

Russia: The Revenge of Orthodoxy

Religion is back in Russia. ● Some say it's a natural reaction to decades of oppressive Soviet atheism, others that efforts on behalf of religious freedom coupled with growing nationalism has helped bring faith back into the Russian social picture. ● But no one explanation fully explains the comeback.

- Moscow's Levada Social Research Center probed the phenomenon and emerged with some interesting statistics.

by Natalija Zorkaja

In the 20 years since the start of Perestroika and the subsequent collapse of the Soviet system, the ratio between non-believers and members of the Orthodox Church in the Russian society has undergone a dramatic reversal. Research compiled by Moscow's Levada Center in the spring of 1989 showed that about 75 in every 100 Russians considered themselves non-believers, with only 17 percent saying they observed an organized religion. But a similar study in 2009 indicated that 73 percent of the population considered itself Russian Orthodox, with seven percent calling themselves atheists, and one in 10 declaring that they didn't identify themselves in any religious denomination defined. For most Russians, belonging to the Russian Orthodox Church has become the norm.

The late 1980s and early 1990s ushered in a period of profound crisis within the basic institutions of the Soviet system. The period witnessed the growth of a sense of relief from the pressures induced by decades of life lived under repressive institutions. Hope emerged for a better life ahead. People from various social backgrounds saw the possibility of a new lease on life. This new con-

tracts included the freedom to express religious conviction. For the present and future parishioners of Russian Orthodox Church, the moment afforded an opportunity for renewal and development. The same kind of liberating experience also occurred in other social spheres, including culture, politics, economics, education, and science. The committed intelligentsia, both liberal and democratic, demanded a place within the cultural elite. It favored the "legalization" of freedom of religion, the free exchange of ideas about religion, and a wish that religion gain both greater relevance and moral authority within the general public. This period saw the first stirrings of religious activity within secular society, promoted especially by educated believers and, more important, by the liberal intelligentsia, which had fostered modernization within the Orthodox Church. In many cases, the trend received Western support, since the West was regarded as the model for the social transformation. Thanks to support from Western-inspired ecumenical religious organizations, new social projects and charitable and educational activities took root. Their growth challenged conservative and fundamentalist ecclesiastical thinking as well as the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church.

At the same time, this ecumenical growth can also be seen as a kind of conservative reaction toward a society that at the time was mired in acute political crisis and susceptible to constant change. The rise in the popularity of religion coincided with a revival of traditional orthodoxy that in Soviet times had remained active if marginalized in what amounted to a forcibly secularized society. The general unleashing strengthened not only re-



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ligion but also nationalism and anti-Semitism. Small right-wing political parties were formed, some of them systematically bigoted, even Fascist (including the ultra-nationalist “Pamjat” and later the “Russian National Unity” as well as less systematic groupings, including Russian Nazis and skinheads). Despite their limited membership and insignificant political weight, their mere existence had a resonant effect on the population.

The growth of such parties was social reaction to the dissolution of the Soviet state, which had relegated matters of ethnic and social identity and dissent to the backburner, forcing them to fester underground. “Internationalism” and “Friendship among people” was artificially promoted. Orthodoxy in this context appeared to substitute for a sense of ethnic identity. Belonging was a reductive Soviet act, a simple and archaic form of mass consciousness. In the late 1980s, and even more so in the early 90s, the Russian population began to trust the Church more. Confidence levels began to supersede what was being conferred to basic political institutions.

For post-Soviet man, the Orthodox Church began gradually symbolizing the concept of the great lost nation, which posited Russia as a great power and the Russian people as the bulwark of the Soviet empire. To some extent this perception supplanted history and created a new set of myths to artificially restore broken or badly damaged traditions.

In the early 90s, the Russian Orthodox Church stopped its ruminations on the meaning of totalitarian Russia that had been started under Perestroika. In essence, it turned its back on establishing a critical view of own history, particularly in Soviet period, a critical vision that could have played a fundamental role in its renewal and development as a social institution in the post-Soviet era. Instead, the Orthodox Church adopted a model that harked back to the days when church and state were united, ignoring the entire legacy of Soviet secularization. It’s no accident that conservative and fundamentalist Orthodox thinkers, given a choice of historical periods to mimic, pick the Church of the 14th and 15th centuries, or that of the 19th century, when the Russian Empire was a paramount importance.

The rebirth of mass religion grew in part from the so-

cial frustration that took root in the mid-1990s, when, under Prime Minister Yegor Gaidar, the national standard of living dropped vertiginously in the wake of social and economic reforms. The return to the Church during this period can be seen as kind of compensation mechanism, psychological and social escapism from a loathed reality.

The state’s “flirtation” with the Church had already begun in the Boris Yeltsin period. It was rationalized as part of the search for a new national identity for the post-Soviet Russia. Those who had endured the trauma of the collapse of Soviet empire and the Communist system needed means to deal with the loss and a new identity. The tipping point came when the country was called on to choose between progressive behavior and a return to the methods more in keeping with its Soviet past. The war in Chechnya, the parliamentary crisis of 1993 and the subsequent exclusion of democrats and liberals from power and politics, the concessions granted to members of the secret services and military, and the way power was conferred (as well as to whom), radically and definitively altered the country’s democratic development that had gone on mostly unimpeded until the 1998 economic crisis. So did the choice of power brokers, as well as the ways and means in which power was transmitted.

The rise of President Vladimir Putin, together with the formation of an authoritarian regime and a police structure, produced a return to the paradigms of Soviet ideological thinking. This in turn bred increased isolationism, great power ambitions, xenophobia, nationalism and growing anti-Western sentiment. Ethno-confessional Orthodoxy, for a growing number of Russian citizens, began coinciding with belonging to the state, in a way substituting for citizenship. Orthodox identity became a simplified form of solidarity, siding with “our people” against “outsiders,” in this case the “accommodated” (non-Russian citizens living in Russia) and the non-orthodox.

Faith in God and religious practices

In post-Soviet society, namely in the two decades since the formal end of the Soviet Union, the number of people in who believe in God has almost doubled. It now stands at slightly more than half the national population. The number of confirmed non-believers has also dropped dramatically (from 36 percent to 15 percent). (TABLE 1.)

Which of the statements below best reflects your idea of God’s existence?
(Based on % of those interviewed)

TABLE 1.

	1991	1998	2008	2009
I don’t believe in God	18	19	10	7
I don’t know if God exists, and I doubt I can be convinced of his existence	18	11	9	8
I don’t believe in God but I do recognize the existence of an omnipotent force	18	13	11	11
Sometimes I believe in God but sometimes I don’t	11	12	14	14
I believe in God, even if at times I have my doubts	15	16	21	21
I know God exists. I have absolutely no doubt	14	24	32	34
I don’t know how to answer	5	5	4	5

Today, the number of Russians who consider themselves as Orthodox is nearly 20 percent higher than those who believe in God (55 and 73 percent). In other words, for a substantial proportion of Russian Orthodox believers, identification is not linked to religious faith or is bound to it very weakly. Belief in God is a bit higher among older women (between 50 and 55 percent), as it is also among pensioners, rural residents, and poor consumers. As in the late 80s and early 90s, religious practices are more strongly expressed the fringes of society (low-income groups with modest resources, limited social hopes, and reduced needs). Nor has the affluence of young people, middle aged citizens, and a generally more educated population, changed the relationship between believers and non-believers in God among the more affluent. It hasn’t even strengthened their belief in the core concepts central to religious consciousness, including recognition of eternal life, heaven and hell, punishment for sins, atonement, salvation and immortality of the soul. (Table 2.1-5, the data reported represents a percentage the number of the Orthodox). (TABLE 2.)

For the majority of those who call themselves Orthodox, religion is neither essential to the salvation of the soul or the path to eternal life, repentance, consolation, let alone central to reconciliation with death (these issues are removed from daily consciousness). Instead, religion means the acquiring the moral norms of everyday life, provided in nearly prepackaged form.

The only Church sacrament of the Church seen as essential among those who call themselves orthodox believers is baptism. At the same, the act of being baptized does not, among most, imply the need to take on reli-

Based on % of the Orthodox followers interviewed

TABLE 2.

	1998	2008	
Do you believe that Paradise exists?			
Absolutely yes + More yes than no	39	41	
More no than yes + Absolutely not	37	33	
I don’t know how to answer	25	26	
	1991	1998	2008
Do you believe in Hell?			
Absolutely yes + More yes than no	48	39	39
More no than yes + Absolutely not	30	37	33
I don’t know how to answer	22	25	27
	1991	2008	
Do you believe the Devil exists?			
Absolutely yes + More yes than no	43	36	
More no than yes + Absolutely not	38	34	
I don’t know how to answer	19	29	
	1991	1998	2008
Do you believe in miracles?			
Absolutely yes + More yes than no	59	41	48
More no than yes + Absolutely not	25	36	29
I don’t know how to answer	17	22	24

gious tasks and responsibilities or yield an awareness of inner spiritual duties. Signs of such awareness are observed only among those who have maturely and voluntarily chosen baptism as adults. According to 2009 research, that’s only 12 percent of the baptized. Those who have made their choices as adults are generally more re-

sponsible and consistent in their observance of religious rites, participation in the sacraments and in the reading of religious texts.

A second seminal moment for the Orthodox is the funeral mass. But even death ends man's earthly journey of man, few consider life as a preparation for death. As a result, even confronted with a terminal disease, few call on priests for absolution, confession or to receive extreme unction. The number stood at nine percent in 2009, not can the behavior be authenticated.

Increasingly, however, Orthodox Christians keep sacred texts and religious literature at home, some 60 percent (less than a tenth of these have similar literature for children, a percentage hasn't gone up since 1991). (TABLE 3.)

Only nine percent of people who married did so with a religious ritual, a percentage that hasn't going up over the last decade. Although the sacrament of marriage can be received at any time, 75 percent of the orthodox population registered for civil marriage and have no intention of having a church wedding. Another 16 percent said they hadn't decided and couldn't answer. Levada's sociological surveys systematically record a gap between what people say they think they need to do and their actual behavior. For example, half of Orthodox respondents said they felt the need to observe fasting and abstinence on Good Friday, during Holy Week, Lent and the penance periods. But the reality of Lent is different. Six percent of said they "always" fasted, five percent said "often," 26 percent said "sometimes," while the majority (62 percent) said "never." Some 14 percent of Orthodox respondents said they prayed every day or "often," while 58 percent said they "never" prayed.

Moreover, a majority of those who prayed said they did so in their own words (52 percent), while only 14 percent said they followed prayers dictated by the Church. More than third of those who did pray (36 percent) acknowledged that they didn't know the Lord's Prayer by heart, while 74 percent said the didn't know the Official Creed of the Orthodox faith.

The majority of those who did pray did so to ask God for something (75 percent), 59 percent for thanks, 24 percent to glorify the deity, while 16 percent said they prayed out of zeal and a love for God.

As for confession, a sacrament that demands awareness

Do you have religious texts at home, and if so which ones? (Based on % of total number of Orthodox followers interviewed) **TABLE 3.**

	1991	2009
The Bible	18	25
The New Testament	13	26
The Old Testament	8	16
The Lives of the Saints	3	5
Psalms	7	11
Book of prayers	9	25
Religious literature for children	7	7
Other books with religion content	5	6
I don't have books with religious content at home	62	43



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and moral evaluation of personal actions and intentions (and linked by Christianity to communion), a vast majority of the Orthodox failed to see it as a compulsory part of religious behavior. Of every 100 members of the Orthodox population, 71 one said they'd never confessed. Some 15 percent said the confessed once a year, and only two percent in the once-a-month range. Same with communion. Among the Orthodox faithful, the number taking communion at least once a month hasn't changed over the last decade, never exceeding more than three percent of the respondents. According to data from a spring 2009 survey, the number of Orthodox taking communion "at least once or twice a year" (usually on religious holidays) was one in 10. Following the generally accepted Russian Orthodox Church notion that holds that members of communities who don't confess at least once a year are not faithful practitioners, some 81 percent of Russian Orthodox Christians live outside the Church.

Among those who call themselves Orthodox, only one in ten attend religious services at least once a month, while the majority (46 percent) attends a few times a year, or at least once a year (during the main religious holidays, Easter foremost, and Christmas to a lesser extent). (TABLE 4.)

Presence at religious functions (Based on % of total number of Orthodox followers interviewed) **TABLE 4.**

	1991	1998	2008
Once a week	4	6	2
At least once a month	15	16	10
At least once a year	56	51	46
Less than once a year	9	15	22
Never	34	33	28
I don't know how to answer	2	2	5

Large portions of Orthodox followers go to church to light a candle or pray in front of an icon but few actually participate in Mass. For the most part, going to church has a symbolic, magical or ritualistic meaning and requires no additional special effort or time.

Even among those who consider themselves devoutly Orthodox the day-to-day picture doesn't really change. An estimated 79 percent have icons in their homes, even

if only 53 percent actually revere them and 37 percent light candles or lamps. More than half of the Orthodox population with icons at home considers the objects a demonstration of their attachment to the religion and the Church (and perhaps above all to themselves). The presence of the objects is unconnected to their behavior and attitudes to the objects themselves.

Amere 17 percent of those who call themselves Orthodox Christians participate in the religion's centerpiece function, Easter Mass. The majority (52 percent) say they attend "sometimes," while a fourth (26 percent) said they had "never" attended an Easter liturgy. As for Sunday Mass, 59 percent of the Orthodox population never attends (the figure is higher for week-



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Participation in religious functions in different nations
(Based on % of believers¹; the figures don't reflect those who didn't know how to answer or had no response) **TABLE 5.**

	GERMANY	ENGLAND	U.S.	HUNGARY	ITALY	SWEDEN	CZECH REPUBLIC	POLAND	RUSSIA	SPAIN	LATVIA	SLOVAKIA	FRANCE
At least once a month	42	40	57	40	61	28	43	78	20	48	39	72	39
A few times a year	23	18	12	22	17	49	30	18	20	25	32	14	18
Usually once a year	27	5	18	25	13	13	9	3	33	10	16	11	25
Never	8	38	13	13	9	10	19	1	28	15	14	4	18

1. Total of those interviewed who responding to the question about their faith in God, picked: «I believe in God, even if sometimes I have doubts» and «I know God exists and I have no doubts in this regard.»

day masses, though in fairness some churches are not open to parishioners on weekdays).

Compared to the inhabitants of other countries, Russians who believe in God have the lowest attendance at religious services and the highest percentage of non-practitioners (except Great Britain, which has a mainly Anglican population). (TABLE 5.)

Being present at church and going to Mass on a relatively regular basis (at least once monthly) can be seen as the loosest if not the most mundane aspect of belonging to the Church, since the Church expects far systematic displays of faith from the devoted, including participation in the sacraments and stricter observance of the rites and requirements of religious life. But because the percentage of the Orthodox who meet these requirements is extremely small, as it was 20 years ago (the faithful who say they confess and take communion for about two-to-three percent of total), only the frequency of church visits and presence at Mass allows statisticians to create a functional socio-demographic model of religious life in today's Russia.

Elderly women are the most rigorous churchgoers. They also tend to adhere more strictly to Church requirements, religious rites and sacraments. In the early 1990s, as mentioned, this population was dominated by poorly educated rural folk. That has changed. The churchgoing population now includes a significantly higher proportion of citizens (once again, mostly women) with a higher level of educational training. Women attend Mass 2-to-2.5 times more often than men and are far more consistent in the observance of religious rules. They're more devoted than men. Among elderly and poorly ed-

ucated woman residing on society's fringes, orthodoxy survived even Soviet times. But it was stripped down worship with a daily magical-ritual element. Turning to the Church (which didn't demand neither a profound moral and subjective enterprise nor a systematic reflection on human destiny from the perspective of faith) was a "universal" way of offloading life's accumulated problems and anxieties, its fears and moments of loss of meaning. This willingness to limit the complexity of problems, agreeing to rationalizations and to the accepting of renunciation, represented a kind of passive adapting process typical to female behavior. But it also best represents the pre-modern or traditional believer that dominates the Russian Church today. What counts most is zealotry in the observation of rites and norms of religious behavior, not the content of faith itself.

Such believers pose no danger to the nation's power structure, which in the past stifled or crushed groups that attempted to form religious elites and destroyed, subjugated or discredited true believers in the eyes of the Church itself.

The fact that so-called "popular Orthodoxy" has survived can be attributed to a softening of totalitarianism, including the Soviet variety, leaving "a little" oxygen" the "common man" who was otherwise pulverized by state violence, ruthlessly oppressed and deprived of all his natural rights. To greater or lesser extent, the preservation of religious traditions was associated with a complete and implicit subjugation to power.

Against this background, Orthodox residents of rural areas and in part those of small towns and cities tend to take their distance from the Church (in common with pensioners, who retain a deep attachment to the ideals of the Soviet past).

Church, religion and daily life

The progressive identification of masses with orthodoxy in today's Russia doesn't reflect a substantial increase in the number of people who believe deeply in the church life or are closely related to its problems ("practitioners"). Neither the church nor religion as such plays much of a role in the daily life of most Russians. Both the institution of the Church and the religious vision of the world have virtually no significant influence on society. Nonetheless, confidence in the Church remains fairly high (two-fifths of respon-

dents said they "completely trusted" the Church.) Surveys conducted over a long period suggest a passive if not an aloof attitude to the both the social role of the Church and of religion. Its function in the daily life of individuals is considered marginal, even among those who think of themselves as Orthodox.

Public opinion, while accepting the ideology broadcast by the Russian Orthodox Church, doesn't connect them to religious doctrine. Instead, they are regarded as part of the official rhetoric of power. The overwhelming majority of respondents (including those who represent

To what extent to you agree with the assertion that religious authorities should not seek to influence government decisions? (Based on % of total number of Orthodox followers interviewed) **TABLE 6.**

	1991	1998	2008
I fully agree / I agree	30	64	69
I don't agree or disagree	19	12	10
I disagree / I'm not fully in agreement	28	14	9
I don't know	23	10	12

To what extent to you agree with the assertion that religious authorities should not seek to influence voters? (Based on % of total number of Orthodox followers interviewed) **TABLE 7.**

	1991	1998	2008
I fully agree / I agree	40	51	74
I don't agree or disagree	13	10	5
I disagree / I'm not fully in agreement	25	12	7
I don't know	23	8	12



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both secular and Orthodox society) oppose Church interference in politics. If the early 1990s the Church-state question still provoked considerable tension, that tension is now gone. The Church-state division is supported unequivocally. (TABLE 6. AND 7.)

In 2008, the majority of respondents (63 percent) said they wanted to live in a country where the attitude toward religion was a “personal matter, and religion does not influence policy,” as opposed to state where “religion plays a important role in politics.” It worth noting that among the majority of those who call themselves Orthodox (68 percent in 2002, 65 percent in 2008) statements indicate the religion does not play a particularly important role in their daily lives (individual life). Only six in every 100 said that religion makes helped make their lives complete. (TABLE 8.)

How would you define your religious views?
(Based on the % of those interviewed) **TABLE 8.**

	1998	2000	2009
Very religious	6	6	5
Fairly religious	42	45	37
Generally not religious	27	26	33
Absolutely not religious	19	20	20
Depends on the circumstances	-	2	2
I don't know how to answer	5	1	3

To better assess the influence of the Church in Russian society it's worth considering the behavior of believers within the context of the life of a parish or Church community. In the two decades since Perestroika, the percentage of active participants in parish life has hardly changed, remaining at one percent of those who consider themselves Orthodox. The vast majority of these Orthodox worshippers (91 percent in 1998, 86 percent in 2008) has never participated in parish life and has no desire to do so. The Russian Orthodox Church (careful to shield all statistics relating to its activities from public view, including its finances, its educational and cultural structure, statistics about attendance at Mass, the number of baptisms, the list goes on) applies only cautious optimism to news that the number of Orthodox worshippers is on the rise, attributing the rise to the Church's inherent merit and attractions.

It's an ambiguous position at best, taking into account the more conservative outlook, which sees Orthodoxy as the state Church, and that of the Church itself, which considers its active parishioners (those who attend church regularly, strictly observe rituals, receive the sacraments, etc.) to number only two-to-four percent of the Russian population. To account for the discrepancy between the number of parishioners and those who attend church from time to time Russian Orthodox Church representatives often note the secularization of society and its consequences. The biggest offender in this regard culprits isn't the Russian Orthodox Church and its history but “the West” as a whole, which is seen as “estranged” from all true faith). Western mass culture in particular is cited as being the ongoing cause of irreparable damage to the “spirituality” of the Russian people, the “authenticity” of its faith, and of Orthodox culture in general.

Ironically, however, comparing Russian figures with those in Western countries with secular societies, and also with former East Bloc nations, it's Russian Orthodox followers who represent the highest proportion of

churchgoers who do not participate at all in the life of the parish or local religious community. (TABLE 9.)

In other words, Western secular societies harbor stronger socio-religious tendencies and influences than Russia's. Among European nations, the countries with the smallest number of believers who don't participate in parish life included Germany, more than half of whose religious believers belong to Lutheran and evangelical churches; Bulgaria, whose faithful are mostly Orthodox, and Slovakia, who population is predominantly Catholic. In most nations (with the exception of Russia, Hungary and Latvia), the percentage of parishioners who participate continuously in parish life was high: between 50 and 52 percent. These figures are no doubt linked to the strong social orientation of both the Protestant and Catholic Churches, though each holds to fundamentally different theological premises. The low Russian numbers suggests that the Russian Orthodox Church is clueless when it comes to the challenges of modernity. It refuses to renew itself, fails to or

won't acknowledge social problems and fears, doesn't recognize the multi-faceted conflicts and tensions faced by those who live in contemporary Russian society.

It is no accident that the Russian state has decided to include the teaching of “Orthodox culture” in school curricula (studying the “foundations of orthodox religion” is now compulsory in middle school). The idea is also gradually winning mass public approval (in 2009, 54 percent of Russians, believers and non-believers, backed the teaching plan.)

In its structure and worldview, the Russian Orthodox Church remains both extremely archaic and conservative. It also claims total dominance over its national population. This is the same Church that has systematically pursued and disciplined activists who have tried to bring new meaning and content to faith itself, to give meaning and symbolism to old rites and liturgy, to attempt to try to help people understand faith and consciously choose it of their own volition instead of joining up mechanically. Under these circumstances, it stands to reason that the refusal of the most Orthodox followers to accept Church formulas while still considering themselves believers suggests that the “image of faith” proposed by the Russian Church today fails to meet their expectations and needs. It is not a credible social institution. It thus becomes evident that parishioners (and potential parishioners) are not the object of the Church's pastoral efforts, a Church whose primary concern is power and ensuring its own survival.



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Do you participate in the religious efforts of a religious community, not counting presences at religious functions?
(Based on % of believers²; the figures don't reflect those who didn't know how to answer or had no response) **TABLE 9.**

	GERMANY	ENGLAND	U.S.	HUNGARY	ITALY	SWEDEN	CZECH REPUBLIC	POLAND	BULGARY	RUSSIA	SPAIN	LATVIA	SLOVAKIA	FRANCE
Never	20	45	31	63	50	31	34	47	20	93	72	61	20	39
Less than once a year	10	13	11	14	4	14	13	13	9	2	4	11	11	13
Once or twice a year	15	11	11	8	8	16	20	9	20	1	6	10	20	14
A few times a year	25	10	12	10	11	14	16	14	26	1	6	8	16	14
Once a month/2-3 times a month	14	9	12	4	9	10	8	9	15	1	4	7	12	10
Every week or more often	15	13	23	3	18	14	8	9	10	2	7	5	22	10

². Total of those interviewed who responding to the question about their faith in God, picked: «I believe in God, even if sometimes I have doubts» and «I know God exists and I have no doubts in this regard.»