

The Changing Pattern of Religious Belief: *Perestroika* and Beyond

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In 1990–2, at the request of the Analytical Centre of the Russian Academy of Sciences, we carried out complex sociological research into the worldview of the Russian population (in 1990–1 Leonti Byzov was also a member of the research group). In our research we were looking mainly at the state of religious belief and how it impinges on politics, culture and morality. In this article we are presenting some of the basic general tendencies in the evolution of religious belief over this period.

In 1990 the survey was conducted in Moscow, Pskov, Khar'kov and in cities in the Moscow, Khar'kov and Smolensk *oblasti*; sample size 1,855 people. In 1991 the survey was conducted in 12 cities in Russia and North Kazakhstan: Moscow, Pskov, Yekaterinburg, Vladikavkaz and others; sample size 2,000. In 1992 the survey was conducted in 15 cities in Russia and Kazakhstan: Moscow, Pskov, Omsk, Stavropol', Ufa, Pechory, Gdov, Alma-Ata, Ural'sk and others; sample size 2,250.

Under normal circumstances, three years would be a very short period of time. But in view of the fact that our country is currently seeing the establishment of new forms of consciousness, ideology and the expression of national identity, these three years could be compared to decades. In the sphere of ideology, it was during these years that the almost universal rejection of communist values and the flowering of religion on a mass scale became obvious.

At the beginning of *perestroika*, when only 10 per cent of the population believed in God (various sociological studies from the end of the 1970s, the 1980s and even 1987–8 showed a consistent 7–12 per cent believers), an immeasurably larger number of people espoused a variety of non-traditional 'New Age' beliefs. This is not surprising: in conditions of censorship, the virtual destruction of ecclesiastical and religious tradition and the disappearance of an integral religious worldview, the most basic beliefs – in the evil eye, UFOs, the abominable snowman, astrology, ESP and elements of Far Eastern religions like yoga and Buddhism – spread like wildfire. The history of the past decade shows that so-called 'non-traditional religiosity' was in fact traditional for a huge sector of the population (see Table 1).

The figures in Table 1 confirm the fact that virtually all forms of non-traditional beliefs were widespread and experienced some growth in the years 1990–2. And we must not forget that these so-called 'superstitions' do not in any way hinder people from accepting Christianity. In the popular consciousness faith in God often goes together quite naturally with faith in magicians, ESP, UFOs, astrology and so on. The results of the survey show that, of people who believe in God, 78 per cent also believe in the evil eye, 68 per cent in telepathy and 60 per cent in astrology.

The pattern of the spread of religious belief today looks very like a repetition of the process that took place seven decades ago, albeit totally different in content. Just as at

Table 1.

	Moscow			Pskov			Overall		
	1990	1991	1992	1990	1991	1992	1990	1991	1992
I believe in reincarnation of the soul	9	10	11	4	6	9	8	9	11
I believe in ESP	–	16	13	–	18	20	–	20	22
I believe in 'the wisdom of the East'	–	20	25	–	18	15	–	19	19
I believe in telepathy	69	70	74	57	61	62	58	66	66
I believe in UFOs	44	47	46	35	46	32	39	47	46
I believe in astrology	59	53	60	48	50	51	49	53	56
I believe in the abominable snowman	–	–	35	–	–	25	–	–	37
I believe in the evil eye and in the stealing of bio-energy	–	–	69	–	–	67	–	–	67

All tables show percentages

Table 2.

	Moscow			Pskov			Overall		
	1990	1991	1992	1990	1991	1992	1990	1991	1992
I believe in God	27	24	41	24	27	43	29	29	40
I vacillate between faith and unbelief	–	25	26	–	35	27	–	29	29
I don't believe in God, but in supernatural forces	35	25	15	24	16	10	35	20	14
I am indifferent	–	–	6	–	–	6	–	–	6
I am an atheist	20	10	8	24	11	7	16	11	8
Unable to answer	18	16	4	18	11	8	20	12	6
Religion plays an important part in my life	30	25	44	19	26	42	28	25	41
Religion does not play an important part in my life	39	37	34	37	39	29	32	35	34
Religion has no meaning for me	27	28	12	24	23	17	25	26	14

that time it was the intellectuals who were disseminating atheism, so today it is mainly people with intermediate and higher education who are propagating both traditional beliefs and various types of parascientific and parareligious ideas. Although among this category of people the number of believers is on the whole below average, their interest in religion is greater and so, undoubtedly, is their degree of influence on the character and tempo of the spread of all forms of religious belief.

The collapse of communist ideology and its substitutes after 1988 is leading to an explosion in the move towards Christianity and faith in God (Table 2). The process of rapid growth in traditional religious belief and the equally rapid disappearance of atheism which began during the years of *perestroika* is still continuing today. According to the results of the surveys, right up to 1988 the number of believers in Moscow fluctuated around 10 per cent. In 1988–90 the process of turning to faith in God became a mass movement. In 1990 the number of believers in Moscow reached 27 per cent (over the whole survey it was 29 per cent). During the same period, the number of atheists in Moscow fell from 20 to 8 per cent (overall from 16 to 8 per cent). In 1990–1 there was an apparent stagnation in the movement towards faith. However, the following year, which brought severe economic restraints and the disappearance of all hope of a quick solution to socio-economic problems, was characterised by a new explosion in the growth of religious belief. During this year the number of people in Moscow who believed in God rose one and a half times – from 24 to 41 per cent (overall from 29 to 40 per cent). There was also a growth in the number of people who considered that religion played an important part in their life, and a marked drop in the number of those for whom religion had no meaning.

Notwithstanding the rapid growth in professed ‘faith in God’, the level of traditional Christian beliefs and of institutional Christian behaviour was growing much more slowly, if at all (Table 3). What was the reason for this apparent contradiction? Why was an increase in the number of those who believe in God not accompanied by a massive spread of traditional Christian concepts and institutional behaviour? The paradox is that this turning to faith was happening spontaneously. The preaching role of the church had very little place in this process (Table 4).

For most people, the main sources of religious ideas and beliefs are the media and fiction, while only 9 per cent are influenced by direct church sources. Religious literature provides information for 21 per cent, but even this group is from a social background where the interpretation of religious texts would take place mainly within the conceptual framework of secular culture. Thus, our religious beliefs do not come

Table 3.

	Moscow			Pskov			Overall		
	1990	1991	1992	1990	1991	1992	1990	1991	1992
I believe in heaven and hell	20	10	15	9	12	18	12	11	12
I pray daily	9	4	10	7	3	11	7	4	10
I go to church at least once a month	10	14	15	8	6	13	10	9	10

Table 4. Where do you get your religious or philosophical views from? (You may choose one or two responses) (Survey carried out in 1992)

	Overall	Believers
In church, from sermons, from conversations with clergy	9	19
From the gospels or other religious literature	21	33
From relatives or friends	21	29
From newspapers or TV	39	27
From fiction	31	23
From what writers or academics say	8	7
Unable to say	13	10

from the witness of the church, but rather spring from our secular culture. They are the result of the flowering of secular culture and ideology. People have spontaneously aligned themselves with the church without any serious effort on the latter's part. They have found that they have a desire for the church and for faith. So what about the relationship between the popular mind and the Russian Orthodox Church? The results of our surveys in 1990–2 permit us to follow the changing pattern of denominational allegiance over the past three years (Table 5).

Table 5. What do you consider yourself to be?

	Moscow			Pskov			Overall		
	1990	1991	1992	1990	1991	1992	1990	1991	1992
Just a Christian	22	42	52	12	50	60	22	47	52
Orthodox	43			57			46		
Moscow Patriarchate		14	12		7	14		8	9
Russian Free Church		11	5		10	4		11	6
Catholic	0	1	1	0	2	0	0	1	1
Old Believer	0	1	0	1	2	0	0	1	0
Baptist (or other Protestant: Lutheran, Adventist etc.)	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Adherent of Buddhism, Hinduism, Krishnaism	1	1	1	0	2	1	1	2	1
Atheist	20	10	9	24	11	6	24	14	8
Other/unable to answer	14	20	19	6	6	22	7	16	22

Over the three years 1990–92 there was a sharp growth in the number of ‘just Christians’ – up two and a half times (from 22 to 52 per cent) – and just as sharp a drop (by a factor of three) in the number of atheists (from 24 to 8 per cent). The overall number of Christians (‘just Christians’, Orthodox adherents of the Moscow Patriarchate or of the Russian Free Church, Catholics, Old Believers and Protestants) remained at the same level: 68 per cent in 1990 and 69 per cent in 1992. Within this number the proportion of Orthodox Christians (both adherents of the Moscow Patriarchate and supporters of the Russian Free Church) dropped by a factor of three: from 46 to 15 per cent. Thus, while the number of Christians held up overall, there was a sharp drop in the number of those who considered themselves Orthodox.

In 1991 and 1992 we put separate questions about membership of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Free Church. In the 1991 survey we had the unexpected result that there were more people who identified themselves with the ‘Free Orthodox Church’ (11 per cent) than there were adherents of the Patriarchate (8 per cent). It is unlikely that these people really are adherents of the ‘Karlovatskaya Tserkov’, – many of them do not even know it exists. It is evident that their replies were really saying something else – that they were expressing a positive reaction to the word ‘free’ and an absence of loyalty to the official church. The 1992 results give a different ratio between supporters of the official and of the ‘free’ church (9 and 6 per cent, respectively), but this still does not show any sharp increase in the number of those aligning themselves with the Patriarchate. This is a quite remarkable situation – in a country where Orthodoxy is the traditionally dominant confession, and where the overwhelming majority of the population are Christians (more than two-thirds), the number of those who support the official church is less than 10 per cent.

As we can see from Table 5, the percentage of those who adhere to other Christian confessions (Catholics, Protestants, Old Believers) is small: about 1–2 per cent. Those who identify with eastern religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Hare Krishna) are in a distinct minority: 1 per cent. At the same time, there is quite a large number of people who consider themselves ‘something else’ or who are unable to answer this question: 22 per cent. The main competition for Orthodoxy is not primarily other religions, but the fast-growing category of people without any denominational affiliation – ‘just Christians’ (of course, this category includes people who are unable to distinguish between Orthodoxy and Christianity, such as many elderly or ill-educated people, but the proportion of these has not grown). The number of ‘just Christians’ grew two and a half times across the survey as a whole, and even more in some cities (in Pskov, for example, it was four and a half times). People who call themselves ‘just Christians’ have a less distinct, less precise religious philosophy than members of some specific confession (such as the Orthodox). As a rule, they are people who already believe in God, or are coming to faith but are not ready to make an unconditional entry into the church and to accept church discipline (hence the very low level, according to the survey results, of institutional Orthodox behaviour). The fact that the number of ‘just Christians’ is growing rapidly, and at the expense of the number of Orthodox, testifies to a desire to see Christianity revived, not in an Orthodox form of seventy years ago, but on some more contemporary and universal level, although essentially within the parameters of Orthodox tradition. The increase in the number of ‘just Christians’ without any specific denomination is an indicator of the high degree of amorphousness, of elemental anarchism and at the same time of elemental ecumenism of the religious movement in our country today. The spontaneous and elemental nature of this process gives us grounds for suggesting that this searching for faith is not moving towards greater definition, but rather in the opposite direction.

The changing pattern of denominational allegiance is in complete harmony with the evolution of people's attitudes towards the official Russian Church (Table 6).

Table 6. Do you think that the Russian Orthodox Church today helps in the following ways?

	Moscow			Pskov			Overall		
	1990	1991	1992	1990	1991	1992	1990 (5 cities)	1991 (12 cities)	1992 (15 cities)
To raise the level of morality, to educate children, to develop tolerance and mutual assistance	82	61	71	89	69	65	81	63	70
To preserve national dignity and people's national self-awareness	69	61	64	77	66	54	70	60	57
To raise people's cultural level	—	—	52	—	—	40	—	—	43
To develop democracy and to strengthen human rights	35	27	27	44	24	23	39	28	25
To give direction to the state	47	21	18	45	27	20	44	26	16
To develop fanaticism and religious and national conflicts	—	—	12	—	—	9	—	—	7

This table only gives positive replies; negative and 'don't know' replies are omitted.

In 1990, during the first phase of the mass movement towards faith in God, very many people had a positive opinion about the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the life of society: in some spheres (morality and culture) it was the majority opinion; in others (the socio-political sphere) numbers were smaller, though with a tendency to increase. In 1991, together with a halt in the growth of religious belief, there was a drop in the authority of the church's role in all spheres of life. The fresh outburst of religious feelings in 1991–2 was no longer accompanied by absolute assertions about the beneficial influence of church involvement in all spheres of life, as was the case in 1988–90. Public opinion today approaches this question with much more discrimination. In 1992 the majority of people were convinced that the church has a beneficial role in the sphere of morality. About half the population expressed the belief that the Russian Orthodox Church assists the development of national self-awareness and

culture: in this respect there were no substantial changes in people's opinions. However, despite a general resurgence of religious feeling and growth in the authority of Orthodoxy, the overwhelming majority did not consider that the church is of assistance in strengthening democracy or giving direction to the state.

There is one other aspect of our amorphous religious worldview that is of interest. The other side of the coin with respect to denominational identity, with most people considering themselves 'just Christians', is denominational tolerance (Table 7).

Table 7. Attitudes towards denominations

	Moscow						Pskov				Overall					
	1990		1991		1992		1991		1992		1990		1991		1992	
	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.	Pos.	Neg.
Orthodoxy (ROC)			64	2	65	3	56	3	59	1			56	2	54	2
Orthodoxy (RFC)	75	1									76	2				
			54	3	44	4	46	3	39	2			49	3	45	3
Catholicism	35	10	34	9	27	6	23	5	24	6	20	7	26	6	24	5
Baptists	15	19	27	13	20	11	12	12	10	9	16	11	18	12	18	7
Islam	23	16	25	15	17	13	12	9	12	7	19	10	21	11	19	8
Judaism	40	17	27	12	19	10	11	8	12	8	17	11	18	10	17	7
Buddhism, Hinduism	37	8	35	8	22	8	19	6	14	6	28	4	26	6	20	5
Atheism	-	-	-	-	16	21	-	-	18	14	-	-	-	-	18	16

The majority of people, as one would expect, express positive feelings towards Orthodoxy. Of the non-Orthodox denominations, Catholicism is the most popular. From 1991 to 1992 the number of positive evaluations of all denominations (except the Baptists) dropped by between 1 and 6 per cent. Most noticeable is the drop in the level of positive feeling towards the eastern religions (Buddhism, Hinduism, Krishnaism), by 6 per cent. It seems as though the period of rapid growth in all-embracing love towards all confessions has passed its peak. Now we have a paradoxical situation in which, on the one hand, popular awareness of religious identity and alienation from 'imported' forms of religious belief is growing, and, on the other, there is a decline in the authority of a particular church organisation, the Moscow Patriarchate, and in the number of people who identify with it. To paraphrase the replies we received, you could say that an ever-increasing number of people consider themselves 'free Christians in the Orthodox tradition'.

Apart from Orthodoxy, more than half those surveyed expressed indifference towards other confessions, or were unable to define their attitude. At the same time, the level of tolerance towards all religions is very high. The highest number of negative evaluations were given to Islam (8 per cent), the Baptists and Judaism (7 per cent each). The most unpopular 'faith' is atheism. It is the only type of worldview for which the

number of negative evaluations exceeded that of positive ones in almost all cities and socio-demographic groups.

The new Russian religiosity, then, is mainly the product of an independently developed secular culture, and not of church teaching. It cannot be confined, therefore, within the bounds of a strict ideological discipline. As a result, the Orthodox Church and the religious life of the majority of people exist as it were in two different dimensions. There is the dogmatic teaching of the church and its official attitude towards various current problems; and there is the body of believers, who are not very familiar with the position of the church and who, as far as we can see, are not particularly anxious to know about it. They attend services more or less regularly and do not require anything further from the church. The religious life of the majority of people is completely autonomous and is developing according to its own laws.

(Translated from the Russian by Cathy Carter)