

RUSSIAN RELIGION

Overview Religion has always been an important element in the Russians' spiritual life. From early Paganism to the powerful Christianized Kievan State and its religious plurality, and continuing with state-controlled and suppressed religious faith under the Soviets, Russian religious life provides a multifaceted picture.

ANCIENT PERIOD

Paganism: Centuries ago tribes in Kievan Rus' believed in gods and spirits which they identified with the forests and meadows. Although very little information has survived about the religious customs of these tribes, we can learn about the religious beliefs and practices of one East Slavic tribe, the Rus, from priests' manuscripts, epics and some treaties signed with princes. The pagan Russians, as mentioned in *The Tale of Bygone Years*, worshipped the earth, trees, stones, fire, the sun and water. The Russians conducted their ceremonies, and made their prayers and supplications in these forests and in shrines. During these ceremonies they played trumpets and rang bells in a wild, noisy fashion, and danced skipping and hopping. Sacrifices were made during these ceremonies to obtain from the gods what they had asked for. Animal and human bones, skulls, vessels, coals and ashes have been found in archaeological excavations. Human sacrifice in Russia continued up until the middle of the 16th century.

POST CLASSICAL PERIOD

Christianization: There was no unity among the Russian princes, and paganism was unsuitable for the unification and centralization of the unruly principalities. Vladimir wanted to unite his people under a single state religion, and adopted Christianity from Byzantium to serve this purpose. However, Christianity had first appeared in this pagan land with Princess Olga's visit to Constantinople in 955. Our information about her visit and acceptance of Christianity there comes from *The Tale of Bygone Years*. Following this conversation the Emperor, with the help of the Patriarch, baptized her. When Olga returned to Kiev she wanted her son Svyatoslav to be baptized also, but the request was rejected by Svyatoslav. The long-running violence during the reigns of Svyatoslav and his son Yaropolk were not enough to reduce the strength of Olga's Christianity, rather its influences began to become apparent in later years. Years later, when Vladimir, a Viking descendent, became prince of Kiev in 978 he compelled the people of Kiev to accept a single religious system. To this end, he constructed a temple containing images of the gods within Kiev, and demanded that everyone venerate them. However, this effort was unsuccessful and in 988 he himself accepted Byzantine Orthodox Christianity. *The Tale of Bygone Years* relates that before Vladimir converted to Christianity, Jews from the Khazar Khanate, Muslims from the Bulgar state on the banks of the Volga, Catholics from Germany and Greek philosophers from Byzantium came to him, each attempting to convince Vladimir to accept their faith.

Byzantine Heritage: The new religion which Vladimir had obtained from the Greeks is known as Eastern Orthodoxy, or Greek Orthodoxy. At first, the Russians perceived their rapid Christianization as an insult to the old gods, and believed that the new religion impoverished the Russian language. However, this religion assisted in the start of Russian autocracy, and became the reason that the new values flourished on Russian soil. Christianity in Russian territory brought with it a church organization with a Greek archbishop appointed from Constantinople at its head. Unlike the Byzantine church, the Russian church used a language close to the Russians' own language, Old Church Slavonic. The Greek priests who served in the churches in Russia accepted the use of Old Slavonic as a liturgical language in place of Greek.

Through Byzantium the Russians took the customs of Near Eastern, Greek and Christian civilizations "ready-made", but adopted them by giving them a uniquely Russian character. The political hegemony of princes recognized by the Orthodox Church in Byzantium was carried to Kievan Russian also, and was the

reason for the princes' consolidation of their power. At the same time, Christianity ended the separation between the indigenous and foreign tribes, merging these peoples with one another.

As soon as Christianity had been accepted, beginning with Kiev, churches and monasteries were constructed, icons, frescos and mosaics were made and craftsmen were brought from Byzantium. Kiev became a religious center, and the Metropolitan of Kiev appointed from Constantinople became the highest ranking religious leader in Russia. The first Metropolitan for the Russians was Greek, a situation that would continue until the 15th century. In 1051 the Metropolitan Ilarion, a Russian, was accepted by Constantinople, but remained in his post for only one year. The rules for the churches in Russia (*Nomokanon*) were also brought from Byzantium. The Prince of Kiev, Vladimir, had Byzantine style cathedrals built in each large city for the purpose of introducing Byzantine art and culture to the Russian people. It is also reported that after the cathedrals were built Vladimir separated children from their families and sent them away to learn the new religion's sacred scripture, the Gospel, for the purpose of creating a new clergy and religious leaders.

Another characteristic that the Russians inherited from Byzantium was the relationship between the church and the state. In Russia, as in Byzantium, the church remained subservient to the state. In western Europe the church and the state were often in conflict, the church was independent of the state and often held a position superior to the state.

In 1054 the Christian world witnessed the final schism dividing the Eastern Orthodox and the western Roman Catholic churches. The western church had adopted the principle of papal superiority and authority over all churches and in matters of doctrine, and claimed that this principle could not be questioned. The Russian church, having its origin in Byzantium, sided with the Orthodox church and opposed Rome.

A few years after accepting Christianity Vladimir granted the church a number of privileges; his son and successor, the Prince of Kiev Yaroslav also gave the church some additional rights. It has been argued that Christianity brought with it attitudes that harmed the status of women in Russian society although Yaroslav's *Kiev Canon Law (Russkaya Pravda)* contained elements that protected the rights of women.

EARLY MODERN PERIOD

15th century: In the initial years of Christianity the Russian church was under the control of the Greek Patriarch in Constantinople. Following the fall of Constantinople in 1453 the Russian church established itself as an archbishopric and declared its independence. While the state removed the Metropolitan of Moscow, Isidore, who had signed the declaration of the Council of Ferrara-Florence to reunite the eastern and western churches, they appointed a new Metropolitan, Iona, the Metropolitan of Moscow as the head of the independent Orthodox Church. After the fall of Constantinople in 1453, Russia began to see herself as the successor to the Roman and Byzantine empires and destined to protect the Orthodox people. The *Third Rome* doctrine appeared in the writings of the Russian monk Filofei of Pskov in the early 16th century which resulted in Moscow's status as a patriarchate being accepted.

16th century: In the 16th century the Church came completely under the control of the state, and the Metropolitan Philipp was ousted from his post by Ivan IV, who later had him murdered.

Possessors and Nonpossessors: Both Ivan IV and the Orthodox Church were terrified by the beginning of the free-thinking German Reformation (Protestant Reformation), with its apparent emphasis on the individual conscience in religious belief and practice. Therefore he closed his borders to western influence, and imprisoned any clerics who propagated the tenets of the Reformation. Nevertheless, the Reformation had a decisive influence on the development of the Russian Orthodox Church. The 16th century witnessed the struggle between the *Possessors (stiazhatel'i)* and *Non-possessors (nestiazhatel'i)*. The non-possessors, led by Nil Sorsky, insisted that the Church should renounce worldly wealth, that monks should adhere to vows of poverty, and that church and state should be separate. On the other hand, the leader of the possessors, Joseph of Volotsk who advocated a powerful, wealthy church, and emphasized the importance of a harmonious relationship between the Church and the Tsar, was supported by a Church council in 1503. The Non-Possessors were condemned of being opponents of the church. Although they

were driven out of the monasteries by Ivan IV and his successors, their influence continued, and a century later, the movement known as the Old Believers appeared.

17th century: Known as the Time of Troubles, the 17th century was a period in which the Russian church turned its back on Catholic politics. The Patriarch Filaret, who had assumed his position after the death of the Patriarch Germogen, gained fame with his anti-Catholic policies. As he was also the father of Tsar Mikhail Romanov, he was given the title *Great Lord*.

Old Believers and Schism (Raskol): During the reign of Alexis Romanov, patriarch Nikon introduced reforms in church liturgy to correct mistakes made in the translation of Greek texts into Russian, to modify the sign of the cross to follow Greek usage, and to introduce some restrictions on the church's acquiring additional lands. This movement met with strong disapproval from traditional followers of the Orthodox faith and led to a schism between the believers of Nikon and the traditionalists. The opponents of reforms introduced by the Patriarch between 1652–1666, became known as Old Believers (*Starovery* or *Staroobriadtsy*) who were led by Avvakum. They have remained a small sect within the Orthodox tradition to this day, and were separated after 1666 from the official Russian Orthodox Church. Old Believers continued to practice the old liturgical practices, causing a split in the Orthodox church known as the *Schism (Raskol)*.

18th century: In this period the Russian church experienced major reforms, particularly in the time of Peter the Great.

Holy Synod: Peter closed the office of the Patriarch of Moscow and its place was taken by the Holy Synod. In 1700, after the death of the patriarch Adrian, he did not allow a new patriarch to be elected. Instead, a committee appointed by the Emperor was established. Peter turned the Church into a department of state headed in practice by an *Over-Procurator (Ober-Prokuror)*, a bureaucrat appointed by the tsar to control the Holy Synod, and Church Slavic was retained for the Church by Peter's order. Thus, by putting an end to the church's independence he was able to transform it into an institution bound to the state. Peter's most important actions were the measures he took to attempt to achieve unity through religion. Peter ordered priests to determine those who had left the Orthodox church and to find ways to bring them back into the church. He even permitted priests to use force to achieve this, if necessary. Those who had left the church paid higher taxes and were forbidden from working in the civil service. However, Peter's efforts to achieve national unity through religion came to naught as Russia's borders expanded and peoples of other religions began to live within the boundaries of the Russian Empire. Nevertheless, the efforts to convert members of other religions to Orthodoxy continued; Muslims who refused to convert were driven from their villages. The efforts to convert Muslims to Orthodoxy only came to an end in the time of Catherine II. The Russian state permitted Muslims to practice their religion provided they lived in the remote corners of the Empire and were obedient.

With Catherine II's annexation of a large territory that had been under Polish rule, came a large number of Jews who were now within the boundaries of the Russian Empire. Anti-Jewish measures which began in the period of Ivan the Terrible had, by the start of the 1700s, reached the degree that Catherine I ordered all Jews who refused to convert to Orthodoxy to be driven out of Russia. Attacks against the Jews gradually increased, and by the 19th century they were even held responsible for Alexander II's death at the hands of an assassin. In Catherine II's time Catholics living within the borders of the empire were left with no choice but to be associated with the Russian church. At the same time in this century a small Protestant group became active. In the 1860s, a group known as Baptists, active in the Caucasus and the Ukraine, began to expand rapidly within the borders of the empire. Worried by this development, the Holy Synod banned all sects and denominations. Members of the Baptists were kept under surveillance and those who were caught were persecuted. Orthodox missionaries were sent to all villages and efforts began to convert to Orthodoxy anyone who belonged to another denomination. The church's attitude became so strict that it eventually alienated its own people.

NINETEENTH CENTURY

Sobornost: The idea of *Sobornost* (communality) appeared in Russian religious thought, which was identified with the Slavophiles Ivan Kireyevksy and Alexey Khomyakov's concept of the communal unity of all believers, like Russian *obshchina*, a peasant commune, united by Orthodox values denying Western individualism.

Russian Bible Society: The first quarter of the 19th century witnessed active endeavors for spiritual satisfaction on the part of large segments of Russian society. One group, called the Russian Bible Society, opened in 1813. Although initiated by the upper strata, it derived support from all classes and from many faiths with Prince Alexander Golitsyn who also happened to be Over-Procurator of the Holy Synod, at its head. Later in 1817 he was appointed head of a new Ministry of Spiritual Affairs and Education. The ministry introduced the fusion of secular and sacred into the state, and issued a statute declaring all religions equal. By virtue of the prominence of many of its leaders, the Society had significant impact in the government, and it eventually became an official arm of the government.

Toleration Though Isolation: In the Russian Empire non-Orthodox religious communities fell into different legal categories. Some were legally recognized and tolerated; others were tolerated but lacked legal recognition; and still others were neither legally recognized nor tolerated. However, official toleration did not imply freedom of conscience, since toleration was considered to have been granted to a distinct, recognized group, an approach that frequently resulted in nationality and religious identity being inextricably linked.

Revolution of 1905: After the Revolution of 1905, for the first time, the state promulgated an Edict of Religious Toleration in April 1905, granting legal tolerance to all other religions in Russia, and allowing members of other religious groups to act more freely than before.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

The Bolsheviks, to clear the way for a new socialist society, changed the structure of the traditional patriarchal family, army and church associated with the tsarist regime. A major campaign against the Orthodox church began when the Orthodox church supported the Whites during the Civil War. Soviet law gave the State the legal right to supervise all religious activities.

From the Bolsheviks' perspective tsarist oppression and the Orthodox Church's conservatism together had combined to produce an utterly backward society that was intensely religious, agrarian, superstitious, peasant and illiterate. According to Lenin, religion served as opium for the Russian people, and was an obstacle to building socialism. A decree of February 1918 separated church and state, deprived churches of property and rights of ownership, and nationalized them. Intensive Soviet persecution of religious leaders and believers of all religious groups began.

Militant Godless League: The Militant Godless League was formed to conduct propaganda campaigns. The Godless League, formed in 1925 by Stalin, periodically ridiculed and humiliated religion and promoted atheism; and attempted to turn superstitious citizens into atheists.

Living Church: To further weaken the Orthodox church the Soviets supported the Living Church which was a reformist movement among the Russian clergy (Renovationist) to split the clergy and the Russian Orthodox Church (1922–1946).

There was an important change in the state's perception of religion under Stalin. During the Second World War, Orthodox identity and the church were used in official propaganda for the purposes of mobilization, and the state also restored the Patriarchate in 1943 as a propaganda agent.

Traditional socialist ideology was re-emphasized when Khrushchev came to power, leading to a new round of religious persecution. Numerous religious institutions and churches that had been reopened under Stalin during the Second World War were closed again.

Nevertheless, religious life continued to exist despite official restrictions, and when Gorbachev came to power approximately forty-five million people belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church. For Gorbachev and his government religious groups with their numerous followers represented potential allies in helping to carry out the extensive political, economic and social reforms that they envisioned

Discussion/Questions

1. How is Christianity reflected in Russian culture?
2. Is it possible to see traces of pagan culture in Orthodox Russia?
3. Talk about the concept of the Tsar as God. Where did this concept come from? How did the Byzantines regard their Emperor?
4. Why did Russia see herself as the Third Rome? Why did this doctrine fail?
- 5- Why did religious tolerance end during the Soviet Union? How can we explain the shift that took place during WWII? Why did Stalin use the idea of Orthodox identity as official propaganda for purposes of mobilization?

Reading

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