersburg, and Russian Christian-Democratic Party. Some political analysts, however, consider the tendency toward political Christianization in Russia to be superficial. The Christian political movements, they claim, lack unity, are split between "Westernizers" and "populists," and have insufficient support from the new business elite and the intelligentsia. See Alexandr Schipkov, "Vosmoshnost Christianskoi Demokrati," and Oleg Nedumov, "Politology dayut soveti ierarcham," in NG-Religii, no. 23 (94), 11 December 2001.

11 Many Russian intellectuals support this view. See, for example, the report about A. Zubov's presentation to the International Educational Conference at Christmas, "Tsarkov moshet sodeistvivat' stanovleniiy grazhdanskogo obshestva," in Mir religii, 1 February 2002, at .


14 Alexandr Morosov, a correspondent for Nezavisimaya gazeta who regularly writes on religious issues, points to the need for the church to specify its political orientations. ("Novii Kurs I Moscovskaya Patriarchia") Similarly, another reporter, Alexander Kirleshev, calls attention to the theological weakness of Orthodoxy which does not allow it to enter fully the discussions of modernity's broad political and social issues. ("Glavnaya tema Sovremennosti") Both articles are in NG-Religii, 9 August 2000.

15 Four religious groups are recognized in the 1997 law as Russia's traditional faiths: Orthodoxy (under the Moscow Patriarchate), Islam, Judaism and Buddhism. With that legislation, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism were granted official status for the first time. Protestantism and Catholicism are considered "foreign" religions. The Orthodox Church's traditional ties with Russia legitimized its legally superior status. In order to be registered, the law requires other religious groups to demonstrate at least a 15-year presence in Russia. This has posed the main difficulty for small religious communities which hid from Soviet officials and therefore have no evidence of their functioning.

16 According to the data of the Ministry of Justice, in 2000 there were over 60 religious groups and communities in Russia. Because of the complicated registration process, interference into the internal life of religious groups is inevitable. To avoid such interference, to date some religious groups have preferred not to register and to remain illegal. Other groups have needed to alter their internal regulations, such as property ownership (Jesuits, Franciscans) or even to change their names, such as the small group called "Genuine Orthodox Church," in order to fulfill the requirements of the law.
In the majority of cases, however, the main obstacle for successful registration has been that many citizens find it difficult to follow the complex procedures set out in the law. See the reports of the Keston Institute, 1998-2000.

17 The openness of the 1990 religious law permitted religious instructions in non-state schools, and prohibited state interference into the affairs of religious groups. However, it also opened the way for unlimited missionary activity and made it possible for sects such as Aum Shinrikyo to profit from this opportunity. The restrictive character of the 1997 law was supposed to protect Russia from aggressive religious sects, yet it raised many complaints from foreign, mostly Protestant, religious groups.

18 For a critical review of the law, see, for example, the testimony of Lauren Homer, director of the group "Law and Liberty Trust," before the US Helsinki Commission regional meeting in Philadelphia, PA, 5 December 1997, posted at Stetson Religious News.

19 The church articulated the separation from the state as the principle of "critical neutrality," that is, it recognizes the legal separation but preserves a critical attitude to the state's actions. See Vsevolod Chaplin, "Active Neutrality," Nezavisimaya gazeta, 10 November 1999. The Russian Public Opinion & Market Research (ROMIR) found that many Russians support the church's separation from the state. About 61 percent of the population thinks that religious institutions should not influence the decisions of political leaders and 75 percent believes that religious leaders should not influence a person's political views and should not interfere in electoral processes. See Elena Bashkirova (the president of ROMIR), "Value Change and Survival of Democracy in Russia, 1995-2000," posted at.

20 Kochetkov has proposed changes in liturgical texts to make the liturgy more understandable and has opened the doors of an Orthodox theological school to many Catholic and Protestant lecturers. While the relations between Kochetkov and the patriarchate are tense, he remains a priest and a professor at the theological school.
21 Yakunin was defrocked (1993) and excommunicated (1997). Among the charges against him were his connections with the group of the previously excommunicated priest Filaret Denisenko and the fact that, after being defrocked, Yakunin continued to wear priestly garb. See the statements of Bishops' Councils, via and.


23 That "territory" embraces areas and populations beyond the boundaries of the Russian Federation. It has imperial implications concerning newly independent republics and at least those of their citizens - religious or not - who are ethnic Russians.

24 Vsevolod Chaplin, "Church and Politics in Russia," in M. Bourdeaux, ed., op. cit., p. 102.

25 "The Basic Principles of the Social Concept."

26 See the reports posted in Stetson Religious News on 14 December 2001, at.

27 The data are taken from the ROMIR research group. See G.S. Klimova's report on an all-Russia (50 cities) study of public opinion, 21 June 2000, .