



Rally “in defense of the faith,” Moscow, April 22, 2012.

STATE OF AFFAIRS

They Never Met: Church and Civil Society in Present-Day Russia

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I have to begin by admitting that this is a difficult topic for me. The recent history of Russia fills me with sadness and bitterness, and by history I mean the course of political, social, and religious life. At the same time, though, this is a chance to look directly and honestly at what has been happening in Russia and in the Russian Orthodox Church over the last few years. It is hard for me to speak with detachment and analyze as if from the out-

side, for I was a direct participant in many of these events. I apologize in advance for being partial. I hope that such an approach will give you some insight into recent developments and their context.

Church Revival as a Phase of History: Challenges of Chronology

What began in Russia in the late 1980s is usually called a time of “Church Re-

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vival.” Millions were baptized, tens of thousands of churches opened, thousands of new ones built. If the numbers were all that mattered, then indeed those metrics are simply astonishing. However, it is no less interesting to consider the qualitative characteristics: quality of faith, as I once called it in my essay “The Orthodox Church in Post-Soviet Russia.” If time permits, I will come back to this concept.

The next issue that arises is creating a timeline: When did this revival start? Can we consider it finished? If so, when did it come to its end? Chronology can help us significantly in considering the relations between the Church and civil society.

First of all, I need to mention that there is a more or less established point of view: Church Revival is considered to have begun in the year 1988, with the celebration of the millennium of the Baptism of Rus. The state, which back then was still Soviet, had acknowledged for the first time that the millennium was not just a regular date on the church calendar. There have been no serious discussions on the possible end of the period, yet the general consensus is that it ended in late 2008–early 2009, just before the election of Metropolitan Kirill to the Patriarchal See.

In my opinion, however, the dating should be adjusted. I believe that Church Revival ended three years later, in 2012, after the notorious performance of a punk group on the ambo of the rebuilt Christ the Savior Cathedral. It was the moment when the state itself, de jure and de facto, demonstrated its readiness to protect the domain of the sacred. The Church

was not expected to participate, as long as it kept silent.

Both the beginning and the end of the so-called Church Revival stemmed, therefore, not from any activity of the Church but from decisions made by the state. In the first case, the state acknowledged the “social significance” of the Russian Orthodox Church and thereby initiated the latter’s exodus from the underground and the process of its legitimization. In the second case, the state’s decision brought the revival to its logical end. This end may seem paradoxical: prayer, salvation, deification, and other spiritual goals are no longer considered to be the main objectives of a religious life. Instead, priority has been given to practical objectives, the first of them being the protection of sacred objects and places. And in that context the state no longer needs the services of the Church. It can handle this problem efficiently enough alone. Is any need felt in this situation for long-term cooperation between the Church and civil society? The answer is obvious: no, there is none. Above all, the Church intends to focus on maintaining its relations with the state.

I would like to propose a different timeline, which, in my opinion, shows the dreadful symbolism of Russian history. And viewed vis-à-vis the events of 100 years ago, it makes one think of the possible consequences. This is my timeline: from the murder of Archpriest Alexander Men, biblical scholar, brilliant preacher, fervent missionary, and gifted ecclesiastical writer, on September 9, 1990, to the murder of Archpriest Pavel Adelgeim, confessor, wonderful pastor, and church publicist, on August 4, 2013. Even the weapons of mur-

der—an axe for Fr. Alexander and a kitchen knife for Fr. Pavel—bear an evil resemblance.

What did these two men have in common? I believe it was their deep and genuine faith and something that is inherent to such faith: their freedom in Christ. The latter phenomenon is the most difficult and incomprehensible for many even among the Orthodox Christians in Russia. And, as we see, it is the most dangerous, for those two men were faithful to Christ even to the point of death.

Yet those two priests shared one more thing: they did not belong to the hierarchy or the church bureaucracy. They were both charismatic leaders around whom community and social life flourished. In other words, Fathers Alexander and Pavel were at the center of communities in which ecclesiastical and social dimensions were closely intertwined. And today, these communities are utterly weakened, if not totally destroyed.

Lay Movements and Civil Society

My conscious involvement in church life began in 1989. And I actually came to it from the side of civil society, through samizdat. I took part in the meetings of a small ecumenical community in Moscow that gathered Orthodox, Old Believers, Catholics, Lutherans, and Baptists. Some of the group members had just been released from prison, including the founder of the group, Sandr Riga, who was discharged in 1987.

The meetings took place in the crypt of one of Orthodox churches in Moscow that was still closed at the time and used as a museum. We had lots of dif-

ferent guests from all over the place. And the general atmosphere was that of fellowship and long-awaited freedom.

Then I joined one of the newly opened parishes, where we also formed a youth fellowship. At that time, a wide range of groups emerged from the underground, Christians among them. The formation of civil society began, and Christians who had survived the persecutions were its integral part.

Beginning in the 1990s, a rapid growth of lay movements in post-Perestroika Russia took place. Christian politicians sat in the Supreme Council of the USSR. Orthodox fellowships that had emerged all over Russia had the desire to unite, and thus in October 1990 the Union of Orthodox Fellowships was established. Independent magazines and newspapers on religion were being published. From 1990–92, the peak period of this activity, there were more than 120 organizations in the Union of Orthodox Fellowships. But then this spontaneous movement, lacking clear goals and spiritual leadership, became polarized and split.

Not the biggest but certainly a very active part of the community of lay groups saw its task as forming some kind of Orthodox ideology and establishing a broad Orthodox patriotic movement. Convinced Orthodox monarchists and Russian nationalists, like the founder of Christian Revival Union, Vladimir Osipov, extended their influence. The second president of the Union of Orthodox Fellowships, Igumen Kirill Sakharov, later recalled that already back at the second Conference of the Union in 1992, “the vast majority of the participants

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spoke in favor of Orthodox monarchy as the only God-given political system.” A search for the enemy from within soon started. In autumn 1993, the Union became the first organization to approach Patriarch Alexey II with an appeal to pay closer attention to the activities of the Fellowship of the Transfiguration of Our Lord and to warn its leader, Fr. Georgy Kochetkov, who had been actively involved in catechesis and liturgical translations into Russian, of the impermissibility of introducing any changes into the Liturgy without the prior blessing of the supreme church authorities.

A larger group of fellowships found itself not ready for any ideological confrontation and chose to leave the Union in order to focus on their own everyday work, particularly education and charity. In this situation, however, the leaders of most of these fellowships were unable to make a convincing case to church hierarchy that they were part of the Church, and not merely socio-political groups and NGOs using church rhetoric as a cover.

Back then, the bishops had virtually no experience of cooperation with lay movements and organizations and were simply not ready for their emergence in the post-Soviet Russia. The reaction to the new and unknown phenomenon was a knee-jerk reflex. In 1994, the Bishops’ Council rigorously tied all the brotherhoods and sisterhoods to parishes and virtually subordinated them to parish rectors.¹ Every fellowship was required to have a blessing for its activities, which in fact meant strict control by the church hierarchy. Most of the fellowships involved people who were members of the different parishes.

Their leaders were unable to implement the decisions of the Council.² Such fellowships ceased to exist.

A catastrophic manpower shortage was another important reason for the “washout” of the lay movement, however strange that may seem. In the early 1990s, the Church’s increased demand for new priests could not be met by the seminaries of the time. Thus many young churchmen who could have become the backbone of the lay movement were ordained, and the Orthodox community lost the most active and engaged members who could have replaced the older generations. After having practically slaughtered the rising lay movement by the mid-1990s, a few years later the church hierarchy felt the need for church NGOs and associations. Unfortunately, in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the social and political activity of such lay groups took quite humble, if not grotesque, forms. These were generally small-scale projects that had no significant impact either on the Church or on society. Some of them even had virtually the same names—endless carbon copies of various kinds of Orthodox union: fellowships, citizens, gonfalon-bearers, you name it.

Some major fellowships survived, however, and are still active. Their activities range from organizing one of the biggest educational institutions of the Church—St. Tikhon’s Orthodox University—to establishing a network of small lay groups and fellowships associated with Fr. Georgy Kochetkov, which lead catechetical courses often more efficiently than traditional parish communities.

And of course lay activities are not limited by the institutionalized forms

¹“The brotherhoods and sisterhoods in their religious, administrative, financial and economic activities shall be subordinate and accountable to the diocesan bishops through the rectors. The brotherhoods and sisterhoods shall abide by the decisions of the diocesan authority and the rectors of the parishes.” Chapter XI, clause 15 of the Statute of the Russian Orthodox Church as revised in 2000 and amended in 2008 and 2011.

²It is particularly remarkable that at more or less the same time, in 1995, the Publishing Department of the Moscow Patriarchate—which had been a prominent intellectual center of the Russian Orthodox Church in the 1960–80s, when it had been headed by Pitirim Nechaev, Metropolitan of Volokolamsk and Yuryevsk—was reorganised and effectively quelled.

of life of various communities, unions, and fellowships. “Loners” play a critical role in the life of the Church by shaping the cultural and intellectual context of church life wherever they are, be it an academic institution, a secular school, the art world, or the realm of journalism. Charity and volunteer organizations are crucial as well.³

What Is This Church Revival?

The severe identity crisis that Russia is going through has substantially influenced both the so-called Church Revival as well as the Orthodox Church as a whole. While Orthodoxy has long been considered an aspect of national identity, until the last couple of years this has been more of an intuitive understanding than a conscious realization. On the external, social level, the Church was given a huge credit of trust as a community that had been persecuted for a long time but had nevertheless survived.

At the same time, it is important to remember that in spite of the reemergence of the Church into the public realm, for the entire post-Soviet period, the Gospel as well as church praxis have remained the domain of a very small share of Russia’s population. This fact is attested to not only by surveys but also by priests themselves. Consider, for example, the observations of Bishop Panteleimon Shatov:

At the beginning of the 1990s we saw a surge of people coming into the Church.... Not just coming, but swarming into it. Alas, not many stayed inside. The period of active attention to the life of the Church and so called ‘churching’ ended very quickly... In my estimation, people who

*go to church every Sunday amount to 1% of the country’s population or even less.*⁴

One would think that the marginalization of Orthodoxy in society would be an obvious trend. It is not the entire story, however. At the same time—thought it may seem paradoxical—the concept of Church Revival has developed not only within the church context but also in society as a whole.

What does this mean? First of all, Church Revival became an element of the ideological movement for de-Sovietization. However, we should not forget that this role was played by the Church Revival only at the early stages of the process, in the 1990s. After that, an essential transformation took place, a sweeping change of priorities of the revival movement. Pastoral care took a back seat (in other words, the Church acknowledged that its missionary efforts had failed), and the tasks that came to the fore were construction and renovation—that is to say, the development of property and assets—and identity building through the propaganda of patriotism and traditional values.

By 2014, it has led the Russian Orthodox Church to become a predominantly national church, in which other nations do not feel welcome. The “Russian World” concept, a weak imitation alternative to Russian nationalism, proved to be insolvent and was widely perceived as a cover-up for the rebirth of the imperial ambitions of the Russian state. Instead of focusing on creative efforts to reclaim modern culture, Church Revival has resorted largely to appealing to the past and advocating the reconstruction of pre-revolutionary Synodal-era practices.

³Examples include the *Miloserdie* (Mercy) ministry, uniting 18 organizations connected to the Synodal Department of Social Ministry and Charity, the *Danilovcy* movement, the *Predanie* (Tradition) Charitable Foundation, the Yu. A. Garnaev “Russian Birch-Tree” Orphaned Children and Large Families Foundation, and many others.

⁴Panteleimon Shatov, Bishop of Smolensk and Vyazma, “People Remember God, But Have Forgotten Christ,” *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* 10 (2012): 44–49.

“O Holy Russia, preserve the Orthodox faith”—the words of a *stikhera* (hymn) to all the saints who have shone forth in the Russian land—have turned into an adage in the last two decades. It appears to be the only quote from liturgical texts that has become a catchphrase. This hymn is sung in the second tone, solemnly but energetically, while the theological problem behind it remains unsolved.

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Liturgical poetry is one thing; furnishing a motto and a formula for guidance in practical issues is another. From a theological perspective, this formula appears to be incomplete and inaccurate. This can be proven when one compares it to the commandment the Lord gives Adam in Eden: “The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it” (Gen. 2:15). Preserving and caring for the garden is listed as secondary. The first task is to work the ground and develop it creatively. Even after Adam is expelled from the Garden of Eden, the Lord still expects him “to till the ground from which he was taken” (Gen. 3:23). The commandment to protect and care for does not follow Adam after the expulsion.

The main messages that the Church offered, both to individuals and to society as a whole, remained attractive for a long time: “Let’s preserve our traditions!” and “Disregard for traditions is very dangerous.” One might think it is nothing but a sound Christian conservatism. However, we should not forget to ask ourselves: what are those traditions? In today’s Russia, one needs to make considerable moral and intellectual effort to look deep into the history, beyond the revolution of 1917. Too much time

has passed, too many generations have changed, and too many bearers of those traditions have been eradicated. The mere appeal to the Christian traditions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries inevitably degenerates into producing either a historical reconstruction or an amateur drama.

If we accept that Christian traditions in Russia are in fact dead, there can be only two possible practical implications. One can either strive to find a remaining living tradition, or lay foundations for new traditions, that are relevant in the political, economical, social and cultural conditions in which we live.

For me as a Christian, it is especially painful to acknowledge that the place of those who speak on behalf of the living tradition is taken in Russia by those who speak of the Soviet past. Here lies the key to the magnetism of everything Soviet and related to the Communist past, not just for the elderly but for the young as well. If one looks closely to the current heritage of Russia—whether cultural, historical, social, philosophical, or religious—there will be only one tradition alive that everyone knows, remembers and can pass on to the next generation. This is the Soviet tradition. Its triumphant return in recent years is the best proof that there is actually nothing else left alive in Russia.

The Church today does not distance itself from warm feelings for everything Soviet. On the one hand, this is an expression of the solidarity between the Church and the state. On the other hand, it is a statement of fact that the pro-Soviet mindset within the Church is as strong as ever. Such

a situation can be explained easily, as I have already mentioned, by the failure of missionary and catechetical efforts. As a result, a generation of Soviet people had been baptized, but were never taught the basics of their faith. The Church absorbed them the way they were, in the hope that they would edify themselves in some natural way. The problem, however, lies in the fact that the Soviet people had no intention of changing. They remained the way they were. The only changes that happened were the changes they caused the Church to undergo.

Nevertheless, despite the official watchdog rhetoric of the Church and its direct support of various radical conservative groups, it has been actively moving along very different lines as well. It has been seeking creatively to seize opportunities offered by the modern world, bearing in mind a proper social and political outlook as it looks toward new technologies and frontiers. The historian Alexey Beglov sums up the last two decades of church life as follows:

*What is happening is not the mechanical recovery of something lost, but a process of enculturation—the creative entry of the Church into the modern and post-modern culture of Russia and other CIS countries.*⁵

Here are some examples of enculturation that have nothing to do with the revival of traditions from before the Revolution:

- The opening of Sunday schools, which the Russian Orthodox Church had never used before
- The introduction of the Basics of Orthodox Culture course into the

school curriculum (a compromise of sorts between the Church and the state educational system, which is still ideologically Soviet)

- The active use of the Internet and online communication technologies
- The use of monolithic construction and other process innovations in building

It is my opinion that, amid the current crisis, the potential for appealing to the past has been exhausted and is no longer of any use. We have to acknowledge that “Church Revival” was a convenient ideological concept rather than something real. It allowed us to turn a blind eye toward the lack of solutions to church problems.

The Church Has Overlooked...

The key problem of the Russian Orthodox Church is that it has overlooked and thus missed civil society. It has paid no attention to it. It has invested all its effort in establishing good relations with state authorities and big business. And this is not just a problem at the level of the hierarchy. These are the priorities at all levels of church administration, including parishes.

The Church has wanted to appear friendly and coherent to the government bureaucracy and various state institutions. Many have considered this to be essential to the restoration of historic justice toward the Church. This process has included:

- The recognition of religious communities as legal entities
- The recovery of church property
- The tax exemptions for religious communities

⁵Alexey Beglov, “Through Thick and Thin,” *Russia Profile*, September 19, 2011. Available at russiaprofile.org/culture_living/45540.html.

- The introduction of army chaplains
- The introduction of the Basics of Orthodox Culture course into the schools' curriculum
- The recognition of theology as a scientific discipline requiring state educational standards
- The funding for the renovation of churches as cultural heritage sites;
- The acknowledgement of Orthodoxy's particular contribution to the formation of Russian culture and statehood
- State benefits and honors for the Primate of the Russian Church and diocesan bishops on the local level.

Twenty years were spent on winning official recognition, being perceived as "a partner," and, in such capacity, being offered financial support. It is fair to say that the desired goal has been achieved. These days, every single state official masterfully speculates on cooperating with the Church, on advances in developing church and state relations, on protecting traditional values, and so forth.

It would seem that this is exactly the expected victory. One should consider the price of that partnership, however. By my reckoning, the price is unthinkable high—so high that the external victory has turned out to be an utter internal defeat. Concern over excessively close cooperation between church and state has evolved into a much harsher realization: that the Church now serves the ideological interests of the state. Cooperation and service are two different arrangements. Cooperation suggests relations on equal terms. Service is first and foremost a form of submission. The Church was so eager to show that

it had something to offer the state, but how could it prove this to the cynical and corrupt officials who very rarely think in terms of public interest? The usefulness of the Church had to be demonstrated within their customary frames of reference—not by using the normal goal-setting of the Church, but by dancing to the tunes of politicians and bureaucrats.

In order to get involved in solving the problems faced by the country, the Church opted to borrow the lens from the state rather than use one of her own. Specific tasks were chosen accordingly. In the 1990s and 2000s, attempts were made to mobilize an Orthodox voting block, to no avail. In recent years, every care has been taken to promote "traditional values," patriotic feelings, and the idea of "Holy Russia," again to no positive effect. By guarding state interests in socio-political issues, the Russian Orthodox Church has remained within a traditional Byzantine framework. It is a familiar approach for the hierarchy, perhaps even the only possible one. But is this not a mistake? Is it consistent with the reality of public life in the twenty-first century?

Can we ignore civil society? Can we afford to turn a deaf ear to its voice, especially when there is an obvious conflict of interest between it and the state? The answers to these questions are self-evident. Instead of ignoring society, the Orthodox Church must learn to see it as a partner, perhaps an even more important one than the state.

But is the Church the only party at fault here? Is she alone responsible for overlooking civil society? It might seem that the correct answer is no: so-

ciety is also to blame. However, I cannot uphold this position. Civil society did assert itself and did send signals to the Church. It rejoiced when the Church spoke out with words that it longed to hear. But those occasions were scarce.

A few months after the political demonstrations on Bolotnaya Square in a presentation before a Catholic audience I called those months “a Pentecost of social and church life.”⁶ Unfortunately, we were unable to keep the gifts of those days for long. The Church failed to do

the most important thing: it never expressed its moral stand in regard to what was going on in society and politics.

Yet it will have to learn—learn to uproot the habit of servility toward state authorities ingrained in church tradition, learn to be independent in its relations with political and social actors. Quite possibly, as an indirect effect, such a shift will solve some internal church problems. Perhaps it will even help overcome the crisis of parish life. But that is a topic for another occasion. ✱

⁶Sergei Chapnin, “Modest revival of Christian social life,” *Trace (Sled)* magazine, March 2012.



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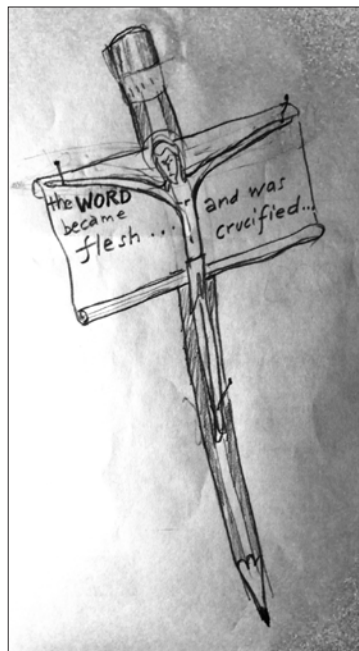
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