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The Encyclopedia of Religious Life in Russia Today

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The Encyclopedia of Religious Life in Russia Today: a Landmark Research Project

PHILIP WALTERS

'It was like the sun suddenly shining on me!' exclaimed a young woman standing next to me, one of the small crowd who had been waiting patiently for an hour or more for a glimpse of their 'teacher', Vissarion. He had just appeared briefly on the balcony of the church, dressed in his dark red robes, to greet his followers, before going back inside to continue the day's briefing with his priest and elders. It was a warm silent May afternoon in the depths of the countryside, in the village of Petropavlovka, Kuragin region, southern Krasnoyarsk territory in western Siberia. My colleague Sergei Filatov and I had hired a van in Abakan, the nearest city, and driven for five hours over rutted dirt tracks to reach the heart of the area to which the members of the Church of the Last Testament have been moving in their thousands for several years.

We spent the rest of the day talking to members of the Church and making copious notes on this indigenous Russian New Religious Movement. Later we wrote up our findings and produced a five-page report. It is now part of Keston Institute's 'Encyclopedia of Religious Life in Russia Today'.

From early 1998 to mid-2001 Keston Institute ran an ambitious research project. Its aim was to gather comprehensive information on religious life in all parts of the Russian Federation. Funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts in the USA, the project was under the supervision of Keston's founder and director emeritus Michael Bourdeaux. It has now come to fruition in the form of 2000 pages of text in Russian describing religious life in 78 subjects of the Russian Federation (11 autonomous regions were not covered separately) and profiling the current activities of over a hundred religious denominations and organisations.

Founded in the late 1960s by Revd Michael Bourdeaux, Keston College (as it was then called) soon became the leading English-language research and information centre on religious life in communist countries. It was quite clear to Keston's researchers that enforced atheism in the Soviet Union was not succeeding in killing religion. As communism collapsed it was clear that religion was reviving in all its variety in the Russian Federation. With its long years of monitoring religious rights in the Soviet Union and other communist countries, Keston was better prepared than virtually any other research centre in the West to launch a study of this post-communist phenomenon. Our ambitious aim was to compile the most detailed and objective description possible of religious life in every region of Russia.

The opportunity was unique. Before 1917 many parts of Russia would have been physically inaccessible. In communist times they were inaccessible for political reasons. There could have been no field trips to gather information: this could have come from various sources, official and unofficial, religious and secular, but it would have been unsystematic and anecdotal. Even in Gorbachev's time local officials would almost certainly have hindered the work.

In the 1990s Keston became acquainted with the Moscow sociologist Sergei Filatov, who had already started a research project of his own, with the same aims and methods as those that we had in mind. We cooperated with him and he became the coordinator of the work in Russia and leader of a team of researchers which in mid-2000 consisted of Roman Lunkin, Lyudmila Vorontsova, Aleksandra Stepina, Vladimir Poresh, Vladimir Nekhotin, Anastasiya Strukova and Mikhail Roshchin. At various times another six people joined in the work. So did the most experienced specialists from Keston's own staff such as Michael Bourdeaux, Xenia Dennen, Lawrence Uzzell and Philip Walters, accompanying the Russian team on various trips. Filatov led his team into virtually every part of the Federation, going deep into the regions to talk directly to religious leaders, local believers, the secular authorities, people responsible for contacts with the local religious organisations, journalists, academics.

We are now in the process of securing a Russian publisher for the Encyclopedia material. At the moment it exists only in Russian. We would very much like to publish an English version too, but this would require extra funding on a considerable scale, and we have not so far located any possible source.

What has just appeared, however, is a book which is an analytical prelude to the Encyclopedia. It presents the research team's major findings in a collection of 22 articles. *Religiya i obshchestvo: ocherki religioznoi zhizni sovremennoi Rossii (Religion and Society: Aspects of Religious Life in Russia Today)*, edited by Sergei Filatov, went on sale in Russia on 12 March. Keston's staff reviewed the entire text before publication and it is a 'Keston book'.

The book opens with an introduction by Michael Bourdeaux in which he tells the story of his own involvement with religion in Russia and describes how the project originated. This is followed by a chapter by Keston's director Lawrence Uzzell on religious liberty in Russia today. He warns that 'at the end of the twentieth century freedom of conscience in Russia was still far from being guaranteed'.

There follow twenty chapters on aspects of religious life in Russia at the start of the new millennium. Some train the microscope closely on particular regions; some take a broader denominational focus. All combine detailed factual material with wideranging analysis.

Russian society is highly secularised. For 70 years under communism it was virtually impossible for anyone, however strongly motivated, to gain a mature understanding of any religious faith. In postcommunist Russia there is certainly a widespread aspiration after the transcendent, but its nature has been deeply affected by the communist experience.

One recurring theme in the book is the basic shapelessness of the religious quest in Russia today. *Perestroika* dissolved a rigid ideological system and 'produced a society of people with vaguely defined views – a society well able to enter the postsoviet "game without rules".' People in favour of market reforms and democracy tend to be neither Orthodox nor atheists, but people with 'an amorphous and eclectic religious consciousness'. 'Public opinion, the Russian Orthodox Church, western missionaries and the leaders of sects all make the same mistake: they all think that

there is some kind of “spiritual vacuum” in Russia.’ There is plenty of spirituality, but it is impressionistic, spontaneous and unformed. In this context, the book notes a peculiar feature of Russia: it is the so-called ‘nontraditional religions’ which often seem more ‘traditional’ to Russians, because they are more familiar than Christianity, which most people had no chance to learn anything about before 1988.

Focusing on the alleged danger presented by ‘totalitarian sects’, the book finds that tightly-organised sects like that led by Vissarion, which demand a high level of commitment and self-sacrifice from their members, are very few in number, and even these tend to lose fervour and gain ‘respectability’. Citizens of the Russian Federation do indeed profess a wide range of occult, pagan and pseudochristian beliefs, but these are eclectic and mutable; people like to meet, talk, read occult literature, and at the most take part in seminars or clubs, but these cannot strictly speaking be called ‘sects’ or ‘cults’. ‘The battle with “totalitarian sects” is turning out to be a battle with shadows.’

Against this background, a small minority of citizens of the Russian Federation go on to discover a specific faith and make it their own, practising it systematically. Articles in the book examine the distinctive features of a range of the most important of these faiths.

Some of these faiths are traditional and are being rediscovered; some are new and are being discovered for the first time. Another theme in the book is the tension which often arises as a result of ‘two logically mutually exclusive tendencies’: ‘restoration’ and ‘innovation’. The regeneration of local faiths is often a phenomenon of national republics – the book focuses on Altai and Tuva as two areas which are particularly illustrative – but it is also an important phenomenon among the Russians themselves as the Russian Orthodox Church seeks to define itself as the ‘local’ church throughout the Federation and as the natural spiritual home for anyone in that territory. The last ten years have seen growing Orthodox dismay at alleged aggressive proselytising and stealing of souls by non-Orthodox denominations and religious organisations. In these circumstances the Russian Orthodox Church generally finds it hard to respond creatively to the new reality of religious pluralism in Russia.

We must say ‘generally’, because there are of course exceptions. The Russian North, the area historically controlled from Novgorod, developed a tradition of the freedom and dignity of the individual. Now the local people are referring to this tradition again, and translating it in practical terms into a recognition of the individual’s own responsibility towards church, state and society. Nowadays the development of church life in this region shows that ‘the bureaucratic Moscow style of church governance has not ... destroyed these northern religious traditions’.

The authors find that the spread of Protestantism in its various forms is one of the most significant religious phenomena in Russia today. Many actors, artists, musicians, journalists and teachers of humanities are becoming Protestants; and Protestants are already having significant influence in the social, political and economic spheres.

Protestantism is not only growing, it is also becoming more Russian. The Christian Missionary Union, for example, talks about the Protestant tradition in Russian Orthodoxy, pointing to figures like Fr Aleksandr Men’ but also St Sergi of Radonezh. Many Protestants are fervent Russian patriots.

Among the various Protestant denominations, Pentecostalism in particular provides ‘a new formula for the revival of Christianity’ in Russia. It is socially and doctrinally flexible and has no central organisational structure, and it is thus well

suited to today's conditions. It is well set to become a significant social force, particularly in Siberia and the Far East. 'The Pentecostals have broadened the concepts of church and religion and made them more comprehensible for Russians; they have demonstrated new ways of influencing state and society. Essentially they have revealed universal Christianity anew to postsoviet society with its broken traditions.'

Meanwhile 'Lutheranism is beginning to present a serious spiritual and intellectual challenge to Russian Orthodoxy, which will soon have to take account of it; it is to be hoped that Orthodoxy will be able to respond in a genuinely creative way.' Signs so far are not encouraging: in Mordovia, since 1992 the Orthodox clergy have been attacking the Lutherans in no uncertain terms, calling them heretics, Catholics and even spies.

Catholicism is also spreading, but not, as the Russian Orthodox claim, as a result of aggressive Catholic proselytising, which the book finds to be 'insignificant'. Catholicism is spreading spontaneously, particularly amongst young people, mainly students and members of the intelligentsia – 'active people who are most sensitive to the demands of the times they are living in'.

Many Orthodox accuse Catholics of modernism, 'renovationism', liberalism. But as many Catholics point out, they are less 'liberal' than the majority of the Orthodox in that they take their faith seriously: they go to church regularly and try to live up to their church's moral standards. 'By the very fact of their existence Russian Catholics are presenting Orthodoxy with an intellectual and spiritual challenge.'

As well as looking at specific denominations the book also turns the spotlight on a variety of regions, each with its distinctive version of the current religious ferment.

Khakasiya presents 'Siberian religious issues in a nutshell'. 'Russians today think of Siberia as a purely "Russian land" where there are practically no non-Russians and non-Orthodox. To an inhabitant of Moscow or St Petersburg it would seem nonsense to talk of a multiethnic Siberia.' The authors find that reality is quite different. Siberia is characterised by the feeble presence of the Russian Orthodox Church and by a large variety of religious minorities. These include former Russian political prisoners and Old Believers, but also non-Russians: the local people, who are Muslims or pagans; and Poles and Germans.

Some of the smaller non-Christian peoples of Siberia are turning to Christianity – mainly Pentecostalism – in sufficient numbers to make this their new national faith. Among larger peoples, particularly those with a Buddhist or Muslim heritage, only a small minority are becoming Christians,

But this minority may well have a significant resonance in society, since the conversion of the local young people and members of the intelligentsia forces the powers that be and the representatives of traditional religions to come to terms with the newly-emerging religious culture and its priorities. For some, conversion to Christianity is nothing other than a betrayal of the national religion, culture and traditions; but for others it is the revelation of new values which inevitably produces a new relationship to old traditions.

In the Volga Region we see 'one of the most unexpected and original phenomena in the religious life of post-*perestroika* Russia: the revival of paganism on a mass scale'. Amongst the Mari, Chuvash and Udmurts paganism revived in the 1990s as a symbol of national identity, but once revived, proceeded to develop a life of its own, and now has important social and political consequences. 'The pagan system of

values has as its ideal a patriarchal society, the worship of nature, and hostility to technical progress and so-called “globalisation”.’

The book notes that the question of Russia’s borders with the Muslim world is constantly debated in the press and media, but that Russia has another border which goes unnoticed: the border with Scandinavia. The authors go to Karelia and find there an object lesson for Russians. Suspicion of the motives of western missionaries runs deep in Russia, as does fear of the consequences of exposure to western religion. Yet in postcommunist Karelia there has been intensive cross-fertilisation, with no disastrous consequences.

The theme of openness to the West is a recurring one in the book. Those who choose Catholicism are choosing more than a faith: they are choosing to face Europe rather than Asia. Noting that many Protestants are Russian patriots, the book goes on to observe that their patriotism nevertheless has a specific feature:

their concept of Russia is necessarily one of a democratic, law-governed state with firmly-entrenched respect for human rights. They often show distaste for mass western culture, but nevertheless Russia is for them a western country, and the sins of the West are sins common to all the Christian world. They regard the idea of a special Russian path of development as an absurd fantasy.

‘Eurasianism’ is one version of the idea that Russia has a unique destiny. It is the concept that Russia is a kind of crucible where European and Asian values are melded. The authors travel to Tatarstan and discover that a different type of Eurasianism has been developing there since the mid-1990s. Historically the Volga region was always multiethnic and multiconfessional, and a tradition of pluralism and tolerance, of a traditional and conservative type, grew up here naturally. Now after an 80-year break this very same tradition is reasserting itself. In Tatarstan Christians and Muslims have lived side-by-side for centuries, and since the mid-1990s they have been developing a conservative democratic alliance, taking a united stand against the anticlerical dictatorial modernising policies of the authorities. ‘But this kind of Eurasianism turned out to be possible only once “Euroislam” and “Euroorthodoxy” had developed in the region.’ ‘A genuine understanding between Russians and Tatars is here the fruit of the spread of European values, and not of a struggle against them.’

‘History books and political propaganda have taught us to think of Russian culture as uniform throughout the Federation’; but of course ‘a Russian living near Sweden looks at the world differently from a Russian living next to China. And the vast distances involved make the differences even greater.’ One achievement of the book is to uncover the sheer diversity of religious life in Russia today.

Filatov rightly observes in his conclusion to the book that ‘practising believers in Russia are indeed few in number’. Nevertheless the overall impression is one of hope for the future:

In a country in which noncommercial social associations and institutions of social selfgovernment are virtually absent, the spectacle of 8,000 religious organisations which are actually shaping public opinion, rallying their members and doing different kinds of social work is of great significance. And the quality of what they do is continually rising.

And it is, of course, the future which will manifest the long-term implications of all the material so painstakingly gathered and analysed here. The authors showed their

chapter on the Russian North to Fr Aleksandr Ranne, one of the most revered and enlightened priests in Novgorod. He told them that they had picked out the first green shoots of a tendency, but there was still a long way to go. He hoped that in 20 years' time developments would have confirmed the authors' findings. 'So,' respond the authors, 'let our article be a memoir of the future!'

Sergei Filatov (ed.), *Religiya i obshchestvo: ocherki religioznoi zhizni sovremennoi Rossii* (Letni Sad, Moscow, 2002)

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46 Bol'shaya Nikitskaya ul.

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Copies can also be ordered through the London booksellers Grant and Cutler:
www.grantandcutler.com

The price through Grant and Cutler is expected to be between GB£10–15 plus postage.

PLEASE NOTE: The book exists in Russian only. Earlier versions of some of its chapters, and articles on similar themes which do not appear in the Russian book, were published in English in *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 28, no.1, March 2000.

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