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RELIGIOUS LIFE IN RUSSIA TODAY

Jonathan Fraiss

In any representative poll of religious belief in the Russian Federation, half the respondents will call themselves 'Russian Orthodox'. Such research also shows that Islam, Judaism and Buddhism are significant minority groups. These four groups are deemed to be the historic faiths of the Russian people. As such they were given preferential treatment in the law of September 1997 (On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations). This law decreed that every religious group requires fifteen years of official existence before receiving legal recognition and being given full freedom to operate. But few apart from the four favoured groups can claim such a legacy, and, in an unfavourable bureaucratic climate, some new ones may not last long enough to gain it.

So where are the Buddhists? They are largely in the east on the borders of China and Mongolia. What about the Jews? Many of them have emigrated to Israel since this was permitted ten years ago, but others still remain in various areas allotted to them under Communism. And the Muslims? They are concentrated in lands near the Caspian Sea. If Chechnya broke totally free from Moscow's control it would become a Muslim state, as would nearby Dagestan. The growth in the Muslim population is assisted by high birth rates, even though Russia has a declining population overall. (Russian families are usually small because of poverty, small apartments and restrictions on land use.)

Along with the religious are the irreligious. After two generations of Bolshevik indoctrination, many older people proudly retain their loyalty to atheism. They do not believe all the revelations about Communist purges, and today they fondly recall past days of healthcare for all, full employment, prompt payment of wages, and military prowess.

Few Russians are in fact actively Orthodox. Although icons have appeared everywhere from shops to taxis, actual attendance in church is under five percent of the nation at Church on a Sunday. The collapse of the Soviet Union heralded a new openness to spiritual things, and from 1989 many overseas missionaries arrived. But there has been no revival, and the openness to the Gospel has subsided and been overtaken by the rush for material acquisition. (There was a mass giveaway of Christian literature at the start of the decade. Many Russians who visit an English-speaking church in Moscow still assume that all literature is free.)

Nevertheless, the Orthodox Church has taken on a high profile. With the Communists out of power and the army in disarray, many have turned to the Church to give shape to their nationalist feelings. Some leading politicians look to the Orthodox Church to unite Russia's eighty-nine regions. So when a visiting dignitary arrives at the Kremlin, Patriarch Alexy II is often photographed alongside President Yeltsin.

Doctrine and Worship

Orthodoxy means 'right-worshipping'. It is an international phenomenon which claims unbroken succession with the Apostles and great faithfulness to the seven Ecumenical Councils of the first eight centuries after Christ. Friends praise it for its closeness to the practices of the first millennium; critics question the need to look like the priests of the Old Testament during the daily eucharist.

In 1054 Rome and Orthodoxy formally parted company after many decades of growing apart. The Orthodox restricted worship aids to two dimensions, hence icons not statues. They also found the status of the Pope over-exalted, centuries before the declaration of his infallibility in 1870. Further, in the Nicene Creed, they said that the Holy Spirit proceeded 'from the Father' but did not add 'and the Son' (the filioque clause) as churches in the West had done.

There are no seats in orthodox churches, for you should stand to pray and you should be prayerful throughout a service. There are no songbooks, for you sing only the Creed and the Lord's Prayer and do so unaccompanied. There are no smiles, for God is too austere for levity. There is no sudden repentance by enquirers, for instead of preaching a moment of conversion Orthodoxy teaches a lifelong process of growing into God (deification).

The Russian Orthodox Church is rightly famed for its resilience. In the last thousand years it has barely changed. There has been no impact from the Renaissance and the Reformation; the Enlightenment and theological liberalism have passed it by; and colonial missionary advances and Vatican II have been ignored. Orthodox services remain long, colourful and replete with prayers to the Trinity, Mary and the saints. Its liturgy continues in an ancient tongue called Church Slavonic. Its Holy Synod retains control of the Patriarch and tight discipline over its clergy, and priests in long beards and black cassocks continue to bless people and places with prayer and a sprinkling of holy water. It is frequently national in character and is a strong force in Greece, Romania, Bulgaria, Georgia and Serbia too. The wealthiest congregations are abroad among the children of the diaspora who fled revolutions and wars earlier this century. Groups such as the Orthodox Church of America often support the mother congregations.

Orthodox Diversity

Orthodoxy has two faces in Russia: the provincial and the Muscovite. In the provinces small communities struggle to raise money to restore the plasterwork on the old village churches. Inside, devoted old women polish the brass, pray before the icons, and sweep the floor. They sell books of prayers for private meditation and candles to light and place before the icon wall which adorns the front of the church. Sometimes the priest will stand in the street with a collection box, thank you for your gift and pray for you. He may be young, fresh from a hurried training in a newly-established and under-resourced seminary, and living on a small salary. If he married before ordination then he is a 'white' priest and will be in parish work all his life. If he did not marry before ordination then he is a 'black' priest or monk, will always minister as a celibate, but may be appointed archpriest, bishop, metropolitan or patriarch.

The Muscovite version differs in size rather than form. There are more churches, more church bookstalls, more priests and more churchgoers here than anywhere else. Yuri Mikhailovich Lushkov, the capital's powerful mayor, has supported the cause of the Orthodox strongly in his seven years in office to date. Around one hundred churches are now visible there. Some are restored, others are new. All Orthodox churches appear to be busy with baptisms, weddings and funerals during the week, and maintained by a choir and core of supporters on Sundays. Churches are full for Easter.

There were 160 Orthodox churches in a considerably smaller Moscow at the time of the Revolutions in 1917. The summer sun glinted off the golden onion domes on every street corner and gave the city the name 'the city of gold'. Then the Communists either demolished them or used them as workshops, offices, or, in our case, a sound-recording studio. Among the new constructions, pride of place goes to the Christ the Saviour Cathedral near the Kremlin. At a cost of tens of millions of dollars, this large construction replaces the original of the last century which Stalin destroyed in the 1930s. He intended to replace it with a huge Palace of Soviet Congresses but when the basement flooded repeatedly he had to settle for an open-air swimming pool. Today's rebuilding work is also financed through the Church's role as a tax-free trading organization.

The non-Orthodox

So much for the official religious landscape of modern Russia. The unofficial scene comprises those groups against whom the new religious law was directed. They include independent Orthodox congregations which have broken free of the rule of the Holy Synod, Catholic and Lutheran churches which have only recently reopened for business, evangelical groups such as Baptists and Pentecostals which are growing well across the country, and cults such as the Mormons which have considerable financial backing from abroad.

The legal challenge for Protestants is lessened wherever newer groups are able to share the registration credentials of the few Pentecostal and Baptist churches which survived the years of persecution. But problems still abound for the Protestants, especially in Asian Russia (east of the Ural mountains) where contact with the ways of the western church is minimal. Three lingering issues from Soviet times concern persecution, tongue-speaking and legalism.

Registration under Communism closely regulated church activities but also brought an end to harassment of believers at work and home. Those who registered were considered weak in faith by those who did not register and who continued to endure persecution. Resentment and misunderstanding still continue although time has brought a measure of healing. Tongue-speaking is another continuing cause of division. The Baptists suspected the Pentecostals of demon-possession because they spoke in tongues, and the Pentecostals suspected the Baptists of not being Christians because they did not. Dismissive attitudes remain strong. By contrast, the issue of legalism is common to all Protestants who endured the seventy-year winter of Bolshevism. The survival mentality produced a Christian subculture which dictated principles for clothes, hairstyles, work possibilities and leisure options. Even today it is not only the Cross of Christ which is a stumbling-block to unbelievers.

Newer issues include false teaching, personality cults and 'rice Christians'. False teaching often appears when growth is dramatic and seminaries few, for in such an environment personality cults grow up around immature but confident leaders. The devotion of their followers dulls their spiritual senses and in their pride they stray from God's Word. Rice Christians are those who attach themselves to any visitor from a wealthier nation. The preacher's meetings are a chance to learn a useful second language, offer the prospect of free gifts, and may open the doorway for emigration. The numbers look great on the missionary report back home, but it is not the true harvest.

Many people in the West have been supporting missions to Russia. At their best, such work has made the most of a window of opportunity to preach the Gospel and has seen souls won for Christ. It has also brought varied approaches to ministry and witness. Many are to be congratulated for their hard work and pioneering spirit. However, the picture is not all good. At their worst, western missions have wasted money through needless duplication of resources, confused their hearers through their lack of co-ordination and petty quarrels, and have shown great insensitivity to the traditional Christian witness which is unhelpfully dismissed as ignorant and apostate. So the first ten years of freedom have brought both joy and sadness. Perhaps it has also clarified that the most strategic work for overseas parties to invest in today is the recruitment, training and encouragement of a new generation of Russian pastors.

Jonathan Fraiss was Assistant Chaplain at St Andrew's Anglican Church, Moscow from 1996 to 1999. He is now Anglican Chaplain in Kyiv, Ukraine.