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Alexander Agadjanian

Turns of Faith, Search for Meaning

Orthodox Christianity and Post-Soviet Experience

PETER LANG
EDITION

Preface

As I decide, thanks to a kind invitation by the Erfurt Series in Eastern Orthodoxy, to publish in one volume my previous studies in a slightly actualized and modified form,[1] I feel that it is necessary to preface this volume with a text setting up a few general "braces" that would hold the entire construction together. These "braces" are, in fact, a few core ideas and objectives that have been animating for more than a decade all the papers included here. Throughout this period, my field has been the dynamic of religious phenomena in the former Soviet lands, with a special emphasis on Russia, with the post-communist "exit" generating its own logic and unique historical experience. However, I was always trying to relate these unique developments to the global shifts that have been unfolding through the turn of the century in both the field of the religious *being* and the field of religious *studies*.

1 First publication: Chapter 1: *Europe-Asia Studies* 53, no. 3 (May 2001) 473–88; Chapter 2: in: Santosh C. Saha (ed.), *Religious Fundamentalism in the Contemporary World: Critical Social and Political Issues*, Lanham: Lexington Books, 2004, 71–90; Chapter 3: *International Journal on Multicultural Societies* 2, no. 2 (2000) 97–124. URL: http://www.unesco.org/shs/ijms/vol2/issue2/art2; Chapter 4: *Journal for the Scientific Studies of Religion* 40, no. 3 (September 2001): 351–65; Chapter 5: *Social Compass* 53, no. 2 (June 2006) 169–84; Chapter 6: J. Sutton and W. van den Bercken (eds.), *Orthodox Christianity and Contemporary Europe*, Leuven: Peeters, 2003, 163–82; Chapter 7: *Religion, State and Society* 31, no. 4 (December 2003) 327–46; Chapter 8: *Religion, State and Society* 38, no. 2 (June 2010) 97–113; Chapter 9: (co-authored with Kathy Rousselet) in: C. Hann and H. Goltz (eds.), *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010, 311–28; Chapter 10: *Archives de sciences sociales des religions* 162 (April-June 2013) 75–94; Chapter 11: in: Peter B. Clark/Peter Beyer (eds.), *The World's Religions: Continuities and Transformations* (Routledge Encyclopedia Series), London/New York: Routledge 2008, 189–206; Chapter 12: (co-authored with Victor Roudometof) First published as "Introduction: Eastern Orthodoxy in a Global Age: Preliminary Considerations", in: V. Roudometof, A. Agadjanian and J. Pankhurst (eds.), *Eastern Orthodoxy in a Global Age: Tradition Faces the Twenty-First Century*, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005, 1–26. In this volume, a shorter version is reproduced and the second part of the text, which makes a presentation of volume articles, is omitted; Chapter 13: (co-authored with Kathy Rousselet) First published in: V. Roudometof, A. Agadjanian and J. Pankhurst (eds.), *Eastern Orthodoxy in a Global Age*: *Tradition Faces the Twenty-First Century*, Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2005, 29–57; Chapter 14: The work on this paper was a part of a three-year international project, supported by the *VolkswagenStiftung*, "Alte Grenzen und neue Fronten – Die orthodoxen Kirchen und die europäische Integration". The first version of the paper was presented in March 2010 at a conference in Nijmegen, Netherlands, which was a part of this project. The proceedings of the conference will be published soon.

The post-Soviet turn in Russia and in other lands of Eurasia was, indeed, tectonic, unprecedented in many ways: besides political, economic and cultural breakdown, it was a reshaping of the universe of meanings, a reconstruction of basic symbolic codes. The decades that followed were the years of challenges and choices urged by massive institutional restructuring. These choices, taken by individuals and social groups, were informed, in this situation of symbolic flux, by unfixed, fluid and sometimes unconscious patchworks of motives and reactions. Occasionally, these patchworks were getting a more or less cohesive shape legitimized through references to one of the "worldviews" or a combination thereof.

Religion was one of such worldviews, which, among others, strongly affected the cultural landscape in the post-communist societies. Religion enjoyed a favorable environment of a formerly forbidden and freshly attractive fruit. Religion offered a different type of meaningful cosmos, which repudiated the distrusted super-rationalism of the officially standardized Soviet doctrine and, at the same time, rejected a new overwhelming craze: a super-pragmatic, cynical pursuit of wealth and success – not available for many and not fully acceptable. "Religion" was used as an umbrella term referring to a *higher* source of meaning, which seemed to provide a relative sense of stability in a vertiginous rush toward the unknown future.

As an umbrella term "religion" included a fascinating range of forms. For some, it was a full-fledged sacred canopy, referred to a millennial tradition (such as Islam or Russian Orthodoxy); however, in fact, such reference yielded to a variety of interpretations of what the true, authentic "tradition" really meant. For others, religion was a universal, ecumenical repository of common wisdom, de-linked from particular traditions and therefore elastic for *individual* adjustments. For yet others, religion was a *bricolage* of mystical, esoteric beliefs and practices addressed to semi-visible, arcane forces underlying the life-process (these forces might be connected or not to a popular-scientific worldview). Finally, for some others, religion was an epiphenomenon of ethno-national identity, an attribute of an essentialist bio-cultural synthesis, serving to collectively-experienced empowerment.

Religious meanings, in whatever of the above contexts, became frequent references in the post-Soviet cultural and political landscape, used in many spheres from commercial billboards to intellectual debates, political programs and artistic production; they entered the language of mass media and school curricula; in one word, they moved to the *public sphere*, in sharp contrast to their almost exclusively private existence back in the Soviet times. In this sense, the post-Soviet trends easily fit into the global trend of public religious resurgence. This shift coincided, however, with another important, and seemingly opposite, shift in society as a whole: the valoriza-

tion of privacy, private freedoms and acts, private individual choices, including private religious choices and experiences. Therefore, we should look for religious meanings thriving at both levels: inner/individual and public.

And yet, what might "thriving" mean in this case? The post-Soviet return of religion appeared as a "religious revival" and was perceived as such by most religious people and some scholars; but this was a rather misleading definition. Sure, new religious freedoms were in sharp contrast to the enforced, ideological secularism in the Soviet Union, and so these societies became "post-secular" in the direct sense of the word – another link to a theoretical frame lively discussed in academic research over the last decade. What did "post-secular" mean in this case, though? It would seem very naïve to affirm – even with pointing at impressive figures of newly built churches and mosques – that religions are back in forms and with attributes and functions they used to have in the pre-Soviet Empire. Nothing of this kind really happened, of course. Nor are the numbers of deeply committed, practicing believers comparable with the early twentieth century, which is used as a preferred reference point for revivalists.

What then happened? In effect, the secular frame in politics and in the sociocultural fabric of new societies seemed to continuously dominate; but in the "post-secular" landscape the secular/religious divide certainly blurred, lost its "classical" relevance, and yielded to a new reconfiguration of meanings. The process was twofold. On one hand, "religions" consolidated into particular social enclaves linked to particular worldviews, more or less cohesive subcultures within an increasingly mixed (global), pluralistic landscape: a type of free associations providing specific "products" on sale at the "spiritual marketplace". These enclave subcultures could be very small, like a tiny local sect or a New Age hangout; or a nationwide corporation playing power games, such as the Russian Orthodox Church. On the other hand, religions (or, rather, an abstract "religion" in singular) became diffused, crumbled into hundreds of splinter-meanings that have often lost their connection to an original "tradition" or "worldview" or "community" and can be found in various fields: arts, politics, moral debates and even economy (work and business ethics). These diffused bits-and-pieces of religious references are hard to catch and describe, and their significance hard to grasp, but this is what is very characteristic for the post-secular cultural landscape.

All the chapters that follow are attempts, based mostly on Russian evidence, to comprehend the trends mentioned above: setting powerful symbolic meta-narratives (Russian Orthodoxy's self-perception in Russia, within Europe and in the world where it claims to position as one of the religiously-determined "civilizations"); the challenges these narratives are faced with in a fluid, global environment (the context

of legal pluralism and lived diversity); and the inner reshaping of the religious tradition (Russian Orthodoxy's new visions of society; partial reforms; and identity quests – both individual and communitarian – generated by the post-Soviet socio-political and cultural dynamic). As I proceed, drawing upon the analysis of both texts and practices, to interpreting religious trends in Russia and other lands of the region, methodologically I position my research at the intersection of religious studies, sociology and anthropology. There is no need to warn the reader about the rapid change that continues to reshape the entire religious landscape after all these chapters were completed and about the sheer impossibility to catch up with these ongoing developments. I consider this book as a series of snapshots, fixing some of the major trends that are based on fluid empirical evidence, but also have some enduring general significance.

During the entire period of writing these texts, I was part of a scholarly network looking at the same phenomena, and many colleagues' studies are referred to on the pages of this book. Two of these scholars, Kathy Rousselet and Victor Roudometof, must be singled out for serving as creative co-authors (chapters 9, 12 and 13). I am also indebted to stimulating academic cooperation within international research projects, such as "Religious Practices in Russia" (2004–6)[2]; "Twenty Years of Transformations: Religious and Social Life of Orthodox congregations" (2008–10)[3]; "Alte Grenzen und neue Fronten – Die orthodoxen Kirchen und die europäische Integration" (2009–11)[4], and some other smaller endeavors. My special thanks go to the editor of the Erfurt Series, Vasilios N. Makrides, who offered the very idea of the book and invested time in making its publication possible.

ALEXANDER AGADJANIAN

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