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RUSSIA: Religious freedom "the only viable option for consolidating Russia's extraordinary diversity"

By Geraldine Fagan , former Russia Correspondent, Forum 18

This is the second of two abridged extracts from a book by Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18's Russia and Belarus Correspondent, "Believing in Russia - Religious Policy after Communism" (Routledge, 2013). The book presents a comprehensive overview of religious policy in Russia since the end of the communist regime, exposing many of the ambiguities and uncertainties about the position of religion in Russian life and revealing how religious freedom in Russia has, contrary to the widely held view, a long tradition. The book argues that continuing failure to resolve the question of whether Russia is to be an Orthodox country with religious minorities or a multi-confessional state is destabilising the nation. More details on the book are available from <http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415490023/>.

The Orthodox-centred model of national identity is now an ill-fitting one, even when allowing certain ethnicities alternative "traditional" religious affiliation. For Soviet deconstruction of previous ethno-religious identities has created a different Russia. Sovietization established what Shireen Hunter terms "an amorphous soviet identity .. often coexisting and sometimes superseding the more ethnocentric, religious and local identities". To the masses of those steeped in that Soviet identity, their forebears' Orthodox Christian or other faith practices are now alien. One Kalmyk Protestant teenager remarks, "I don't understand. Why, after they introduced the law on freedom of conscience at the end of Soviet rule, was it then suddenly decided that Kalmyks are traditionally Buddhist, and Russians Orthodox? Everyone was atheist."

Following the demise of enforced atheism, the diverse reality of beliefs in Russia is more distant than ever from the old messianic vision of a homogeneously Orthodox civilization. Political pursuit of that vision is consequently producing a dangerously skewed social imbalance. For evidence, one need look no further than the "Third Rome" itself.

Despite then Prime Minister Vladimir Putin's assurances during his December 2010 telethon that a new mosque would be built in Moscow, the city still had only three official mosques by 2012. By contrast, a construction plan for 200 new Orthodox churches in the capital spearheaded by Patriarch Kirill continues apace. Moscow's Soviet-planned suburbs indeed lack Orthodox churches. But the enormous discrepancy between their provision and that of mosques – reflecting the assumption that Russia is definitively Orthodox with inconsequential Muslim and other minorities – is turning explosive. Three mosques were woefully inadequate for the estimated 100,000 Muslim worshippers who attended Uraza-Bayram (Eid ul-Fitr) in Moscow in August 2011, mostly packing central streets. Only three times as many faithful attended Orthodox Easter services in the city that April – but they had recourse to nearly 100 times as many churches.

Russia's rulers do not acknowledge the dilemma over ethno-religious identity that gives rise to such tensions, let alone seek to resolve it. Local scholars do point to the need for a new religious policy model. Alexander Agadjanian suggests contemporary nations that have responded successfully to the need to deal with diversity have done so by embracing civic values that "presuppose that the new 'imagined community' transcends 'primordial bonds'; including ethnic and religious ones". But in Russia's case it is the imagined community – first officially Orthodox then officially atheist – that has failed to ensure unity. The only viable religious policy is therefore one accurately reflecting the diverse reality of what is believed in Russia. This need not be divisive: insofar as a state respects individual religious and other worldviews, it wins unenforced loyalty from the maximum number of citizens and thereby genuine stability and security.

The principle of detesting another's beliefs while defending to the death the right to believe them resonates widely. A 2009 WorldPublicOpinion.org international survey on attitudes towards "defamation of religion" found 61 per cent of Russians supporting the statement that "People should have the right to publicly criticise a religion, because people should have freedom of speech." By contrast, only 13 per cent – lower than in France and Germany – agreed that "The government should have the right to fine or imprison people who publicly criticise a religion, because such criticism could defame the religion." As the ubiquity and intensity of local theological debate testify, the freedom to remain aloof from or dismissive of other belief systems is one valued by Russians. The misperception that religious freedom belongs with a positive attitude towards the blurring of theological boundaries is one reason why that right is rejected as alien in Russia.

Emphasis upon diversity as an intrinsically human trait is also found in the traditional exposition of Russian national identity. Reflecting upon Fyodor Tyutchev's famous quatrain "Russia cannot be known by the mind" (Rossiu umom ne poniat'), religious philosopher Nikolai Berdyayev concluded that "each person believes in Russia in their own way and finds completely contradictory facts in the existence of Russia to support that belief". Fellow religious philosopher Vladimir Solovyev similarly viewed religious freedom as a vital precondition for realization of the Russian national idea. He insisted, however, that this could not entail renunciation of Grand Prince Vladimir's baptism of Rus in 988. Support for the Russian Orthodox Church occupying a prominent role in public life remains strong. It is thus hard to envisage Russia adopting a religious policy stipulating very stringent separation of Church and state.

Few passive Orthodox, non-Orthodox or atheist taxpayers object to government funding for aspects of religious activity perceived as cultural, such as the preservation of historic churches or celebration of major Church festivals. Senior state human rights official Mikhail Odintsov has thus suggested "cultural co-operation" to be the optimal foundation for the state's religious policy. Provided such co-operation were transparent and non-exclusive, the Russian Orthodox Church could enjoy broad public approval amid conditions of true religious freedom: these are not mutually exclusive.

But formidable obstacles remain. Any policy shift away from the prescriptive and towards dependency upon the fluctuating worldview preferences of the populace would entail a complete overhaul of the way in which state representatives relate to citizens. In particular, it would mean abandoning the entrenched official attitude that citizens need to be directed and protected from themselves – or, in the words of Baptist leader Yuri Sipko, "supposing that the citizens of a country with a great culture are incapable of making their own choices".

And in order for that shift to take place, Russia's rulers would have to make civic rather than personal political interest their priority.

As Putin commenced his third presidency in May 2012, Russia continued to drift in the opposite direction. Seeking the Patriarchate as an ally in its drive to preserve credibility amidst rising popular resentment, the regime is increasingly drawn to the old notion that Russia is definitively Orthodox. Still, pockets of support for religious freedom survive within the state apparatus. Advisers to the Volga Federal District have argued that the concept of "spiritual security" promotes the attitude of Dostoyevsky's villainous Grand Inquisitor, who "removes the complicated right, exclusive to humankind, of choice: freedom of conscience".

Opponents of religious freedom claim it is a Western ruse aiming to destabilise and destroy Russia. But government policy grounded in this principle is the only viable option for consolidating Russia's extraordinary diversity. Crucially, it is also fully congruent with local historical tradition. For, as 49 Russian parliamentarians affirmed more than a century ago on 12 May 1906, only full provision of freedom of conscience "can restore that trust and moral connection between separate peoples without which the prosperity, well-being and might of Russia is impossible, the elevation of the authority of the Orthodox Church impossible."

(End of second and final extract from "Believing in Russia - Religious Policy after Communism". The first extract can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1762. The Economist's review of the book is available here <http://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21571111-new-look-religion-post-1991-russia-question-faith>.)

- Geraldine Fagan is Forum 18's Russia and Belarus Correspondent, and author of "Believing in Russia - Religious Policy after Communism" <http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415490023/> (Routledge, 2013). This comprehensive overview of Russian religious policy argues that continuing failure to resolve the question of whether Russia is to be an Orthodox country with religious minorities or a multi-confessional state is destabilising the nation.

For more background, see Forum 18's surveys of the general state of religious freedom in Russia at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1722, and of the dramatic decline in religious freedom related to Russia's Extremism Law at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1724.

An analysis of the way that the Russian authorities have used the Pussy Riot case to intensify restrictions on freedom of religion or belief is at F18News 15 October 2012 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1754.

A personal commentary by Alexander Verkhovsky, Director of the SOVA Center for Information and Analysis <http://www.sova-center.ru>, about the systemic problems of Russian anti-extremism legislation, is at F18News 19 July 2010 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1468.

A personal commentary by Irina Budkina, Editor of the <http://www.samstar.ucoz.ru> Old Believer website, about continuing denial of equality to Russia's religious minorities, is at F18News 26 May 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=570.

More reports on freedom of thought, conscience and belief in Russia can be found at <http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?query=&religion=all&country=10>.

A compilation of Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) freedom of religion or belief commitments can be found at http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=1351.

A printer-friendly map of Russia is available at
<http://education.nationalgeographic.com/education/mapping/outline-map/?map=Russia>.

Geraldine Fagan , contributed this comment to Forum 18 News Service. Commentaries are personal views and do not necessarily represent the views of F18News or Forum 18.

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