

THE RESUSCITATION OF ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY AND TSARIST SYMBOLISM IN POST-SOVIET RUSSIA: AN ANALYSIS

Muhammad Ahsan

Abstract

It has been a generation since the end of Bolshevik rule in Russia. In the last 25 years, we have seen a fervent urgency to reconnect contemporary Russian society with its pre-Bolshevik past. This perseverance has been manifested by the appearances of monuments that hark back to the days of monarchic Russia. The Russian Orthodox Church has been at the forefront in all this rejuvenation. Under increasing state patronage, it has undertaken efforts to reshape the national trajectory. In addition, Tsarist regalia abounds state architecture. This symbolism carries deep signification. It communicates motifs that are essential to understand Moscow's diplomatic posturing. The conservatism enshrined within these expressions challenges the liberal consensus that has been the order of the day since the end of the Cold War. It fundamentally contests the prevalent cosmopolitanism and the values it has propagated. Furthermore, this article asserts that Russian nationalism is inextricably linked with Orthodox Christianity. There is no place for pagan allegory in Russian identity.

Introduction

Whenever we think about of Christianity as a fact of history, our imagination usually flies to the magisterial St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome, to the splendid biblical renditions that adore the walls of the Sistine Chapel, to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ, or to the sectarian tension that exists to this day in some parts of the World between Catholics and Protestants. The faces of Martin Luther, Henry VIII, John Calvin, Zwingli, Erasmus, Thomas Aquinas etc. swiftly populate our thoughts.

But how often do we find ourselves eastbound? The eastern half of Christianity, namely the Orthodox, seldom occur to us. Afterall, the faith began in the Middle East. Alexandria, Constantinople, Jericho, the River Jordan, Mount Athos, Moscow and Kiev have been as much a part of Christian history as Rome and other Catholic and Protestant territories. It is

as if they have all vanished. Well, some of them have in a way. Majority of the stated places are today within non-Christian realms. Still, for an Orthodox faithful, they carry immense emotional significance.

It is maintained in this article that Orthodox Christianity and Tsarist symbolism make up the blood in the body of Russian nationalism. The latter is merely a corpse without the former essential components. Why is it so? How is this particular nationalism any different from French, German, Italian, or Spanish nationalisms? Is the deployment state-led ritualism purely a Machiavellian ploy to legitimize a regime? Or does one need to be careful when generalizing about Russia? These are some questions that this article aims to address.

Although, the focus will be on the last 27 years, that is since the fall of the Soviet Union, it is of crucial importance to briefly touch upon the momentous developments that took place in the last millennium.

The article shall proceed in the following manner:

- The first section sheds light on the Christianization of Russian lands and the wider historical context.
- The succeeding part concentrates on the schism between Eastern and Western Christianity. And the desecration of Orthodox lands during the Fourth Crusade.
- The next segment analyses the Mongol onslaught into Russian domain and its aftermaths, the fall of Constantinople, the defeat of Mongols, and the expansion of Russian lands under the Tsars.
- The concluding section discusses the decline and demise of Monarchism, the aftershocks of Westernization, the ascent of Bolshevism, the great vacuum of the 20th century, and the reconstruction of the broken bridges that connect an ordinary Russian to his past.

Needless to say, this is not a theological endeavor. The doctrinal differences between the two Christian denominations do not come under the ambit of this research.

The Christianization of the Slavic lands

According to the historical chronicles, commercial contacts between Byzantine Empire and Slavic tribal settlements (Kievan Rus' being the most

powerful amongst them) along the river Dnieper had begun to establish in the 9th century AD. The empire was sitting on the coasts of Black Sea and the Mediterranean. Moreover, polities situated between the Adriatic and the Black Seas deemed it a geographical necessity to pursue closer ties with Constantinople. This exchange later facilitated proselytization and missionary work. Historical accounts show that by the middle and late 10th century AD Christianity had reached the region between Volga and Dnieper. And then around 988, Vladimir, Grand Prince of Kiev, married the sister of Basil II, the Byzantine Emperor, and officially introduced Christianity into his realm. The Prince had been searching an instrument of stability. He abandoned his pagan heritage for want of discipline and institutional organization. He ordered the construction of churches and asked his subjects to baptize themselves in the waters of Dnieper. He comprehensively purged whatever scarce pagan symbols were in existence till then. In the later years, his decisive stamp in this regard elevated him in the eyes of the faithful. He sanctified the seat of the sovereign, thereby, placing the ruler somewhere between the God and the masses. For an ardent Russian romantic, Russian history began with Prince Vladimir and his baptism.¹

The Orthodox lands expanded during his regime. Wherever his forces marched, the bishops followed. At times, he resorted to extreme measures to subdue a stubborn people. For instance, the city of Novgorod suffered his wrath when some of his commanders cracked their whips to drive the message home. It was baptism by sword and fire.²

When Vladimir breathed his last on July 15, 1015 in his mid-fifties, Russian Orthodoxy had been established as the new national religion.³

The period immediately after the death of Prince Vladimir brought fratricidal strife that weakened the cohesiveness of this fragile polity. The region was susceptible to major geopolitical earthquakes. Nomadic Turkic tribes were checking Russian advances in their vicinity. The lack of a geographical barrier kept the doors open for a massive incursion.⁴

¹ Jonathan Shepard, "The Origins of Rus' (c.900–1015)", in *The Cambridge History of Russia*, ed. Maureen Perrie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 45-72.

² Daniel H. Shubin, *A History of Russian Christianity, Volume I: From the Earliest Years through Tsar Ivan IV* (New York: Algora Publishing, 2004), 36.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, 37-46.

Around Byzantium, the nerve centre of Orthodox faith, Islamized Turkic tribes were flexing their political muscles. They had escaped the Abbasid orbit, and these military autocracies were jostling for territories. The Christian lands had been shrinking there for the last four hundred years. The Mediterranean coastline had a formidable presence of Berber and Arab forces. The noose around Orthodoxy was gradually tightening.⁵

The Great Schism (1054) and the Crusades

The theological matters came to a boil in the second half of the 11th century. Tension had been brewing under the surface for some time. The Latin and Greek authorities clashed and excommunicated each other. The Eastern Patriarchs refused to accept the Pontiff at Rome and retained the rituals they deemed fit. The breach still exists to this day.⁶

However, all this acrimony didn't prevent the Byzantine Emperor Alexios I Komnenos from appealing to his religious brethren in the West for reinforcements against the advancing Turks. Pope Urban II responded with a sermon at Clermont in France in 1095 in which he pressed the faithful to take up arms in the defence of the holy land. He condemned internecine warfare, and asked the knights and warriors to, instead, channel their energies for the salvation of their Christian brothers in the East. He cautioned that if left unchecked, the Turkish blitzkrieg would annihilate the beleaguered followers of Lord. But all did not go according to the Christian spirit. Once in the Byzantine lands, the crusaders fell on their allies. The Emperor Alexios I had expected a more dignified behaviour, and that they would respect and recognize his authority. They abused the hospitality they were given, and started maneuvering against their hosts. Naturally, this behaviour strengthened enemies' hand. This state of affairs was to continue for the next almost 150 years. It was one thing to be attacked by the heathens but quite another to suffer humiliation at the hands of those who came as rescuers.⁷

⁵ Osman Turan, "Anatolia in the Period of the Seljuks and the Beyliks", in *The Cambridge History of Islam*, edited by P. M. Holt, Ann K. S. Lambton and Bernard Lewis (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 231.

⁶ Tony Wesolowsky, "The Great Schism Explained", *Radio Free Radio Liberty*, February 5, 2016, available at <https://www.rferl.org/a/explainer-great-schism/27534730.html>.

⁷ James Harvey Robinson, *Medieval and Modern Times: An Introduction to the History of Western Civilization from the Dissolution of the Roman Empire to the Present Time* (Boston: Ginn and Company, 1926), 167-71.

During the Fourth Crusade (1202-1204), the Crusader Armies pillaged Constantinople, the grandest city of Christianity in its time, which left an indelible mark on the Orthodox spirit. The storming of the great centre by the Latin Christians extinguished any hope of reconciliation between the two schools of thought. The split was irreversible.⁸ The patriarch of Constantinople, John X Kamateros, was treated disgracefully. He left the captured city in a haggard state. Pope Innocent III found it expedient to pull Russian Orthodoxy into Catholicism but he couldn't swing the hearts of the Orthodox. The Kievan princes' stood their ground and didn't yield. Russian Orthodoxy had managed to weather the first of many storms that were to strike Orthodox lands in the coming centuries.⁹

A much bigger test was in the offing. The sack of Constantinople was a spiritually traumatic event, however, what was to follow would ravage two hundred years of Orthodox progress in the Slavic territories. Grand Prince Vladimir's successors couldn't hold the polity together and the disintegration invited a chastisement so severe that it would temporarily remove Orthodox territories in Eastern Europe as an influential geopolitical entity.

Mongol occupation (1237-1480) and the fall of Constantinople (1453)

In 1237, the Mongol hordes crossed the Volga under Batu Khan. His troops reduced Ryazan, Vladimir, Rostov, Tver, Kiev and Halych into rubble. The armies slaughtered the inhabitants and defiled the holy icons. Only Novgorod escaped any punishment as it deferred to Mongol authority. Sensing an opportunity to pile more misery, the Teutonic Knights charged from the West. Prince Alexander Nevsky successfully defended the city at the Battle of the Ice (1242). He is still regarded as a hero who kept the Orthodox flame alive in the face of such odds. The Tatar yoke would continue for another 200 years.¹⁰ And two centuries later, the Russian Orthodoxy suffered another spiritual setback. Constantinople, the jewel of Christendom, surrendered to the Ottoman Turks. Given its volatile political condition, it was inevitable, still, its eventual demise must have flattened the Orthodox morale. In Orthodox imagination, the first Rome succumbed to the Latins, whereas, the second one (Constantinople) yielded to the heathens.

⁸ Ibid, 178.

⁹ Daniel H. Shubin, 71.

¹⁰ Epic History TV, "History of Russia (PARTS 1-5) - Rurik to Revolution", Youtube, <https://youtu.be/w0Wmc8COEq0> Date Published: 24 December 2016, Duration: 46:59.

The Byzantine double-headed eagle had become orphaned. Nevertheless, the Russian Orthodoxy, being the only standing Orthodox power left in the world enhanced its profile and assumed the mantle of Eastern Christianity. The Muscovite princes began to be addressed as 'Tsars' and Moscow became the Third Rome. The stage was set for a colossal transformation. Tsar Ivan IV, known as 'the Terrible', expanded Russian frontiers deep into Tatar-held lands. He dealt dissent in an extremely severe manner. Summary executions were the order of the day. The Tsars employed Cossacks as shock troops who added Siberia into the Russian Empire. Although, political instability invited Polish and Lithuanian incursions, the era of prolonged docility had all but ended.¹¹

Peter the Great ascended the throne in 1672. Hitherto, the Tsars had not entertained any plans for a comprehensive engagement with Western Europe. Peter, on the other hand, was determined to drag Russia materially as well as intellectually into the 17th century. He visited England, Germany, and the Netherlands. He met artisans, architects, ship-builders, and artillery experts. It goes without saying that he faced considerable opposition back home, and he had to cut short his journey to suppress a revolt instigated by the nobility and clergy who strongly disapproved his attack on traditional values. For instance, Peter had imposed a beard tax. He encouraged women to take part in social gatherings. He allowed foreign settlements. They were mainly advisors and expert technocrats. In a nutshell, he sought to intellectually prepare Russia for the ideas of Enlightenment, which would have far-reaching repercussions.¹²

The hostility between the traditionalists and the new Europeanized constituency would escalate dangerously in the coming centuries. The 'revolutionary ideas' would seep into the Russian soul and vehemently change the place of Orthodox Christianity.

Twilight of imperial Russia and the dawn of Bolshevism

The next ordeal that Orthodoxy had to endure was the gradual weakening of the Tsardom. Inspired by the regicide in France, anti-monarchists had been in a state of insurrection. They envisioned a socialist Russia where rationality would substitute clerical obscurantism. For them, Russian destiny pointed to the egalitarian ideas that transcended religious and ethnic bonds.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² James Harvey Robinson, 404-06.

Sure, they were nationalists but their nationalism did not acknowledge the nine hundred years old ancestral ties. Modernization appeared to have engendered a dangerous radicalism. The youth was moving towards Nihilism. Fyodor Dostoyevsky's characters betrayed such hysteria.

In the words of Late Bishop Fulton Sheen:

As one of the characters said there are only two periods in history. One is our ascent from the gorilla to the death of God and the other is from the death of God to the making of a new earth through Communism... . In *Crime and Punishment*, one of the characters is Raskolnikov, the individual Communist. Raskolnikov does not believe in the distinction between right and wrong, good and bad. But he is interested in the masses. He is concerned about the poor. He wants to build up a social system. He is concerned with the proletariat. This new social system that loves the masses must be built up but in order to build it up says Raskolnikov you have to have money. So, he kills a poor old woman pawn broker to get money to establish his socialistic state. And he argues she was vermin anyway. You see the system. You kill one you ate a thousand of the masses that simple arithmetic. That's Communism. No concern whatever for the individual person. All that matters is the party state, the totalitarian structure... all that matters is the regime that professes to love the poor and tramples on them... . Then, in his work *The Possessed*, describes the state that has been set up by this philosophy. Verkhovensky says the Russian revolution will begin with an atheistic base.¹³

The collapse came in 1917. Exhausted by foreign and domestic engagements, the Imperial Army disintegrated and abandoned their Emperor. Three hundred years of Romanov sovereignty over Slavic lands was dead.¹⁴

¹³ Sensus Fidelium, "The Man who Knew Communism", Youtube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2StHmJUUuSQ0>, Date Published: 12 February 2015, Duration: 25:29.

¹⁴ James Harvey Robinson, 753.

Immediately, the revolutionary factions went for the jugular. They squeezed Russian Orthodoxy with all their might. The most powerful column of Russian identity crashed. The rest of the twentieth century was a great spiritual vacuum. Sickel and Hammer pushed the Byzantine double-eagle aside. Orthodox hymns lost in Communist pandemonium. Every metaphysical aspect of the previous dispensation was put to sword. Lenin, Trotsky, Stalin, Zinoviev, Kaganovich, etc. personified Dostoyevsky's fictional radicals.¹⁵

Here concludes the historical narrative. The following space shall address the inseverable link between Russian Orthodox Church and Russian Nationalism and the conspicuous, generation long renewal of Orthodox and Tsarist symbolism that has taken place under the Russian Federation.

Even though we divided the preceding timeline for our analytical convenience, it is evident that in its thousand-year history the Russian Orthodox Church has suffered one tumult after another. On most of the occasions it seemed the end was nigh. Whereas Western Christianity underwent the test of times but its existence was never in doubt. Rome never fell to either Arabs or Turks. On the contrary, Constantinople, the spiritual pride of Eastern Christianity, has ceased to be a Christian city. Hagia Sofia remains under Turkish sovereignty. Likewise, all other sacred sites of Orthodox Christianity such as Antioch, Alexandria, and Jerusalem are not Christian anymore. Furthermore, when the rest of Europe was experimenting with Enlightenment and classical art, Slavic lands were battling the Ottomans to keep Christianity alive in the Eastern half. Church and state never got separated in these realms. A state heavily tinged with religious symbolism fought a protracted battle for its spiritual survival.

When Martin Luther threw down the gauntlet to the Papal authority at Rome, he indirectly cleared the way for the monarchs to subsume the ecclesiastical domain within the secular power structure. To put it crudely, the nationalization of religion thus became possible. It paved the way for something called 'humanism'. This erosion of hierarchies and tradition never took place in Orthodox territories. Admittedly, the Tsars applied a squeeze so as to drive the message home. Nevertheless, on a nuclear level, the Orthodox tradition retained its rigor and signature.

¹⁵ Sensus Fidelium, "The Man who Knew Communism", Youtube.

Secondly, pagan imagery abounds Western Europe. Greco-Roman architecture keeps a pre-Christian Europe alive in Catholic as well as Protestant imagination. It should be remembered that Christianity succeeded Roman Empire. But what empire did Russian Orthodoxy succeed? Where are the majestic pre-Christian monuments? Or if they are there, are they powerful enough to match the spiritual gravity of Orthodox Christian symbolism?

A Spaniard or a Frenchman may feel elated at the sight of Roman aqueducts. A German or a Scandinavian may find solace in Nordic mythology. An Italian may find himself home in a Roman Colosseum. However, a Russian sundered from his Orthodox faith is a fish without water. There is no Russia without the Orthodox Church.¹⁶ It can be inferred that Slavic identity is nothing but Christian.

Consider Turkey and Turkish nationalism. The Turks penetrated Anatolia sometime around 11th or 12th century AD. Ottoman Caliphate nourished Turkish identity so much so that aggressive secularization of the Turkish state after the dissolution of the Caliphate under Mustafa Kemal Ataturk couldn't split Sunni Islam with Turkish identity. Like Russians, Anatolian Turks too do not have a pre-Islamic past to look up to. They may associate themselves with the Europeans but in that case, they might not be able to retain their unique Turkish self.

Against this background, the apparent zeal in modern Russia to restore the Orthodox Church to its elevated station, which it used to enjoy upon the Christianization of Kievan Rus', becomes comprehensible.

Re-Christianization under a second Vladimir

Vladimir Putin became Russian President at the end of the last millennium. Exactly one thousand years ago his namesake was baptizing his politically volatile territories.

Russian Orthodox Christianity has been quite visible under President Putin. He expresses his faith publicly because as Russian president religion is not entirely a personal matter. One may not catch French President Emmanuel Macron or German Chancellor Angela Merkel reverently bowing to the cross

¹⁶ "Monument to Vladimir the Great Opened in Moscow on Unity Day", November 4, 2016, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/copy/53211>.

in front of rolling cameras. But for a Russian head of the state, it is incumbent to not only appear with the ecclesiastical hierarchy but also take active part in the rituals. When a head of the state publicizes his religious devotion, it has to be stated his action carries a thousand messages.

Some of the religiously significant visits he has undertaken after becoming President are as follows:

- River Jordan (2007, 2012). Christians believe Jesus Christ was baptized in its stream.¹⁷
- Church of the Lord's Sepulcher, Jerusalem (2012), which contains the Stone of Anointing. According to Christian tradition, Christ's body was anointed on this slab before burial.¹⁸
- Mount Athos, Greece (2016). According to historical accounts, its association with the Russian Orthodox Church goes back to 1000 years.¹⁹

Simultaneously, the monarchist heritage has also received a facelift. Tsar Peter the Great, whose colours constitute the national banner, Alexander III, and Nicholas II have been rehabilitated with their due protocol.

The last Tsar, Nicholas II, was canonized in the year 2000. Savagely murdered by the revolutionary forces, the late Tsar and his family were granted sainthood by the Russian Orthodox Church.²⁰

The national coat of arms consists of the Byzantine double eagle and the venerated Saint George.²¹ It has been Russian insignia since the fall of Constantinople. It is of critical importance. It is an undercurrent that ardently considers Russian motherland **holy and spiritual**. It signifies Russian people as the inheritors, and if it may be added, the custodians of the purest and

¹⁷ "President Vladimir Putin Visited the Site where Jesus Christ was Baptised in the River Jordan", February 13, 2007, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/37188>.

¹⁸ "President Putin Venerates Shrines in Jerusalem and Bethlehem", June 26, 2012, available at: <https://mospat.ru/en/2012/06/26/news66649/>.

¹⁹ "Visit to Mount Athos", May 28, 2016, available at: <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/52029>.

²⁰ "Romanovs Move from Tsardom to Sainthood", August 16, 2000, available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/1353012/Romanovs-move-from-tsardom-to-sainthood.html>.

²¹ "National Coat of Arms", available at: <http://eng.flag.kremlin.ru/gerb/>.

truest form of Christianity unmolested by the heretical influences of the Latin West. Moscow is the new Constantinople. The first Rome fell into the hands of heretical papacy, the second to infidels but the third stands and every effort was to be made to prevent the occurrence of the fourth.

Conclusion

The article ventured to study the relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and contemporary Russian nationalism. It argued that the former nourishes the latter. Without this particular Church, Russia has no history. The resuscitation that has come about since the termination of Soviet Union should be analyzed within the larger historical context. Simply characterizing it as some sort of a wily political maneuver smacks of intellectual inertia. Certainly, political pragmatism forbids hostility towards the largest national church. However, to only operate within such analytical parameters may lead one to superficial inferences.

Every now and then we are challenged to categorize the Russian Federation as either Asian and European. Often, we end up labelling Russia as Eurasian. Nonetheless, in the opinion of this author if Orthodoxy defines Russia then its spirit lies outside Europe.

Although Russia's recent activity in the Middle East can be a geopolitical move, its contours are worth pondering. Moscow has positioned itself as the protector of Syrian Christians.²² Granted that this policy sits well with the domestic constituency, at the same time, it hints a closer union between the state and faith, and how this bond manifests itself in various forms.

The crisis in Russo-Ukrainian relations took a religious turn a few months back. The Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, archbishop of Constantinople, the 'first among equals' in the Eastern Orthodox clergy, decided to bestow Ukrainian Orthodox Church independence from the Russian Church, which invited condemnation from Moscow.²³

²² Claire Giangravè, "As U.S. Commitment to Persecuted Christians Wavers, Russia Steps In", December 5, 2017, available at: <https://cruxnow.com/global-church/2017/12/05/u-s-commitment-persecuted-christians-wavers-russia-steps/>.

²³ RFE/RL, "Ecumenical Patriarchate Agrees to Recognize Independence of Ukrainian Church", October 12, 2018, available at: <https://www.rferl.org/a/constantinople-patriarchate-agrees-to-recognize-independence-of-ukrainian-orthodox-church/29538590.html>.

On the face of it, Kiev has further distanced itself from Moscow by invoking theology. In contrast, for an ardent Orthodox Russian, the latest diversion is an assault on the spiritual unity of the two nations.

The waters of Dnieper baptized the first believers. Realpolitik or geopolitical considerations cannot diminish the metaphysical essence that flows from one generation to another. Christianity may have taken the backseat in Western Europe but it is, to this day, a matter of spiritual life and death once you move eastward from the Vistula.

In the immortal words of Fyodor Tyutchev,

Who would grasp Russia with the mind?
For her no yardstick was created;
Her soul is of special kind,
By faith only appreciated.²⁴

²⁴ Fyodor Tyutchev and John Dewey, *Fyodor Tyutchev Selected Poems* (Gillingham: Brimstone Press 2014), 113.