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REINVENTING RELIGION IN RUSSIA

Abstract: The collapse of the Soviet Union opened path to post-Soviet countries for all sorts of religious organizations, missionaries, as well as for religious activities, that existed underground during Soviet period or emerged after 1991. That time, widely addressed as Religious Renaissance in Russia, added new trends to religious landscape of the country, already immensely diverse. People had to find their own religious views, for majority lost because of the state policy. In many cases it was the reinventing of religion.

Religious diversity of Russia is strongly connected to the ethnic adherence of the population. The common position is “Russian means Orthodox”, “Tatar means Muslim”, “Kalmyk means Buddhist” and so on. But the attendance of religious events is not that popular as labeling oneself as religious.

Most of religious practices this day can be studied with three major conceptual frameworks. One describe existing rituals and places of worship (bricolage), second tells us more about attitude to religious organizations (vicarious religion) and third places the question under study in the context of state policies (ties between church and state).

Can we say that in Russia there is pluralism? Solving problems with religious diversity and creating this pluralistic ideology is possible only by means of “melting” some differences for the same of civil society or the idea of citizenship. But it seems that Russia's chosen another way of solving the growing problems of diversity.

Keywords: *worship, pluralism, Orthodox, secular, ideology, Russian rituals.*

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1. RELIGIOUS RENAISSANCE IN RUSSIA

After 1991 Russian population faced relatively fresh and shocking news. For seventy years of Soviet history, religion and religious organizations were banned and regarded either as absent or irrelevant to the modern life; scholars argued that the religious worldview was naturally disappearing, or, in some cases, existed as an atavism, a form of narrow-mind, typical for no educated and rather “ancient” people.

The collapse of the Soviet Union opened the path to the post-Soviet countries for all sorts of religious organizations, missionaries, as well as for the religious activities that existed underground during the Soviet period or emerged after 1991. 1990s were a time when, on the national television, you could watch American televangelists in the morning, Sun Myung Moon’s sermons in the daytime, and, in the evening, new members of the parliament discussing current issues with Aum Shinrikyo leaders. That time, widely addressed as the “Religious Renaissance” in Russia, added new trends to the religious landscape of the country, already immensely diverse.

The popularity of the religious TV programs, books and lectures showed a particular interest and lack of knowledge among the Russians, as they had very little or no experience of religion, because of their Marxist ideology, atheistic by its nature. Most of the religious traditions had to find their way back to Russia after 70 years of struggle with the state. Moreover, people had to find their own religious views, lost by the majority because of the state policy. In many cases, it was the reinventing of religion.

Religious diversity of Russia is strongly connected to the ethnic adherence of the population. Most groups in Russia maintain the traditional religion of their ancestors, intertwined with their culture, traditions, language etc.

During the latest census in Russia, held in 2010, people claimed to be of more than 160 ethnic groups. This question was optional and almost 4% did not declare any ethnic origin. 80.90% of the population claims to be Russians; there are 3.87% of Tatars; 4 peoples, Ukrainians, Bashkirs, Chuvashs and Chechens made more than 1% each, and other ethnic groups were even smaller. Tatars, Bashkirs and Chechens traditionally are Muslims, Ukrainians belong to several Orthodox churches, and Chuvashs are partly Russian Orthodox, but recently they tend to leave Christianity for Neopaganism, the traditional religion of their ancestors. The “Neopagan turn” is pretty close to the trend of “reinventing religion”, with the number of Neopagans growing slowly but steadily. Despite this and other patterns of change, the common position is “Russian means Orthodox”, “Tatar means Muslim”, “Kalmyk means Buddhist” and so on. Such ties create space for “low-

commitment religious organization”, to use Nancy Ammerman’s phrase¹. The attendance of religious ceremonies is not as popular as labeling oneself as religious. The number of people who go to churches/mosques/synagogues once a month or more often can vary from 3% to 8%² (data from 2012). One third of the population would visit places of worship occasionally, that is, on holidays or for a ritual – baptism or funeral. During the 1990s we saw a certain growth in church attendance, plus 3-4% from 1990 to 1998³. But, despite this low rate of attendance, these people still have the sense of belonging to the community.

2. GAP IN TRADITION – NO ONE KNOWS WHAT RELIGION IS

Mostly we will address to the Orthodox, but the same is typical for Muslim and partly Buddhist communities. When it comes to religious minorities, their major goal is not to lose their identity and, in case of NRMs, either to keep stable good relations with the state or to prevent any contact with it. Usually, newly converted religious practitioners keep rather a high level of attendance and religious literacy, i.e. a pretty high level of commitment.

But, when it comes to “religious free riders”, as someone put it, religious organizations and leaders have to cope with their attitude. Nevertheless, it puts a certain responsibility on the religious leaders and organizations: “The church is motivated to provide a subsidy in order to increase participation”⁴, and this brings us to the tendencies that we will describe. They are very much about including people in religious life by all means and about leveling their commitment by building a new identity.

The situation that we called “reinventing religion” can be described in many terms, from “return to God” to “de-secularization”⁵ However, I suppose that most of the religious practices of today can be studied with three major conceptual frameworks. One describes the existing rituals and places of worship, the second tells us more about the attitude towards religious organizations and the third places the question under study in the context of state policies.

¹ Nancy T. Ammerman, “Organized Religion in a Voluntaristic Society,” *Sociology of Religion* 58 (1997): 206.

² “Посещение служб, соблюдение поста, ношение креста и молитва,” accessed November 17, 2015, <http://sreda.org/ru/opros/43-kto-iz-rossiyan-postitsya-nosit-krestik-molitsya>.

³ Detlef Pollack and Daniel V. Olson, *The role of religion in modern societies* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 67.

⁴ Joseph P. Daniels and Marc von der Ruhr, “Subsidizing Religious Participation through Groups: A Model of the “Megachurch” Strategy for Growth,” *Review of Religious Research* 53 (2012): 473.

⁵ Detlef and Olson, *Role*, 1.

3. BRICOLAGE

When one's goal is to invent something, or to reinvent it, the easiest, though not the very rational way, is to take all sorts of things rather hectically, hoping that this collection will work or at least will be useful. Such picking and choosing sometimes forms a religious worldview, and, among all the terms used to describe it, our choice is "bricolage", first used by Claude Levy-Strauss. There might be all sorts of definitions of the religious bricolage, such as the following: "This term has been used as a metaphor to designate the combining of a variety of religious practices and representations found in certain oral societies and, in a different form, in the most modern societies"⁶. Keeping in mind that, along with other terms we use, "bricolage" does not announce any specific ontological reality but is just a tool for describing it, a mere metaphor, lets pay attention to its creative nature – each person forms his or her version of views, tradition, rituals, based on his/her personal experience and background.

This trend is widespread and it can be compared with certain features of religious life all around the world, for example, with the growth of the Pentecostal churches in Latin America or the Evangelical megachurches in the US. These movements offer "something to everyone"⁷, and, using the market metaphor, we can compare them to the shopping malls. Religion is much less regarded as an obligation, but becomes more of consumption⁸.

The best illustration of this attitude can be discovered among the pilgrims to the sacred places or sanctities. As an example, The Cincture of the Theotokos, worshiped by all Eastern churches, was brought to Russia in 2011 from Mount Athos. The Cincture (pieces of it are kept in several churches in Russia, with two pieces in Moscow) was displayed in 14 cities and 1 monastery; it stayed in the country for 39 days. More than 3.1 millions of people revered it, with 1 million in Moscow, where the Cincture was on 19-28 November 2011. In the capital, several streets in the city center were closed for cars and pedestrians, subway passengers were unable to use several stations for exit, because the line lasting up to 8 km and consisting of 80 thousand people was freezing the public transportation, as well as creating traffic jams. This line was the center of media attention, as well as a product of media creation. Due to media coverage, the Cincture from Athos was regarded as much more interesting than the pieces of the same garment already kept in the Russian Orthodox churches. People came from

⁶ Wade Clark Roof, *Contemporary American religion*, Vol.1 (New-York: Macmillan Reference USA, 2000), 81.

⁷ C. K. Robertson, *Religion as entertainment* (New-York: P. Lang, 2002): 29.

⁸ Grace Davie, "Thinking Sociologically About Religion: Implications for Faith Communities," *Review of Religious Research* 54 (2012): 287.

all regions to touch the sacred object, as it was claimed it could heal illnesses, especially women infertility.

The CEO of the Russian Railways (RZD), Vladimir Yakunin, head of Andrew the Apostle Foundation, an organizer of the event of bringing the sacred object to Russia, announced on a press-conference that the Cincture of the Theotokos would change the demographic situation in Russia and increase the birth rate (one of the priorities stated by President Putin)⁹. This shows a pretty magical or consumerist approach to the matter – trying to solve secular personal or social problems with the help of a Higher Being. But the people in the line, as many as the participants in other mass pilgrimages - to the Matrona of Moscow or to Seraphim Sarovsky in Diveevo, were not only Orthodox Christians. Among them, we could meet agnostics, spiritual but not religious, Christians of other denominations, even adherents of other traditions. No sociological survey on a big sample took place in the Cincture lines, but the existing data show that people standing there were willing to be more churched than they actually were and that only 8% visited church every week and on holidays¹⁰. But these people, with any views, were using the word “podvig” (endeavor) to describe their experience in the line. These 20-24 hours in the line meant the fulfillment of their religious aim, a shortcut to their wishes becoming true and them turning more Christian.

But, while being or trying to be Christian, the Russian population tends to be rather inclusive in respect of other worldviews, even if they are not really working well alongside Christianity. For example, 16% of people claiming to be Orthodox Christians, believe in and practice fortune telling and rely on different superstitions¹¹.

4. VICARIOUS RELIGION

Grace Davie writes that “vicarious religion” is religion “performed by an active minority but on behalf of a much larger number, who (implicitly at least) not

⁹ “Ситуация с наплывом паломников к Поясу Богородицы в главный храм Москвы под контролем мэрии,” accessed November 17, 2015, <http://simvol-veri.ru/xp/situaciya-s-naplivom-palomnikov-k-poyasu-bogorodici-v-glavniie-xram-moskvi-pod-kontrolem-merii.html>.

¹⁰ “Очередь к Поясу. Подвиг?,” accessed November 17, 2015, <http://sreda.org/ru/2011/ochered-k-poyasu-podvig/1052>.

¹¹ “Вера в астрологию, приметы и гадания,” accessed November 17, 2015, <http://sreda.org/ru/opros/42-veryat-li-rossiyane-v-astrologiyu-primetyi-i-gadaniya-portret-suevernyih-rossiyan>.

only understand, but, quite clearly, approve of what the minority is doing”¹². This means that we divide population in religious experts and religious consumers who are very different in their lifestyle and rarely meet. Their relations are restricted by several “rules”:

- ✓ Churches and church leaders perform rituals on behalf of others;
- ✓ Church leaders and churchgoers believe on behalf of others;
- ✓ Church leaders and churchgoers embody moral codes on behalf of others;
- ✓ Churches can offer space for the vicarious debate of the unresolved issues in the modern societies;¹³

Finally, yet important, especially for the Russian case, “religious professionals, both local and national, are expected to uphold certain standards of behavior, not least, traditional representations of family life”¹⁴.

Definitely, vicarious religion is very much based on the classic idea of Thomas Luckmann, who claimed that the privatization of religion gives birth to new forms of religiosity, usually called after English title of his book *The invisible religion*¹⁵. This invisible nature of the vicarious religion makes studying it really challenging; that is why Grace Davie suggests to pay attention to the periods of crisis, personal or social, to find traces of this phenomenon. Although originally this framework was created to describe different European contexts, certain features of vicarious religion could be found in the US as well¹⁶.

This model works well especially (and maybe exclusively) with the cultures with dominating Christian churches¹⁷, which makes vicarious religion a useful tool in studying the religious situation in contemporary Russia. The very idea of low-commitment religions, as the dominant form of affiliation in Russia, is particularly close to the notion of vicarious religion. Let me provide illustrations for the different elements of the cited definition.

Church leaders and church goers perform rituals and believe on behalf of the others; that gives them the responsibility as well as the privilege to be the representatives of the entire nation. Further, we will see how the Russian Orthodox Church became responsible for guarding the traditions in Russia as well as in the

¹² Grace Davie, “Vicarious Religion: A Methodological Challenge”, in *Everyday religion: observing modern religious lives*, ed. Nancy Tatom Ammerman (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007): 22.

¹³ Davie, “Vicarious Religion,” 23.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Thomas Luckmann, *The invisible religion: the problem of religion in modern society*, (New-York: Macmillan, 1967).

¹⁶ Davie, “Vicarious Religion,” 32.

¹⁷ Steve Bruce and Voas David, “Vicarious Religion: An Examination and Critique”, *Journal of Contemporary Religion* 25 (2010): 257.

whole Russian-speaking part of the world. The inactive majority would take part only in case of personal need – like baptism or marriage, though the last one is not really popular, or in cases of major holidays – for Russian Orthodox Church, the Easter and the Christmas (of course, the same tendency can be seen in Europe¹⁸).

This majority doesn't pay a lot of attention to the church leaders but very painfully react on their supposed misrepresentation of the moral code. For example, one of the most heated discussion took place in 2012, when, via media, it was discovered that Patriarch Kirill had a very expensive watch and an apartment in one of the most expensive buildings in the center of Moscow. People blamed the Patriarch for not meeting the expectations people would have from a church leader – modesty, avoiding temptations etc.

The role of the vicarious religious leaders in the public debates, very important for a British context, is not so important in Russia. As long as the Russian Orthodox Church unites the majority of population, it regards other religious traditions either like “younger brothers”, when it comes to the other religions of the peoples of Russia, or as dangerous strangers, when new religious movements, especially of foreign origin, start their mission in the country. So, when crucial questions require the attention of the religious leaders, in most cases, the only expert whose opinion is taken in consideration is the Orthodox Church.

5. STATE CHURCH

Like many European countries, Russia has a long history of a state church. The Russian Orthodox Church played this role during the imperial period, and, after 1991, it has reached out to regain the power. Other religious organizations (except the Muslims) usually don't have the abilities to form strong mighty denominations and tend to be marginalized. As Grace Davie puts it, “The notion of “denominations and congregations” is characteristically American; it does not reflect the religious situation in Europe where the legacies of state churches and their successors still resonate, though more so in some places than others, and where there is significant representation of faiths other than Christian, not to mention more innovative forms of spirituality”¹⁹.

When it comes to the question of law, Russia inherited the Soviet tradition of a very strict secularism – in the Russian Constitution (1993), Article 14 states the secular character and that no religion can become obligatory; religious organizations are separated from state and school and are all equal. On the federal level, all the issues concerning the religious groups are regulated by the law 125, “About the freedom of consciousness and religious communities”. This law starts

¹⁸ See Bruce and Voas, “Vicarious Religion,” 251-52.

with a preamble that focuses on the special role of Orthodoxy in Russian history, spirituality and culture. In the previous version of this law, there was the idea of “traditional religions”, i.e. Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Buddhism and Judaism, as the most important for the Russian history and culture and, despite the fact that the preamble doesn’t really have any juridical power, this idea became very popular and widely used by prosecutors and judges. This is one of the reasons we cannot see Russia as a fully secular state: “In the Orthodox religious tradition, which is as a rule strongly connected to national identity, the question of the separation of church and state was not raised with such intensity”²⁰.

The case of other European countries may be a matter of disagreement among scholars²¹, but in Russia religion is still an important part of building the national identity. The leaders of the state – President, Prime Minister, and Mayor of the capital – do not miss any important church service, support different church foundations etc. No religious service, but those of the Orthodox Church, are broadcasted live on the national TV. The idea of “russskiy mir” (Russian world), that has certain roots in the Russian history as a very conservative view of a people united by language and culture was brought back to life by Patriarch Kirill in 2009²², and, in 2014, president Putin used this idea in his speech to the Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation in connection with the request for the admission of Crimea in the Russian Federation. This mutual influence is an important feature of both church and state rhetoric in Russia today.

But the importance that the current government sees in Orthodoxy is rooted not only in the imperial period but also in the cultural role that the Russian Orthodox Church played during the period of perestroika. It is not uniquely a Russian experience: “In many parts of Europe, a tiny and undoubtedly infiltrated worshipping community had maintained a protected if somewhat marginalized public space (including physical space), which became available to the population as a whole at the moment of need, and in which protest could become explicit rather than implicit”²³. So, the Russian church is regarded simultaneously as a keeper of the tradition and as a guard of the Russian culture and language, as well as a martyr of the Soviet atheistic society.

¹⁹ Davie, “Thinking Sociologically,” 273-274.

²⁰ Gert Pickel and Kornelia Sammet, *Transformations of religiosity religion and religiosity in Eastern Europe 1989-2010* (Wiesbaden: Springer VS, 2012): 95.

²¹ Bruce and Voas, “Vicarious Religion,” 256-57.

²² “Выступление Святейшего Патриарха Кирилла на торжественном открытии III Ассамблеи Русского мира,” accessed November 17, 2015 <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/928446.html>.

²³ Davie, “Vicarious Religion”, 26.

Coming back to the question of the public debates and of the place of the religious leaders in them, I suppose that it is exactly this mutual reliance with the state that makes public debates impossible. If the state is somehow officially supporting the Orthodox dominance in Russian culture, we will have such stories as the widely discussed imprisonment of three members of an art project or of a punk protest band, “Pussy Riot”, in 2012. In Russia, their performance on 21st of February 2012, in Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Savior, marked the crisis uniting the nation with shared feelings of shame and pity, as well as with disgust, and sometimes calling out for cruel punishment.

Finally, “Pussy Riot”’s performance “Holy Mary, drive Putin away”, focusing exactly on the point of church-state mutual penetration, led to the passing of a new federal law protecting religious feelings (blasphemy became a crime). Now, this law is one more resource for suppressing the religious minorities and postulates the special role of the Russian Orthodox Church. Of course, the future of the atheists is rather gloomy as long as they don't have religious feelings to protect.

6. WHAT IS PLURALISM?

Nevertheless, this situation does not really mean serious conflicts; in most cases, the religion related conflicts are based not on the religious background, but on ethnic differences. Can we say that in Russia there is any kind of pluralism?

There are all sorts of definitions for religious pluralism. We can look at three of them representing different views on the subject.

The first, very wide and neutral, goes like this: “the free existence of many faiths”²⁴. This definition stresses out freedom, that is, no external restrictions put on religions, but gives no clue about the relations between religions and also it gives no insight on how to distinguish diversity from pluralism.

The second is “Religious pluralism is a term for religious diversity that imputes positive meaning to religion and encourages appreciation of religion’s many forms”²⁵. Here, I would like to underline the idea of positive meaning and appreciation of religion in society.

Very close to the second is our third definition; pluralism is the “normative ideology of inclusion and tolerance”²⁶. Only the third definition draws attention not

²⁴ Catherine L. Albanese, *America, Religions and Religion*, 5th. ed. (Belmont, Calif.: Wadsworth, 2012), 11.

²⁵ Amanda Porterfield, “Religious Pluralism in Religious Studies”, in *Gods in America: Religious Pluralism in the United States*, ed. Charles L. Cohen and Ronald L. Numbers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 21.

²⁶ Kathleen M. Moore, *The unfamiliar abode: Islamic law in the United States and Britain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 30.

to diversity as the main source of pluralism, but to the normative character of these phenomena, drawing a line between diversity as reality and pluralism as an ideology trying to regulate this reality.

The first definition seems too wide and inclusive. With this definition, we can say that Russia has all the reasons to be called a pluralistic society. The second definition works perfectly well for the Russian law. But pluralism, as the third definition puts it, doesn't really work well in societies with a state church. Solving the problems with religious diversity and creating this pluralistic ideology is possible only by means of "melting" some differences for the sake of the civil society or of the idea of citizenship. But it seems that Russia has chosen another way of solving the growing problems with diversity, by building a new form of state church, sometimes going pretty far from the historical Christianity.

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