

Анастасия В. Митрофанова: The Politcization of Russian Orthodoxy
Actors and Ideas

SOVIET AND POST-SOVIET POLITICS AND SOCIETY

Ed. By Dr. Andreas Umland
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A Book Review by Dimitry V. Pospelovsky Professor Emeritus, University of Western Ontario.

It would hardly be an exaggeration to say that by the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, the total quantity of the Russian Orthodox clergy was no more than 10% of its pre-revolutionary numbers. To somehow fill the gap bishops were ordaining priests without any theological education to speak of. Most of them were former *komsomols*, used to a certain form of collective discipline, to obey orders from above with no feed back from below.

By the end of 1980s the Communist system was totally compromised, hence the failed Communist putsch on the Orthodox feast of Transfiguration, 19 August, 1991. The first crack in that democracy optimism occurred in the bloody confrontation at the “White House” in 1993 (the House of the Soviet Government). News from the West was readily available and Western democracies had still appeared to be ideal, until the bloody confrontation of 1993 at the battle for the *White House* (Government House).

The great breakthrough for religion came on 29 April 1988 when the whole Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church was received by Gorbachev in the Kremlin. The Orthodox delegation handed in to Gorbachev a memorandum protesting the treatment of Christians as second-class citizens, demanding equal rights to both believers and non-believers, abolition of job discrimination and return of churches to their original owners or users. Gorbachev agreed to all these demands; and literally within days Soviet lawyers and representatives of the Church began to work together to produce a religious legislation, hopefully satisfactory to all.

The first, temporary, legislation on religious freedom appeared in print in 1991. The criticism of the hastily adopted religious legislation was of a technical character, e.g.: its incongruence with some articles of the legal code or with the Constitution for that

matter. But on the whole the new religious laws were almost ideal, compared to the status of religion prior to 1991. Dissatisfied with the new law were the Communists, who were now trying to pose as friends and defenders of the Church, strange bed-fellows, aren't they?

The 1991 law legitimized all regular religious organizations without discriminating against any. Yeltsin, the President of the Russian Federation who with the abolition of the defunct Soviet Union (forced Gorbachev into retirement on 25 December 1991) was proud of his religious legislation, but not the Patriarch, who argued that the Orthodox Church, being the historical Church of Russia, deserves some special status. It was grossly unfair, argued the Patriarch, to give the historical Church the same status and rights as to, say, the Mormons, for instance. Eventually Yeltsin had to give in, confronted with the Communist and other leftist majority in the *Duma* – all in favour of the Patriarch's bill. This writer feels that the Patriarch's position cannot be easily discarded. After 70 years of brutal persecutions the Russian Orthodox Church was penniless, lacking in educational facilities and deprived of any substantial help from abroad, in contrast to all sorts of Protestant churches – mostly American, -- as well as Muslims, who have financed from abroad the construction and reconstruction of thousands of mosques in Russia. Nevertheless, having gained special rights for the Orthodox Church with the help of communists and other leftists, the Patriarch became – as it were – a prisoner of the communist-leftist bloc which led him to his recent statement in which he said that the only thing wrong with the Communists when they had been in power was the persecution of the Church, otherwise the Church could coexist with the communists quite well. How about the *GULAG* in which thousands of his predecessors had perished?

The final (?) *Law of 15 October 1997 on the Freedom of Conscience and on Religious Associations*, as far as the Russian Orthodox Church is concerned, remains essentially unchanged since the adoption of the 27 February 1997 *Law on the Freedom of Conscience*. The changes relate to the rights of the non-Orthodox.

A voluntary religious association is a an association of citizens of Russia and of other citizens permanently residing in Russia, having formed for the purpose of jointly

confessing and disseminating their faith in accordance with the law of the State and having the status of person in law.

Religious associations may be centralized or local groupings of no less than 10 members and presided by a person not younger than 17 years of age. A religious group is legitimate if it has a document confirming that it has been in existence in the given area for at least 15 years.

A centralized religious organization may¹ legitimately call itself “**Russian**” if on the day of its official registration it can present a documentary proof that it had² functioned in the country for at least 50 years.

It may be added that for the first 15 years of residence in Russia a religious group of foreign origin may not establish an independent legal parish, but may pray as guests within an established parish. Such are the limitations on foreigners worshipping in Russia.

Mitrofanova’s book, however, is not about legal matters , but about the use and misuse of the Orthodox faith in Russia by diverse fringe political elements trying to make use of the Church for their political and partisan aims.

As stated above, in 1991 and thereabouts there was a short lived euphoria regarding democracy. The dreams were cut short by the 1993 brief but bloody confrontation between the government forces and the attempted procommunist rebellion. Despite the victory of the pro-government forces, Yeltsin failed to reestablish his credibility. He won the 1996 elections not as a popular leader, but as the only available alternative to the Communist Party³. One could argue that from then on the Russian society has been split; not that Yeltsin or his opponents received anything approaching mass support. None of Yeltsin’s promises materialized while living standards were continuing to decline. A fragile economic equilibrium was achieved by about 2002, with some marginal growth of incomes after 2004 contrasted with the incredible new wealth of the New Russians. These contrasts have further split Russian society.

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³ This author was present in Moscow during the voting, inquiring from students of their choice. Most of them stressed they were voting not for Yeltsin but against the Communists.

One would have thought that after seven decades of religious suppression and persecutions the population would be ignorant of the Bible. But no, the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe made masses of people turn to **The Revelations**, chapters 8-12.: : “the third Angel sounded: and a great star fell from Heaven, burning like a torch, and it fell on a third of the rivers and on the springs of water. The name of the star is wormwood. A third of the waters became wormwood, and many men died from the water because it was made bitter”.

In no time this Apocalyptic story was on everybody’s lips. Literally millions and millions of Russians of all ages and ed educational levels rushed to the baptismal font. Obviously there could not have been any spiritual contact between the baptizer and the baptized. Lines of thousands of people could be seen queuing in and around churches waiting for their turn to be baptized. In such a “stampede” there was no room or time to establish spiritual contact between the clergy and the newly baptized. Only in very few cases spiritual contact was developed in small groups headed by a spiritually influential priest. Consequently in the vast majority of cases the newly baptized and the baptizer went home tired and frustrated.

It is thus that the “new Christians” began to invent for themselves their “unique way” to what they believed was their kind of “Christianity, but in practice most of those neophytes reinvented their own brand of spirituality, in which paying due to Russian history or pre-history (i.e. paganism) they blame all their and Russia’s misfortunes on Jews (indeed, the proportion of Jews in the Communist Party and Lenin’s and Stalin’s terror police by far exceeded the proportion of Jews in the Russian population. Out of all proportions were also Latvians and Georgians working for the Soviet secret police. But maybe some of the blame for the minorities role in the Soviet terror system lay with something that was wrong in the pre-revolutionary Russia?

To begin with, accepting such position requires the use of “the grey matter”, study and analysis of our history. Accepting such views requires the ability and desire to analyse, to be able to criticise oneself. It is much easier to blame everything you don’t like on scapegoats.

Hence all those militant groups use, or rather misuse, some versions of Orthodox Christianity, the movements which Anastasia Mitrofanova appropriately calls:

Politicization of Russian Orthodoxy, which has appeared and spread out to a considerable extent as a result of failed encounter between the contemporary Orthodox clergy and its would-be spiritual children; its pastors and their flock going their separate ways.⁴

Dr. Mitrofanova has created a classification of these semi-Orthodox movements. *In corpore* she calls these groupings and movements *political religion* from Voegelin's book, *Die politischen Religionen*. . These are movements of national unity (Nazi totalitarianism). Political religion, continues Voegelin, is an ideology in which concepts such as nations or states take the place of the Supernatural.

The end of religious persecutions coincided in time with the (988) millennium of Christianity in Russia. For the first time in the post-Soviet Russia church leaders appeared on television, in conferences, etc. the population at large, thirsty for spiritual food, having been deprived of it, and expecting to receive it from the clergy, very soon found out that the clergy available to the masses was unable to quench that thirst and, for the reasons discussed above, was ready to fall into the hands of self-made "spiritual leaders", in reality charlatans full of frustration and hatred for having been left on the fringes of society, all sorts of self-appointed healers and "miracle-makers".

Let us now look at Mitrofanova's system of categorization of all those Russian expressions of political religion. Firstly, she analyses *fundamentalism*, which she sees as focused on the past, i.e. of being primarily a form of traditionalism or religious conservatism, differing from the latter by its search to address vital contemporary issues. In fact, if we look at the Iranian Khomeini regime and his successors it becomes clear, they are all revolutionaries, in fact, opposed to archaic traditionalism. On the heels of Pan-Slavism and somewhat intermixed with it arose the idea of Eurasianism. In the words of the leading western historian of Russia, Nikolai Valentinovich Riasanovsky Eurasianism was the result of encounter of the Russian White émigrés with the Balkan and Central European Slavs. The 19th and the early 20th century Russian Slavophiles, emigrants from the revolutionary Russia, lived by the dream that the western Slavs were

⁴ Of course there are some excellent parishes? Such as the Kosma and Damian parish in Moscow's Stoleshnikov pereulok, broadminded and academically educated priests, e.g. frs.: Alexandr Borisov, Georgii Chistiakov, Georgii Kochetkov, nevertheless, they are a drop in the bucket, compared with the semi-educated mass of clergy, particularly those in small towns and villages.

but a western branch of Russians. Their realization on contact with western Slavs that they were a completely different people, fatally undermined the idea of Pan-Slavism, which was, as it were, replaced by Eurasianism. Characteristically the “bible” of the Eurasians authored by Prince Pavel Trubetskoi in Bulgaria in 1920 was entitled *Iskhod k Vostoku* (**The Final Road to the East**), not to “fraternal” European Slavs, but to the East. Eurasians argued that Russia was not just a European or Asiatic state, but a cultural entity of its own, a Continent by itself, as it were, built up from a fusion of Turks, Fins Scandinavians and Slavs.

At first the Eurasians were definite anti-Bolsheviks. However, deprived of proper information of goings on in the Soviet Union and fed disinformation on the alleged great achievements and industrialization in the 1930s, the Eurasian movement split into a pro-Soviet and anti-Soviet factions. The left wing, including its youth section, *The Young Russians* (mladorossy) became simply agents of the NKVD, including the former White Army officer A. Efron, the husband of the great poetesse Marina Tsvetaeva. Her husband, fulfilling orders from the NKVD, he became directly involved in the murder of an active Russian émigré anticommunist. On his and his family’s return to the USSR on the eve of World War II Efron was executed by the Bolsheviks, his poet-wife committed suicide; their son was killed in action in the first days of the Soviet Army’s participation in World War II. Their daughter and Tsvetaeva’s ’sister (an author in her own right) spent dozens of years in the GULAGS. Hundreds s if not thousands of homesick émigré intellectuals returned to the USSR in the 1930’s heeding the Soviet repatriation propaganda campaign. Such was the price of trusting the Soviets. The Efrons – Tsvetaevs were not the only returnees in the 1930s. Practically all repatriated Eurasians were either executed or died in the GULAGS.

The left wing of the Eurasians went also by the name of *The Change of Signposts Movement*.

Now, is there any link between the 1930s patriotic movements and today’s ideological searches? I wish someone from the neo-Eurasians, Pan-Slavists, etc. were here to answer this question. My own observations lead me to a negative conclusion. It seems to me that after the 70-years’ experience of imposed ideologies cum-terror, the population is simply tired of politics waned to live and let live. An illustration of this is

the failure to form any steady political parties, even in the *Duma*. One would have thought that once it became legal to form political parties, to raise one's voice in the *Duma*, the population would rush to join political parties of their taste. And indeed in the years before the White House confrontation and the spilling of blood under democracy there was a general interest in what was going on in the *Duma*. I remember how in 1990-91 people approached me in the streets asking directions to such-and-such Party Office. As I said above, there was a great political upsurge among students at the time of the 1996 elections, the vote was cast to prevent a communist president – a vote for the lesser evil, as it were. And nobody seems to be interested in electoral results any more. The predominant mood in today's Russia is political apathy. Yes there are numerous political movements in Russia of all "colours": from Orthodox fundamentalists to Limonov's *National-Bolsheviks*. These latter ones are "ideological hooligans", dreaming of restoring a Bolshevik State of the early revolutionary days. They are primarily trouble risers, engaging into street fights with whoever disagrees with them. One of their recent "achievements" was an attack in 2005 on President Putin's office, when they succeeded in occupying the outer part of the office complex and holding it for several hours until the arrival of special forces. They may be compared with the Nazi German *SA* in the early '30s. In fact, they would be proud to be compared to Nazi forces – there is quite cult of Hitlerism among the *Limonov* anarcho-hooligans. On their own *Limonovtsy* are just political hooligans, but in case of a serious political disturbance they can become dangerous.

There is such a *mélange* of fundamentalists, pan-Slavists, Eurasians, overlapping each other, that even Mitrofanova does not appear to throw sufficient light on each of her categories to be able to differentiate between them all. Mitrofanova sees an insoluble dichotomy in the ranks of fundamentalists: on the one hand, as Orthodox believers they reject Communist ideology; and this comes naturally with the Russian émigrés, but the Soviet-bred fundamentalists cannot help having nostalgic memories of their Soviet youth. Then there are the modern *Pan-Slavists*, who differ from their ideological fore-fathers in realizing that being a Slav does not make one automatically Russian, and vice-versa.

⁵ The Limonov movement is very similar to skinheads; although now there are Russian hoodlums who also call themselves skinheads.

They even discovered a contemporary Polish Pan-Slavist, Tejkowski, who says: "The fact that I am a Slav is more important than my being Orthodox, Catholic, Protestant, atheist or pagan".

Such declaration of the priority of ethnicity over religion differentiates Pan-Slavism from what Mitrofanova calls political fundamentalism, which maintains that Catholic Slavs are heretics; while the 19th century Slavophiles saw Roman-Catholic Poles as 'traitors' to the Slavonic cause, while contemporary Pan-Slavists and Eurasianists take into consideration the Russians' deep penetration into Asia (right to the Pacific coast) culturally making Russian Asians 'partly Slavonic'; hence contemporary Pan-Slavists place value not only on Islam, but also on Hinduism and other Oriental religions. What Mitrofanova's book reveals is a general mental confusion and inconsistency of terms and of what contemporary Russian political writers mean by the terms they use. Equally, published texts reveal ignorance of the true meaning of the terms. Irresponsibly they throw terms about without clarifying to the reader the meaning of a term used, for instance, among the terms popular with the new ideologues-demagogues are: Orthodox communism and Communist orthodoxy – both terms are used interchangeably, presumably meaning the same thing. .

Only a short while ago Moscow buried a well known priest, Father Dmitri Dudko who had served two terms of imprisonment -- under Stalin and under Gorbachev. It was a good Christian trait in him that he took his misfortunes humbly and forgivably. But what is incomprehensible is that he chose 'a red-brown newspaper (*Zavtra*) to publish his articles, and in one of them he called the leader of the KPRF " 'a true Russian Orthodox, although a Godless(!). Was Dudko's memory that short, or he simply did not understand that had the Communist Party lingered on longer, the same Ziuganov or his successor would have sent him far away?

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A prolific propaganda writer (in terms of quantity, rather than quality), Deacon Viktor Pichuzhkin who can often be seen in the front lines of communist and other leftist demonstrations carrying a big metal cross, On his banner he wrote: "for the great

Soviet Union! For the holiest human brotherhood! Oh Lord Jesus All-merciful!
Resurrect our terrestrial happiness Raise our Red Union – The Cross of Thy lectern!

Mitrofanova sees Eurasianism as a more attractive and broader movement than Communism . In fact, having traveled in the Asiatic CIS countries, it appears to me that all of them, except perhaps Kazakhstan are considerably worse off after their separation from Russia. The populations of those states talk with great longing for the former USSR. This writer can agree with the nostalgic pro-Communist Russian politician Ivashov only on one point, namely that peoples of the CIS of the Muslim world may set their hopes on Russia. For instance, a clearly Russian Muslim thinker, Den'ga Khalidov, the head of the Centre for ethno-political and Islamic Studies, addressing the All-Russian Assembly of officers on Ethno-political and Islamic Studies declared: that the only wrong thing about the Soviet system was its atheism and that the whole system was based on the godless atheistic foundation⁶. Time has come, he continued, to revise our ideas used to unite people of the whole world, not only of Russia...He argues that Russia is able to give to the whole world the new anti-imperialist, anti-globalist idea.

This may sound absurd in the present historical circumstances of Russia. But with the ever increasing nostalgia and growing dissatisfaction in the CIS **Asian** states⁷, the idea might not sound so mad after all.

But has the Church in Russia the potential to become the spiritual leader of the nation? Mitrofanova's statistic of Orthodox believers, based on the most scholarly and reliable study by Kaariainen and Furman reveals that Russian church attendance is probably the lowest in the world: only about 2% attend church on weekly basis; 6 to 7% attend about once a month and less than 30% attend the church once a year or less than that. The latter category probably come to church only for funerals of their relatives and for baby baptisms. The fact is that 80% of the same cluster of the Russian population declare themselves to be Orthodox, of whom only 42% declare to be believers in God. This statistic indicates that a good chunk of the post-Soviet Russians have a very peculiar concept of Orthodox Christianity, that they see religion primarily in terms of politics and nationalism. Where is then that "Holy Russia?" Another survey of

⁶ It is ironic that reading Den'gas statement, one almost begins to hope that a revival of the Russian Orthodox Church might be activated by moderate Russian muslims.

⁷ Or the Ukraine for that matter.

Russians claiming, to be Orthodox revealed that 47% of them believed in witchcraft and evil eye⁸ Only 40% believed in immortality and the resurrection of Jesus Christ. 21% believed in 'auras' and 22% in karma. – an obvious influence of Hinduism.

The status of the Patriarch in the contemporary Russian society is rather ambivalent. We saw how in the early period of his tenure he distanced himself from the most dedicated priests who were in favor of services in the vernacular as well as in favor of activating the Church's in social services and in attracting non politicized intellectuals, educating the public about the evils of Communism and its terror. Having isolated himself from the non-politicized and clearly anticommunist intelligentsia, the Patriarch 'fell' into the hands of Shevkunov and his first trip to the USA was cut short by the 1993 procommunist rebellion. The trip was apparently meant to acquaint the American Orthodox with the Patriarch; to establish a spiritual contact between the Patriarch and the Orthodox diaspora. His second visit to the USA, about a year later, was purely diplomatic. In New York he paid his visit to the Rabbinical Centre, greeting the rabbis with the traditional *Shalom!* In the speech he stressed the common roots between Christianity and Judaism via **the Old Testament**. This caused a furor of protest by the Russian anti-Semites. Private radio stations and anti-Semitic newspapers, e.g. the Fascist *ZAVTRA* attacked the Patriarch as a sell-out to the Jews. Thus he lost the support of the Communists and generally the left wing in Russia. This he exacerbated by his visit to Germany and Hungary. In the main cathedrals of Germany and Hungary he publicly apologized for the post-War Soviet occupation for the Soviet regimes in both countries.

This resulted in an even louder uproar of the Communists and Fascists in Russia. The radical elements in Russia accused him of insulting Russia, whose troops, allegedly, were liberators of the above-mentioned nations. Thus the Patriarch lost the support of both the left and the right radicals. Ironically, the only ones who remained technically loyal to the Patriarch have been the liberal Christian intelligentsia, including such figures as the now 90-years old Archpriest – Professor Vitali Borovoi (who was the author of the Patriarch's journey to the USA). As the result of all the above, the radicals in Russia

⁸ Centre for sociological research (1996).

prefer to call him by his last name: “Count Ridiger” or simply “Mister Ridiger” (obviously not to his face). Even more hostile to the Patriarch is the Konstantin Dushenov’s ‘paper “*Rossia pravoslavnaia*”, which openly defies the Patriarch and verbally attacks him, as a sell-out.

I would not be surprised if the present weak position of Patriarch Alexi II played a role in removing the bans from the above-mentioned Father Georgi Kochetkov. It may be added that the international spiritual-theological conferences which Kochetkov’s fraternity holds every September; this past September was unprecedentedly numerous, with over 750 participants, including many Christian scholars from abroad, apparently without any attempts on the part of the Patriarch to hamper or undermine it.⁹ In conclusion it can be pointed out that the centre of the spiritual and theological life of the Church is not associated with the Patriarch; rather it is to be found in conferences organized by such dedicated and active priests as the above mentioned Fr. Georgi Kochetkov or the rector of the Smolensk Seminary Fr. Victor Savik. These activities from below are a hopeful sign of the Church’s reawakening, . We can only hope that the Church leadership does not interfere in these initiatives.

⁹ The question remains: do the Asian nations consider **themselves** to belong to that Cosmism?