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A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php

Religiosity and Political Consciousness in Postsoviet Russia

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The years of *perestroika* saw religion flourishing in Russia. Religious renewal has become an important factor in sociopolitical life. What influence has this new religiosity had on the sociopolitical views of the Russian people? Is it enabling Russia to move towards democracy and a government based on law, or, on the contrary, is it hampering this process? We will attempt to answer these questions using the results of a sociological survey *Mirovozzreniye naseleniya Rossii posle perestroiki: religioznost', politicheskiye, kul'turnyye i moral'nyye ustanovki* (*The Worldview of the Russian People After Perestroika: Religiosity, Politics, Culture and Morality*), conducted in 1992.

A rapid growth in religiosity is one of the phenomena of the revolution that has taken place in our outlook on the world in recent years. If we were to look for one common denominator in these apparently heterogeneous developments in the realm of ideas we might find it in a reaction against ossified communist ideology, a rebirth of all that was suppressed by the totalitarian regime and a hostility towards everything that it made compulsory.

All surveys conducted between 1987 and 1992, including those in which we have been involved, witness to the speedy disintegration of communist ideology and the mass growth of anticommunism. After the events of August 1991 and October 1993 hostility towards this ideology, its symbols and political institutions has become a universal phenomenon and adherence to these old values is now a comparatively rare form of dissidence. Practically every survey shows that between 5 and 10 per cent of the population support communist values. The concept of socialism fares somewhat better: 15 to 20 per cent of those surveyed support it. More than a third of the urban population of the country (42 per cent in Moscow) are confirmed anticommunists, people who believe that 'former party workers should not be trusted with important government posts'. Only 5 per cent of those surveyed are prepared to vote for the communists in the next elections. The strongest anticommunists of all are the young and those who live in large cities.

Rejection of communist ideology and practices can be found alongside mass hostility to the very idea of an all-powerful, authoritarian state. In the national consciousness the natural path is to adopt the ideals of freedom and democracy, regardless of the fact that the ideal of a 'law-governed state' has only comparatively recently come to the top of the agenda of those who shape public opinion. A peculiarity of the *perestroika* and post-*perestroika* years was a clear receptivity towards anticommunist and 'market' propaganda at a time of relative indifference towards the usual 'liberation movement' values – representation of the people, freedom and human rights. Bearing in mind the complete contempt the communist system showed

towards these values, it might well have been supposed that they would not have had the opportunity to root themselves deeply in the national consciousness. However, this is not the case. Several basic democratic ideas and principles are rooted much more deeply than one might have thought possible, although the general picture, as we shall see, is contradictory enough.

The attitude of respondents to democratic values can be summarised in the following way (in declining order): freedom of conscience and the equality of all religions is supported by 74 per cent; basic human rights by 72 per cent; freedom of speech by 68 per cent; the primacy of law by 59 per cent; the priority of democracy over 'order' by 31 per cent; the principle of parliamentarianism by 30 per cent. It is not hard to see that the majority of people support basic freedoms; but at the same time, the principles and mechanisms of democracy which are necessary to secure these values attract the attention of a significantly smaller number of people. The result is paradoxical: a preference for order over democracy with simultaneous universal support for human rights. Almost everyone agrees that freedoms must be respected, but few seem to realise that this requires the primacy of law and a law-based state. The pursuit of legality rather than short-term goals still seems to many to be an irresponsible extravagance. The weakness and fragility of our current democratic system is thus the consequence not of a rejection of the basic values of a free society but of an inadequate political culture in which citizens have not given enough consideration to what is needed.

In the sphere of economics the anticommunist trend in public opinion has led to a complete discrediting of the socialist idea of a state-planned economy, and only 8 per cent of the population believe that this system should be reinstated. Despite the ups and downs of Yel'tsin's shock therapy, only 15 per cent react negatively to the concept of 'market'. About a quarter of the population are in favour of radical economic reforms whatever the cost and about the same number think that the observance of moral norms could be dispensed with in the process of achieving capitalism speedily.

Another important element in the present anticommunist worldview has no logical connection with it and is even theoretically contradictory. This is a nostalgic mood amongst a broad spectrum of the population: a growth of interest in prerevolutionary Russia and positive evaluations of it. Seventy-one per cent of city dwellers believe that 'Russia is a unique country. We must find our own path of development and not copy the West.' What in particular are our fellow citizens focusing on in the historical experience of our country? Where do they see potential for development? Two questions were asked to solve this riddle: 'Name the best era in Russian history' and 'Which of these Russian historical figures would you like to see alive today?' The answers reveal certain patterns. Frustrated by social disintegration and national humiliation, the public is looking not towards periods of revolution, even if they promised freedom, democracy and modernisation, but to periods of strong government.

The most popular era was that of Peter the Great (named by 34 per cent of those surveyed), then came 'the period of Stolypin's reforms', with 12 per cent. Russia after the victory of 1812, the age of Pushkin, received 8 per cent. Military leaders as embodiments of the military glory of Russia were very popular: Alexander Nevsky, Marshal Zhukov, General Kutuzov (and this despite a very low level of militarism and a growth of pacifism in society). Another category of popular eras and leaders was connected with the modernisation and even the westernisation of Russia. The general nostalgic mood was not, however, crudely 'restorationist': Nicholas II and Admiral Kolchak collected less than 8 per cent between them. Public opinion avoids

falling into a trap where 'reds' and 'whites' confront each other. This is confirmed by the response to the question 'What emotions does the word "autocracy" evoke in you?' Nine per cent answered positively but 44 per cent negatively. The remainder found it hard to answer, showing that they had not given the subject any thought. The question 'What do you think about the restoration of the monarchy in Russia?' produced similar results. Nine per cent were in favour, 41 per cent against. Russia's own path of development is thus not linked in public opinion with the restoration of the political institutions of the old regime. A more detailed analysis showed that a romantic wish to restore the past was expressed mainly on the spiritual and cultural level. This fact throws light on the nature of Russian religiosity today.

The anticommunist trend in the worldview of contemporary Russians has brought about basic changes in the sphere of religious consciousness. The years of *perestroika* saw a swift growth in religiosity and the equally swift disappearance of atheism, and rightly became known as a period of 'religious rebirth'. Until 1988 the number of believers in Moscow was around 10 per cent and between 5 and 15 per cent in other Russian cities. In 1990, the number of believers in Moscow had reached 27 per cent, against 29 per cent in the country as a whole. In the same year the number of atheists decreased from 20 to 8 per cent in Moscow and from 16 to 8 per cent in the country as a whole. In 1990–1 there was no increase in the rate, but the following year with its severe economic problems and the dissipation of hopes for quick socioeconomic solutions, was characterised by a new rise in religiosity. Over the year the number of believers in Moscow grew one and a half times, from 27 to 41 per cent (from 29 to 40 per cent in the country as a whole). In Moscow the number of people who felt that religion played an important role in their lives rose from 30 to 44 per cent and in the country as a whole from 28 to 41 per cent. In 1992 the number of people for whom religion had no significance was one and a half times fewer than in 1990, falling in Moscow from 27 to 12 per cent and in the country as a whole from 25 to 14 per cent.

Turning to faith can either strengthen or weaken democracy, human rights and pluralistic values. The twentieth century gives examples of both. In this respect the current situation in Russian Orthodoxy seems to give few grounds for hope. In contrast to Catholic and Protestant theology, Orthodox theology has not developed a theoretical basis for modern democracy and human rights. Attempts to do so at the start of the twentieth century were suppressed by the communist regime. Officially the church hierarchy stands above the battle between democracy and authoritarianism. It is as hard to find consistent and principled support for democracy in announcements made by Orthodox bishops as it is to find criticism of authoritarianism. However, it is no secret that there is a widespread antidemocratic mood among the Russian Orthodox clergy, that the spirit of national and religious intolerance has not been overcome and that there is hostility towards Catholics, Protestants and Jews.

It is not difficult to explain this phenomenon. It was inevitable that the development of mass religious consciousness would have brought with it an antidemocratic charge in that the return of Orthodox Christianity is a process of 'restoration'. The 'restoration' mentality is shown among believers. Twelve per cent of them relate to autocracy positively and 38 per cent negatively (9 per cent positive and 44 per cent negative in the population as a whole). More often than other people, believers support the restoration of the monarchy: 13 per cent (10 per cent in the population as a whole). Most believers are anticommunist and 40 per cent of them believe that the Communist Party should be brought to public trial and that former party workers must not be trusted with posts in government (as opposed to 36 per cent of the popu-

lation as whole). Two per cent of believers would be prepared to vote for communists in the next elections (5 per cent among the population as a whole). Forty-four per cent of believers react negatively to the word 'socialism' (41 per cent among the population as a whole).

Strictly speaking, anticommunism and monarchism are not the opposites of democracy, human rights and political liberalism. But at the same time the 'restoration' mentality in the public consciousness necessarily includes elements of authoritarianism. The polls show that this is the case. Forty-six per cent of believers are of the opinion that order and firm authority should be established even if this means limiting democracy (43 per cent among the population as a whole). Ten per cent of believers want a planned economy compared to 8 per cent of the whole population. In their answers to a series of questions on freedom of speech, the separation of church and state and the primacy of law, believers have a more authoritarian attitude than the population as a whole. Eight per cent of believers react negatively to the concept of 'human rights' (6 per cent among the population as a whole).

The attitude of believers, then, tends to be more authoritarian. This can be explained by the 'restoration' mentality, the ideology of the Moscow Patriarchate and the opinions of Russian Orthodox clergy. Yet it is also important to observe that this authoritarianism is expressed fairly weakly. The difference is only of 1 to 5 per cent. There is no hint of any basic division in society between authoritarian believers and democratic nonbelievers. The survey results show that a democratic, freedom-loving, and (in the sphere of economics) promarket mood predominates amongst believers and nonbelievers alike.

Why, then, is present-day Russian religiosity so much less authoritarian than history would suggest it should be? One explanation is the traditional political conformity of believers. It is among believers that Yel'tsin enjoys the most popularity because he fulfills the role of the archetypal 'little father'. The powers that be are from God and any opposition, especially when it is implacable, instinctively evokes a negative reaction. There are not only fewer supporters of the Communist Party amongst believers, but also fewer supporters of 'Pamyat'.

However, it is impossible to explain the political views of believers by reference only to their conformism. Despite their tendency towards authoritarianism, they are not generators of antisemitism or general national intolerance. As many of them relate positively to Jews and Germans (57 and 66 per cent) and as few of them negatively (8 and 3 per cent) as in the population as a whole. Believers are significantly more tolerant towards Caucasians and Central Asians than the rest of the population.

For all its traditional conformism, contemporary Russian religiosity also displays considerable antistatism. To a greater extent than the rest of the population believers do not agree that 'the government is obliged to fight poverty and individuals can do nothing to help' (19 per cent of believers are in agreement with this belief and 22 per cent of the population as a whole). A quite unexpected piece of data is that there are significantly more pacifists among believers: 12 per cent of them and 9 per cent of the population as a whole believe that 'the army and weapons are evil and must be resisted'.

We see, then, that Russian religiosity today has a series of unique and unexpected peculiarities. Despite the logic of history and the ideology of the Russian Orthodox Church, authoritarianism among believers is not only muted, but even non-existent at the level of morality. In order to understand why this should be so we need to look at the nature of Russian religiosity today and the role played by the Russian Orthodox Church in its formation.

In our society the return to religion is occurring at a time when several successive generations have had no links with institutional churches or official church ideology. In the Soviet era even those who went regularly to those churches which were open for services were not thereby introduced to real church life, and gained only minimal acquaintance with a religious worldview. During the years of *perestroika* communist ideology collapsed. Religion is beginning to fill the spiritual vacuum in society. But where do people get their ideas about religion from? For the vast majority of people the main sources of religious ideas are the mass media and fiction, and for only 9 per cent is the church the immediate source. Religious texts are cited by 21 per cent of respondents as a source of information, but these texts are interpreted in the context of secular culture. Religiosity today, then, is not a result of 'the witness of the church', but to a significant extent it is the outcome of the development of secular culture and ideology, of the spontaneous spiritual aspirations of the people. Desiring a faith, they find their place alongside the church. Faith is growing rapidly, but increase in church membership is slow.

According to the surveys of recent years, around 40 per cent of people believe in God. At the same time, only 8 to 10 per cent of these people pray 'every day' or 'often' and 12 per cent 'rarely'. Two to 8 per cent attend services once a week or once a month, but most attend 'at festivals' or 'once a year'. Only 17 per cent of those surveyed had taken communion in the past year or two and only 7 per cent had observed Lent. The majority of those who believe in God do not observe traditional church norms, and have not been institutionalised into the Orthodox Church.

What, then, is the attitude of believers to the Russian Orthodox Church? Here it is instructive to look at believers' confessional self-identification. The growth of religiosity and the increase in those who believe in God has not been accompanied by a growth in the popularity of Orthodoxy. Indeed, the years 1990–2 saw a sharp fall in its popularity. Among its competitors are Catholicism, eastern religions (Buddhism and Krishnaism) and, to a lesser extent, the Baptist Church. All the same, followers of these religions are a small minority of the population: Catholics and Baptists make up less than 1 per cent and followers of eastern religions 2 per cent. Orthodoxy's main competitor is not other religions, but the swiftly growing category of people with no denominational adherence: 'just Christians'. They grew two and a half times over the three years 1989–92 and in 1992 made up 52 per cent of the population, while the number of Orthodox (of all jurisdictions) decreased. This is a striking phenomenon in a country where Orthodoxy has traditionally dominated. At the start of *perestroika*, many of those who said they were Orthodox were evidently people for whom Orthodoxy had become a symbol of a 'western' orientation. They apparently expected Orthodoxy to give its blessing to a democracy of the kind found in the USA, the UK, Italy, Poland and elsewhere. Soon, however, it became apparent that an attraction to democracy was incompatible with the movement towards Orthodoxy, and so those democratically inclined 'superficial' Orthodox neophytes began to identify themselves more readily with the amorphous category 'just Christian'.

These 'just Christians' are people with a less well defined religious worldview than that of the adherents of specific denominations (for example, Orthodoxy). 'Just Christians' are the neophytes who believe in God and have come to faith but are not prepared to enter the church unconditionally and to accept church disciplines (hence the low level of Orthodox behaviour registered in the survey). The fact that the number of 'just Christians' is growing at the expense of Orthodoxy testifies to the rebirth of Christianity not in the form of Orthodoxy as it was 70 years ago, but on a more

modern, universal level, albeit Orthodox in essence.

The increase in the number of 'just Christians' not belonging to any specific denomination shows a high level of amorphousness and anarchy and at the same time spontaneous ecumenism within the Russian religious revival. We are in the presence of a national religious movement of a completely new kind, with 'prowestern' tendencies. It corresponds to a contemporary worldwide phenomenon – amorphous democracy breeds an amorphous belief in God, which in its turn stimulates the former.

One other category of people on the new Russian religious scene is of interest – those who 'believe not in God but in supernatural forces'. Some of these people identify themselves as Orthodox, some as 'just Christian' and some as atheists, but apart from their denominational or atheist sympathies they have the most eclectic and undefined worldview. According to the data in the surveys, this is the type of religious consciousness that correlates most with adherence to western values. 'Believers in supernatural forces' are the strongest opponents of authoritarianism and the most enthusiastic democrats.

There are thus clearly two tendencies on the Russian religious and political scene today. The first leads to faith in God and in Orthodoxy, the dominant religion in Russian for 1,000 years. The political view which correlates with this movement is the desire to restore authoritarianism. The second tendency, which is obscuring the first and preventing it from going too far, is the move towards an amorphous, eclectic consciousness which is not denominational ('just Christians') and moreover includes followers of untraditional beliefs ('I believe not in God, but in supernatural forces'). This undefined and unstructured religious consciousness has grown perceptibly in recent years while our political consciousness has been making the swift transition to democratic values. The growth of a 'free', eclectic type of religious consciousness, a kind of philosophical 'entropy', and the growth of an aspiration towards democracy are phenomena which are parallel and mutually connected.

An eclectic 'anticommunist bloc' has taken shape in the mind of the 'average' Russian, uniting what in the past were irreconcilable ideas: a striving for democracy and human rights and a concentration on Russian history; religiosity and faith in social progress. 'Westernism' and 'Native Soilism' (*pochvennichestvo*), antagonistic in the past, have unexpectedly merged in the context of anticommunism to form a kind of hybrid worldview. This merger is producing both positive and negative consequences. On the one hand, eclecticism and amorphousness in public opinion are hindering the development of extremist authoritarian political movements; on the other hand, this same amorphousness is breeding flabbiness, lack of structure and irrationality in political life.

Can this situation last for long? Probably not. Sooner or later either this hybrid will split and the traditional ideological and political opponents will reappear, or else a new synthesis of worldviews will be worked out rationally and there will be a new demarcation between politics and ideas in Russia.

(Translated from the Russian by Emma Watkins.)