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‘Holy Russia’: The Cultural Influences of Orthodoxy on Russian Foreign Policy

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the often-overlooked topic of the profound philosophical influence which Russian Orthodoxy has historically had on Russian culture and, as a result, on Russia’s behaviour in foreign affairs. In particular, I highlight the three main trends which appear to continue between the early Tsarist and Soviet periods—namely, the idea of Russia’s ‘special mission’ in the world, messianism and millenarianism.

BIOGRAPHY

Daryl Morini is a third-year student currently completing his Bachelor of Arts, majoring in International Relations and Modern History. He plans to go on to study an Honours year on the topic of Europe-Russia diplomatic relations.
The history of Christian Russia is conventionally set to begin circa 988 C.E., when Prince Vladimir of Kiev converted to Orthodoxy. Since that time, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has occupied a central role in the creation of a coherent Russian national identity. In the field of foreign policy, it has long been observed that the ‘least developed angle of analysis…is the study of how societal culture affects foreign policy choice.’ Seldom explored, in the case of Russia, has been the influential role which Orthodoxy has played in the country’s relations with the outside world. We are here concerned with the philosophical impact of the Church’s teachings on Russian foreign policy, as opposed to the direct role of the institution itself, unless otherwise specified. This paper will discuss the three main characteristics which Russia’s foreign policy-making inherited from the Orthodox Christian tradition, namely the myth of Russia’s ‘special mission,’ messianism and millenarianism. In a broad historical sweep, we will highlight these phenomena in action from the early formation of Russian statehood, through to the imperial and, finally, Soviet period. We will finish by discussing the extent to which Orthodoxy impacts upon the foreign policies of the Russian Federation to this day.

**Third Rome and New Israel**

By the late Sixteenth Century, Russia was finally freeing herself from the Tatar Yoke. As an already 600-year old Russian institution, the ROC served as a rallying point in this era of chaotic nation-building. In popular culture, Orthodoxy also helped to distinguish the Slavic East from the European West. Due to its historical role as a struggling Christian bulwark against the Tatars, Russia ‘became the self-conscious champion of orthodoxy.’ As a result, the Kremlin’s position in foreign affairs was profoundly influenced by the religious peculiarities of the Church. To begin, the narrative of Russians’ spiritual uniqueness in the world was the most obvious outgrowth of ROC teachings. Russia, it was deemed, had a unique place in world history as the ‘Third and Last Rome’; the guardian of the one ‘true faith’ (pravoslavno); the land of God’s Chosen People. One offshoot of the ROC even considered Russia to be ‘the New Israel’ and, as such, the new Kingdom of God.

At this stage, it should be noted that the belief of one’s people being ‘a vessel chosen by a deity for a special religious task or mission’ seems to be a universal feature of nationalism. Russia is certainly not alone in the religious undertones which its foreign policy attained. As an historical phenomenon, nationalism worldwide has always had ‘a strong affinity with religious imaginings.’ The classic counter-example to Russian messianism has not been lost on historians—that is America’s penchant towards a sense of exceptionalism and evangelical “Manifest Destiny” in the world. However, Orthodoxy was particularly influential to the development of Russia’s national identity and, as a result, of Russian patterns in world affairs. By the Nineteenth Century, no other European nationalism ‘approached the messianic fervour, the Sendungsbewusstsein, the expectation of a decisive apocalyptic struggle against the alien world,’ that such Russian authors as Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Nikolai Danilevsky propounded. All of these ideological convictions, which shaped Russian behaviour in the international realm for centuries, in fact descended from the spiritual and philosophical guidance of the Russian Orthodox Church.

**Russian Messianism: ‘Today You Will Be With Me in Paradise’**

The Orthodox idea of Russia’s special role in the world eventually impacted directly upon Tsarist foreign policies. Gradually, the state adopted a messianic identity—a kind of outward-looking, evangelising role which the Russian government undertook, in the name of Orthodoxy and civilisation. What has been termed ‘organic colonialism’ towards the Siberian Far East was thus the Russian empire’s version of a God-sanctioned mission civilisatrice. Indeed, the Orthodox faith acted as a national glue between the multi-ethnic periphery and the imperial centre (Moscow). Eventually, this intoxicating worldview came to be shared widely by Russia’s rulers. Tsarist officials insisted that their colonial subjects in Central Asia, and elsewhere, regarded the Russian presence there as ‘akin to paradise.’ Similarly, Alexander II believed in Holy Russia’s ‘sacred mission’ to liberate fellow Orthodox Christians in the Balkans. Hence, the messianic role which Russian Orthodoxy
imbued in the country’s populace, and then leaders, often had far-reaching consequences in Russia’s relations with the outside world.

The official Russian explanation for participating in the Great Northern War was initially to defend Orthodoxy from Swedish persecution. After defeating Sweden, though, the territorial gains bestowed upon Russia with the Treaty of Nystad (1721) strongly suggest that geopolitical interests had been the primary purpose of the war.

One author argues that the myth of Orthodox fraternity has historically served (and continues to serve) as a cynical Realpolitik tactic for Russian leaders who fear Western meddling in their backyard. On one level this is true. Upon the outbreak of the Crimean War in 1853, for example, a foreign eyewitness described how Russian villagers were motivated to go to war. They ‘have been led to believe that their religion is in danger, and that the Turks are massacring the [Orthodox] Greeks in all directions.’ Thus Orthodoxy was so deeply imbedded in Russian culture, that, in this case, only propaganda playing on an existential threat to their religious brothers and sisters could awaken Russian war fervour. Rather than being simply understood as a manipulative ploy, this is, instead, a testament to how passionately Russians felt about their Orthodox faith that they should volunteer to die defending it. Indeed, Orthodoxy became so important in the make-up of Russia’s national identity, that peasants would often ask a stranger if they were Orthodox, which was synonymous for ‘Are you Russian?’

This worldview of messianism, reflected in Russian imperial and, later, Soviet foreign policy, could be referred to as the “outward-looking” face of Orthodoxy in Russia’s foreign affairs. These doctrines helped to shape Russia’s image—and nothing more than an image it was—as a messianic and philanthropic force of Christian progress in the world. Until 1917, this Christian messianism at least heralded a sense of normality in Russia’s diplomatic relations within the Europe-centric international system, dominated by other colonial and messianic powers. In stark contrast to the aforementioned tradition, however, the “inward-looking” face of Orthodoxy also found its way into Russia’s conduct of foreign affairs. This consisted, chiefly, of millenarianism—a belief in the imminent end of the world, which would usher in a thousand-year period of bliss on earth (the Millennium). It is this second under-current of Orthodox belief which differentiated Russia from Western states and, ultimately, cast the former as a pariah in world politics for most of the Twentieth Century.

MILLENNARIANISM: THE END IS NIGH

Since the founding of the modern Russian state, the ‘prevalent belief that Russia was the centre of the only true faith, tended to intensify suspicion of foreigners and their institutions.’ It was feared, especially by the so-called ‘Slavophiles,’ that Russia’s religious purity would be contaminated by ‘the spiritual sickness of the West.’ Due to its Russo-centric focus, the Orthodox Church became a political ally and, soon enough, the thinly veiled agent of the Muscovite state. This was demonstrated in the late Tsarist period, for example, when priests habitually denounced the political misbehaviour of their flock to the authorities. As a result of these trends, the Russian Church became ‘confined to its national boundaries, which, in turn, led to reinforcement of its state and political attributes.’ This impacted Russian culture by inextricably entwining the political with the religious elements of social life.

Russia’s international behaviour has been influenced by the kind of withdrawn and, in the extreme, xenophobic worldview which some teachings of the Russian Orthodox Church emphasised. In particular, the mystical Orthodox value of sobornost’ variously translated as ‘churchliness’ or ‘togetherness,’ implied a special communitarian function for the Church in Russian society. The principle of sobornost’ subordinates the individual to the collective, rejecting the Western concept of rational inquiry, and putting ultimate authority in the hands of the Church. Millenarianism, or a belief in the imminence of the Day of Judgement, is firmly rooted in this tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church—particularly the ‘Old Believer’ group. Their profound spiritual reclusiveness can best be understood through famous poetic lines by Fedor Tiutchev, in which he instructs: ‘Be silent, conceal yourself, and hide both your feelings and your dreams…Only learn to live within yourself.’ Just as the apocalyptic visions of the Old Believers simmered in their lonesome contemplation, the Russian Orthodox tendency to look inwards for answers to the soul’s mysteries sometimes culminated in a black-and-white view of the outside world.

FROM THE PRIESTHOOD TO THE PARTY

Of all events in modern Russian history, the Civil War of the 1920s most resembled the end of the world for ordinary people. In these times when survival mattered above all, the general Russian worldview was simplified to one of good versus evil. As Geoffrey Hosking observed:
People thought in cruder ways. When reverses happened, they did not seek a sophisticated explanation, but took the one which…their political superiors usually encouraged: namely that misfortunes were caused by “enemies” who should be resisted at all costs and if possible destroyed, while good fortune was due to “comrades” who should be supported wholeheartedly. Such interpretations…shaped the Russian mentality for much of the twentieth century.xxxi

The Russian cultural pattern of withdrawal into oneself, as we have seen, was influenced by Orthodoxy and reinforced in the popular mind by the sufferings of the Russian people throughout history. A paranoid defensiveness from the outside world was the result for the Kremlin’s foreign policy, which reached its zenith in the early Soviet period. It could indeed be argued that the conditions for militant Marxism to succeed in Russia, as opposed to anywhere else in Europe, were contingent on the pre-existing messianic and millenarian traditions of the Russian Orthodox Church.

The millenarian and, specifically, Orthodox overtones of Marxist-Leninist doctrines are an historical irony that escaped many of its atheistic followers. There was the prevalent belief in an inevitable world-wide revolution, for example, which would pit the forces of good (the proletariat) against the evil scourge of the earth (the capitalists) in a final, apocalyptic battle. Furthermore, the Bolsheviks combined the messianic and millenarian aspects of Russian Orthodoxy to shape a foreign policy at once dangerously confrontational—aimed at exporting revolution to destroy the very fabric of the international system—young insecure and profoundly fearful of ‘capitalist encirclement’.xxxii In the case of Josef Stalin, it could be objected that he himself was a chauvinistic xenophobe and, as such, that his foreign policy was less a reflection of Russian Orthodox influences than of his personal insecurity.xxxiii However Stalin, who had attended a religious seminary in his youth, was without a doubt ‘a child of the Russian Revolution with its apocalyptic belief in the catastrophic destruction of the old world in purifying flames and the emergence of a new millennium.’xxxiv Stalin was, in other words, the combined product of his main politico-religious influences—namely Marxist-Leninism as well as Russian Orthodoxy.

CONCLUSION: RETURNING TO, OR ABANDONING GOD?

In the wake of the Soviet Union’s collapse, it seemed self-evident that the new Russian state would be of a post-ideological and, by extension, post-messianic character. An ideational crisis consumed Russian society, resulting from the dramatic exit of Soviet ‘secular messianism’ from the domestic and world stages.xxxv

However, this vacuum was partly filled by a popular revival of the Russian Orthodox Church. As of 2007, as many as 72 percent of Russian citizens identified themselves as Russian Orthodox, and a huge majority (92 percent) claimed to believe in God.xxxvi Public debate about the direction of Russia in foreign affairs similarly revolved around the idea that the country ‘is endowed with a special world mission, which is spiritual par excellence.’xxxvii In the words of a contemporary Orthodox Metropolitan, Russia was historically and is (allegedly) still ‘the pedestal of the Lord’s throne.’xxxviii This demonstrates that the philosophical influence of Orthodoxy, which had become indelibly etched on successive Russian generations, had not disappeared after one lifetime of Communist atheism and religious persecution. Metaphorically-speaking, God was not dead. This simple observation has important repercussions for the foreign policy of the Russian Federation today.

In 2002, Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov claimed that ‘Russia has consciously given up the global Messianic ideology that had been intrinsic to the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR)…’xxxix Despite such efforts to stress that Russia was now a “normal” and pragmatic state in its international affairs, some echoes of the past have continued to resonate in Russian foreign policy. In rhetoric, at least, there is something distinctly messianic about the worldview of former-President Vladimir Putin. His much-touted concept of Russian derzhavnost’ (greatness) in world affairs is a case in point. ‘Russia was and will remain a great power,’ Putin wrote in his aptly-named Millenium Manifesto.xxxix Furthermore, the influential school of thought of ‘Eurasianism’ advocates a doctrinally-pure version of Orthodoxy and nationalism at home, accompanied by a renewed messianic and anti-Western stance in foreign affairs.xxxxi

In conclusion, the influence of Orthodoxy on Russia’s external relations in the Twenty-First Century is largely symbolic. The extremes of Russian messianism and millenarianism witnessed by the outside world, from the days of imperial to Soviet foreign policy, are well and truly over. The Russian Federation’s foreign policy is likely to remain messianic in rhetoric, at times, but not in essence.41 In the government’s pursuit of its perceived national interests, as many analysts concur, “Russia sees little utility in messianic efforts.”42 In sum, the Russian Orthodox Church certainly remains an important source of national unity and spiritual guidance in Russian society, but it no longer excises a strong, philosophical influence in Moscow’s inter-state relations.
REFERENCES


ii As Dmitrii Sidorov noted, there is a conspicuous absence of literature on what he calls ‘Orthodoxy-related geopolitics’. Sidorov, 318.


10 This phrase is taken from the New Testament, Luke 23:42-43. This is the second verse attributed to Jesus Christ, as he suffered on the Cross to redeem mankind of their sins. Jesus promised salvation to a criminal who saw the light of Christianity.

xi This term was coined by Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Ross Terrill, The New Chinese Empire (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2003), 230.

xii Ibid.


xvi Ibid., 499.


xxi Hosking, 18.

xxii Thus, ‘the Russian Orthodox Church was little more than a department of state during the Empire’s last two centuries.’ Hingley, 130.

xxiii Likhachev, 42-43.

xxiv The xenophobic tendency of some circles in the Russian Orthodox Church is exemplified by such characters as Metropolitan Ioann who, in the tumultuous 1990s, preached of ‘Russia as a nation constantly under threats from cunning and malicious foreigners.’ He particularly targeted Jews. Hosking, 398.


xxvii Hosking, 40.

xxviii Ibid., 42.

xxix Typical of Josef Stalin’s ideological interpretation, though, was his belief that whilst awaiting for a socialist Utopia to materialise, ‘the land of the victorious revolution should not weaken, but in every way strengthen the
state, state organs, intelligence organs and army, if that land does not want to be crushed by the capitalist encirclement.’ J. V. Stalin. Marxism and Problems of Linguistics (Peking: Foreign Language Press, 1972), 48.

Vladislav Zubok and Constantine Pleshakov, Inside the Kremlin’s Cold War: From Stalin to Khrushchev (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996), 22

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Ibid., 140.

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A recent visit by Moscow’s Orthodox Patriarch Kirill, to Ukraine, caused diplomatic tensions between both countries. As Steven Eke suggested, the ROC “plays a role in the Kremlin’s policies aimed at strengthening the Russian state and its influence abroad.” However, this can best be understood as a tactic of the Russian state in foreign affairs, rather than as a quasi-religious, messianic foreign policy.


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