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Religious Statistics in Russia

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RELIGIOUS STATISTICS IN RUSSIA. A CHALLENGE FOR RELIGIOUS LEADERSHIP

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1. Conflicting Interests for Counting Religious Groups in Russia

The first national census to be conducted since 1989 took place in October 2002. Unfortunately, it was not compulsory and provoked a great deal of scandals; still it allowed for the production of a body of officially recognised data that, if processed, can give answers to many questions concerning the nature of Russian society today. One important question however has remained unanswered. As early as the initial stages in preparations for the census, many authoritative scientists insisted that the census questionnaire should include a question about the religious affiliation of respondents and proposed to omit instead the questions about their living conditions as such data are easily obtained from housing and communal services. They heard in response that this replacement was difficult to make technically and that, generally, religious leaders strongly disapproved of such questions, allegedly afraid to face the truth when they saw how low in fact the numbers of their followers were. To be sure, it was just a lame excuse because major religious organisations in Russia were concerned in the first place with obtaining such data and never objected to having the questionnaires corrected accordingly. As a result, the request of scientists was rejected, thus depriving them of an opportunity to handle official statistics as to the religious convictions of Russian citizens for at least ten more years, while engaged specialists retained the *carte blanche* to continue speculating on the subject. Followers of scientific atheism will thus continue arguing that it is they who make up the majority of the population, while supporters of the interests of religious minorities will continue insisting on having as many as 35 million Russian Muslims, 5 million Protestants and 1.5 million Catholics. It is much easier to refute such claims than to substantiate them. However, a natural question arises here: 'What is it in fact that the Russians believe in?' In order to answer, let us undertake an analysis of the four principal sources of information concerning the religious composition of the Russian population.

2. First Source: The 2002 National Census

The latest census remains the main official source of information about the ethnic make-up of the Russian population. At first glance, the ethnic make-up has no direct correlation with the religious preferences of the population. However it helps identify the upper limit in the number of followers of some religious traditions, such as Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Catholicism, Lutheranism, Mennonism and Heathenism. To this end the assumption is made that, for instance, all the Poles, Lithuanians, Czechs, Slovaks, French, one third of the Germans and one twentieth of the Ukrainians confess Catholicism, while the number of Catholics among the Russians and other peoples is negligible. Then the total number of the so-called 'ethnic Catholics' is calculated and the figure thus obtained is considered to be the upper limit of the number of Catholics in Russia. Certainly, any qualified scholar of religions or ethnographer will raise an objection that there are considerably fewer real Catholics among the Russian Germans than one third, just as many Poles and Lithuanians actually confess Orthodox Christianity. The procedure described above however does not claim at all any high accuracy, but it makes it possible to show vividly that the number of Catholics living in our country is no more than 460 thousand, that is, 0.3 % of the population. Out of the 145 million Russians covered by the census, 1.5 million did not indicate their ethnic origin, or rather considered themselves among some exotic peoples, with the Elves, Hobbits and Goblins occupying an honorary place among them. There is every reason to believe that the general ratio of major ethnicities in Russia can apply to this group just as well, though this hypothesis needs to be proved. Therefore, the upper limits of the strength of major religious groups in our country appear as follows:

<i>Orthodox Christians</i>	86.5 %	<i>(app. 126 million)</i>
<i>Muslims</i>	10 %	<i>(app. 14.5 million)</i>
<i>Armenian Gregorians</i>	0.8 %	<i>(app. 1.1 million)</i>
<i>Heathens</i>	0.5 %	<i>(app. 670 thousand)</i>
<i>Catholics</i>	0.35 %	<i>(app. 480 thousand)</i>
<i>Lutherans and Mennonites</i>	0.3 %	<i>(app. 430 thousand)</i>
<i>Buddhists</i>	0.25 %	<i>(app. 380 thousand)</i>
<i>Judaists</i>	0.15 %	<i>(230 thousand)</i>
<i>No mention of ethnic origin</i>	1.15 %	<i>(app. 1.5 million)</i>

It is necessary to make some additional clarifications at this point. All those who claimed to be Jews are considered to be Judaists. Half the Buryats, half the Tuvins, two thirds of the Kalmyks and all the

Mongols are assumed to be Buddhists; all the Armenians, Armenian Gregorians; half the Finns and Latvians, Lutherans; two thirds of the Germans, Lutherans and all the German Mennonites, Mennonites proper; one fourth of the Buryats, the Mary and the Altaians, half the Tuvinians and up to 20 % of the minor peoples of the North, Heathens. The proportion of Muslims among the Ossetians is assumed to be 25 %, while the Tatars are all Muslims except for 26 thousand Orthodox Kryashens. The Estonians are considered to be Orthodox, while the Kurdian Jesides are followers of Jesidism rather than Islam.

All these calculations can be challenged, but they look most plausible in the author's view.

3. Second Source: Polls and Field Ethnic and Confessional Studies

The very rough 'upper limit' procedure can be corrected by two other methods, namely polls and appropriate field studies. As the most authoritative polls sample today from 2000 to 2500 people and are fairly accurate in establishing the rating of politicians and in predicting returns, they can be used to clarify the religious picture. In this case, it is sufficient to include into a questionnaire only one additional question: 'What religious tradition do you belong to (believe to belong to)?' A more detailed questionnaire designed to unveil also whether believers are aware of the basic doctrines of their religious tradition and how far they are religiously active is certainly helpful, but it cannot give grounds for alleging that there are only 2 or 3 % of genuine believers in our country, because in most religions the actual strength of one's faith is defined only by one's life after death – in paradise or hell. Notably, nobody anywhere would test non-believers or atheists for the strength of their non-belief. Otherwise it would turn out indeed that there are few classical representatives of this kind of people in our country, while Heathens and occultists are far too many. The correct polls have produced on average the following religious picture of Russia today:

<i>Orthodox Christians</i>	60-70 % (<i>baptised in Orthodoxy: 75 %</i>)
<i>Non-believers and atheists</i>	10-15 %
<i>Muslims</i>	4-5 %
<i>Protestants & followers of new religious movements (NRMs)</i>	1-2 %
<i>Buddhists</i>	< 1 %
<i>The rest of the religious groups falling under the limits of admissible errors.</i>	

Thus, the polls have made it possible to identify a new group of believers who do not belong either to the Lutherans or Mennonite Protestants or NRMs and who are greater in number than the followers of many traditional religions. The principal shortcoming of all these polls is that their sample is rather small and not quite representative, covering mainly the population of large cities. This peculiarity leads to an underestimation of the proportion of the Orthodox, Muslims and Heathens and to an overestimation of the number of Buddhists (at the expense of non-traditional Buddhists), Protestants, NRMs and non-believers. Because they are contradictory and not quite reliable, these polls have on the whole been seldom used as a principal source of information about the religious picture, and are called mainly to illustrate the tendencies of religious processes. Ethnic and religious field studies are aimed predominantly at identifying small religious groups, such as Old Believers, Catacomb Church members, traditional Heathens, covert NRM groups, who do not come into the field of vision when other methods are used, but can help solve other important problems. It was only a field study that could establish that Tatarstan is a predominantly Orthodox republic, that in Tuva, shamanism has crowded out Buddhism, while Burhanism, which used to be so popular in the Mountainous Altai, has become almost extinct.

4. Third Source: Statistics of the Russian Federation Ministry of Justice

Nearly 75 % of the religious groups and organisations active in Russia now enjoy the status of 'legal identity' and are registered with the Ministry of Justice. The Ministry of Justice register represents one of the most important resources for mapping the religious picture. Its only shortcoming is its failure to give the size of each particular community, and this prevents it from becoming universal. A simple analysis shows that even within the same religious organisation, communities may differ in size by dozens or even hundreds times, and in order to realise it, it is sufficient to compare an Orthodox parish in a 'sleeping' district in Moscow with a parish in a largely depopulated village. If this important point is neglected, the Ministry of Justice register can become seriously misleading, since, if judged by the number of communities registered in it, the Protestants leave the Muslims far behind, while the Judaists outnumber the Buddhists. Besides, it should be taken into account that in some religious organisations the number of registered communities exceeds by far that of truly active ones, such as most of the NRMs and some alternative Orthodox and Muslim organisations, while in other religious organisations, such as traditional Heathens and some trends of the Old Belief, the status of

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legal identity is enjoyed by fewer than half the communities. In total, 21,664 religious organisations were registered as of the beginning of 2002. They break down as follows:

<i>Russian Orthodox</i>	11,525	(53.2 %)
<i>Protestants</i>	4097	(19 %)
<i>Muslims</i>	3537	(16.3 %)
<i>New religious movements (NRMs)</i>	1040	(4.8 %)
<i>Old Believers</i>	284	(1.3 %)
<i>Judaists</i>	267	(1.3 %)
<i>Roman Catholics</i>	253	(1.2 %)
<i>Buddhists (including non-traditional)</i>	192	(0.9 %)
<i>Non-canonical Orthodox jurisdictions</i>	137	(0.6 %)
<i>Heathens</i>	25	(0.1 %)
<i>Others</i>	274	(1.3 %)

5. Fourth Source: Assessments by Religious Leaders

This source is actually only good for defining the strength of small religious groups whose leaders can count their parishioners precisely. Certainly, in larger religious organisations, the leaders of some communities do have an idea of how many people come every day or holiday to pray in their church, mosque or synagogue, but it is technically difficult to compile these data even for a hundred places. As a result, the religious leaders of large organisations, in assessing the number of their followers, have to use only the data produced by the first three sources. At the same time, one should bear in mind that representatives of religious minorities often tend to overstate their strength, while the proportion of Orthodox Christians can be overstated by 10 % at the most, otherwise it will exceed 100 %, indeed. A researcher can also be confused by an apparent dissension of opinions within the same religious tradition. Thus, in a poll conducted by a Jewish newspaper among representatives of the Judaist establishment the number of Jews in Russia varied from 250 thousand to 10 million.

A special place in this review should be given to the question of how many Muslims there are in Russia. This subject has long been a stumbling stone for Muslim leaders as well as state officials and researchers, whose assessments sometimes radically differ. As was already mentioned, the 2002 census reported the total number of ethnic Muslims in Russia as being at least 14.5 million. Most of the Muslim leaders would insist on the figure of 20 million, which was voiced by the Russian president in August 2003. More politicised

muftis give numbers as high as 25 to 50 million, while many Islamic studies scholars argue that the actual number of real followers of Islam do not exceed 8 to 10 million. In assessing the views cited above, one can observe that the author of each is right in his own way. Those who bring the number of Muslims into proportion with the total strength of Muslim peoples are right. Those who proceed from sociological polls and establish the number of Muslims somewhere between 8 and 10 millions are also right. Moreover, the authority of the Russian president does not allow any doubt as to his assessment, but at the same time the figure of 35 to 50 million Muslims is manifestly overstated. The only way to smooth away the existing contradictions is to propose a figure between 17 and 19 million people (the round-off figure will be 20 million) staying in Russia at a time. In spite of the State Statistics Committee leaders' assurances of otherwise, the census could not really embrace all these people, as many of them are evidently not Russian citizens, but those who came in search of a job from Central Asia and the Transcaucasus.

In assessing the strength of the Russian Muslim community, one should bear in mind that there is a great number of non-believers and followers of other religions among these ethnic Muslims. Thus, the recent census in Estonia, which included a question about one's religious affiliation, has shown that nearly one fourth of the ethnic Tatar believers there actually confess various forms of Christianity. Similar figures were produced when processing the data of the census conducted in Lithuania. Therefore, it can be presumed that up to 10 to 15 % of the ethnic Muslims in Russia really confess not Islam, but Christianity. This figure is indirectly confirmed by the data of sociological polls and the sampling of the ethnic make-up of Orthodox and Protestant communities. Muslim leaders themselves do not deny either that thousands of Tatars, Bashkirs, Kazakhs, Adygs and Kabardinians have embraced Christianity, while the total number of the newly-converted Muslims does not exceed 3,000. The Christianisation of ethnic Muslims is not so much due to some purposeful missionary work conducted among them only by Protestants as it is to the influence of Russian culture in the expression of Christian roots. The assimilation of ethnic and religious minorities is an inevitable process in any society, and in Russia it goes even faster because of the negative image of Islam created by the mass media. The percentage of non-believers among the ethnic Muslims is definitely lower than among peoples belonging to the Christian culture due to the deeply religious nature of the peoples in the Caucasus and Central Asia, but here too it can hardly be lower than 10 %. In total, between 20 and 30 percent of the people of Muslim culture do not really consider themselves as Muslims – and this is the figure to be reckoned with in assessing the strength of the Islamic community in Russia.

6. Basic Tendencies in Russia's Religious Life Today

- a) The proportion of believers in the Russian population is gradually increasing, while that of people indifferent to belief and of non-believers is, accordingly, decreasing. An increasing number of people are returning to the fold of traditional religions, on one hand, and the number of materialists is decreasing due to the intensive propaganda of esotericism and mysticism, on the other. The number of committed atheists, with the most active of them united in sect-like associations, is negligibly small today.
- b) The high birth rate among the North Caucasian Muslims and the intensive immigration of Muslims from Central Asia and the Transcaucasus is offset in many ways by the 'russification' and Christianisation of most children born in mixed marriages, and also by mass conversion of Tatars, Bashkirs, Kazakhs, Adygs and many other people to Christianity. Therefore, any considerable increase in the proportion of genuine Muslims can hardly be expected in the nearest future, though the proportion of ethnic Muslims will surely grow.
- c) Compared to what it was in 1989, the number of Catholics, Lutherans and Mennonites has decreased and continue to decrease due to, first of all, intensive emigration of Germans and continued russification of Poles and Lithuanians. The mission of Russian Catholics proselytes, called as it is to preserve their position if only partly, has not been met with a noticeable success, and the community of 'Russian Catholics' can hardly amount to more than 10 thousand now.
- d) The growth in the number of Baptists, Adventists, Evangelical Christians and other non-charismatic Protestants has stopped. The outflow of their parishioners to charismatic groups has become ever more visible; many Protestants are returning to the fold of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Mormons, Moonies, scientologists and most of the other new religious groups have almost exhausted their reserves for growth, their target groups being worked out, their missionary methods being out of date, their ill fame preventing them from using effectively the riches they have accumulated. Only Jehovah's Witnesses and neo-charismatics have maintained a relatively rapid rate of growth, but their ranks have been replenished mostly by non-believers and Baptists and Adventists.
- e) The proportion of the Judaists and traditional Buddhists is declining. A radical decrease in the number of Judaists is accounted for, in the first place, by the continued emigration and assimilation of the Jews, while peoples of Buddhist culture are experiencing intensive Christianisation (mostly through the efforts of marginal Protestants) and expansion of shamanism.

- f) The proportion of traditional Heathens is slowly growing, while the Old Believers, the True Orthodox Christians and adherents of the non-canonical Orthodox jurisdictions are gradually losing their positions.