# PUTIN AND THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH: ASYMMETRIC SYMPHONIA?

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Following his inauguration as Russian president in May 2000, Vladimir Putin walked the short distance across the Kremlin grounds to the Cathedral of the Annunciation for a thanksgiving service. At this brief service, Patriarch Aleksii II praised the new president for his "thoughtful and responsible style of leadership" and suggested that like never before Russia needed "the restoration of the spiritual powers of the nation and a rebirth of its commitment to genuine moral values...Vladimir Vladimirovich, help us to disclose the soul of the nation."[1] If the leader of the Russian Orthodox Church was using this opportunity to present church and state in perfect harmony, one might also note that the president too was making a point in keeping separate the civil and religious celebrations of his electoral success.

In the immediate aftermath of Putin's appearance as heir apparent, there had been considerable speculation as to what this might mean for church-state relations. This resulted from the fact that he did little to hide his personal commitment to Orthodoxy and that his participation in religious services clearly went beyond the lip service paid by the first generation of post- and ex-communist politicians. Liberal critics feared the advent of a more religious based politics in which pre-Soviet church-state links were restored and the church hierarchy largely appointed during the Soviet era returned to a familiar role of subservience to the state. Though sometimes associated with the Byzantine era, it was Peter the Great who effectively turned the Orthodox Church into a department of state, abolishing the Patriarchate and placing a state appointed bureaucrat at the head of the church. In consequence the Orthodox Church came to be seen as a pillar of the state and, though it enjoyed a very limited political role, its bishops were important dignitaries who could use their position to pursue church ends, such as supporting tight restrictions on religious minorities until 1905. Yet this close association with the state, which included the obligation to report on any political matters heard in the confessional, along with the scandals associated with Rasputin, was to have bitter consequences for the

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Orthodox after 1917 despite the emergence of a significant reform movement within the church at the turn of the century.[2] If liberals were perhaps pessimistic about a revival of a state church, conservatives had more reasons to be optimistic that Putin's stated commitment to order and patriotism might lead to a renewed focus on Orthodox values in public life. Yet, as this article suggests, Putin's period in office has not been characterized by a serious state-led attempt to restore the political authority of the Russian Orthodox Church and religious matters are clearly very much secondary affairs for the Kremlin, except where they impinge on security or social harmony. Church leaders are treated with respect, clerics are present at public occasions and, where it does not conflict with other priorities, Putin is likely to favor the Orthodox Church's agenda. We illustrate this through discussion of four areas where there are what might be called shared orientations or affinities between the interests of church and state: the issue of liberalization and Westernization, the notion of "managed pluralism," security and religious education. In all of these areas, the policies of Putin largely suit the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church, though in some there are differences of emphasis. But this is very much a matter of church preferences reinforcing, not determining, the policies of the president and even where there are differences, the church's preference for a close relationship with state power has meant that major church-state clashes have been avoided.

## The Man and the Inheritance

Very much a child of the Soviet Union, Putin inherited a religion-politics relationship that had undergone significant changes during his lifetime. When the president was a boy, Khrushchev waged a militant campaign against religion; as he came to maturity, Brezhnev further developed a policy of low-level harassment combined with close state control of the few religious institutions permitted to exist. Towards the end of the Gorbachev years, the state effectively dropped its anti-religious commitment; in October 1990, the Russian Federation adopted a new law on freedom of conscience, removing the administrative and repressive restrictions of the past. This inaugurated the first phase of post-communist policy, which can be characterized as one of free-market romanticism, when existing religious communities enjoyed a certain institutional revitalization and newer domestic- and foreign-based groups were able to operate freely. Inevitably, this provoked a reaction, as nationalist politicians and leaders of the dominant Orthodox Church expressed concerns about the "invasion of the sects" and claims were made that Russia was not ready for an unregulated religious market where the ideologically disoriented population might fall prey to dubious religious groups.[3] In consequence the Orthodox Church started to campaign for a more restrictive law that would privilege traditional religious communities and make it harder for others to function in the new Russia. The

details have been explored elsewhere but the outcome of this policy debate was that, in 1997, a new law on religion put in place some of the restrictions promoted by the Orthodox leadership and various political groups.[4]

The 1997 law ushered in the second phase of post-communist religious policy, characterized by some as "managed pluralism."[5] Under the new legal regime, "traditional" religious communities (Orthodox, Muslim, Buddhist and Jewish) enjoyed a range of rights that were not available to minority groups, which remained free to worship but lacked some of the legal privileges offered to the former groups. Whilst the fears that this might usher in a new era of Soviet-style repression of religious communities have not materialized, it has enabled local authorities hostile to particular communities to use the law to impose restrictions on religious activity. Particularly affected have been groups such as Roman Catholics, Pentecostals, independent evangelicals, Jehovah's Witnesses, some Adventists, members of various "new religious movements," and most notoriously, the Moscow branch of the Salvation Army, which faced the rather surreal charge of being a paramilitary organization. By the time that Putin came to power, the long-term effects of the law remained unclear, but the picture that emerged from around the country was of considerable variation in the implementation of the law, depending on the attitudes of individual leaders and administrations.

**The policies of Putin largely suit the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church.**

During the Yeltsin era, religion was not a major concern of the administration, though this did not stop the church seeking to influence the president, as in the passage of the 1997 law, or prevent critics from charging that religion enjoyed undue influence in a country whose constitution mandated separation of church and state. Certainly the Russian Orthodox Church enjoyed a public preeminence, evident in its representation at major state functions, the granting of certain economic concessions to the church, the tendency of Yeltsin to visit Patriarch Aleksii II on the eve of major foreign visits, and in the church's endorsement of Yeltsin during the 1996 presidential election. There was also a tendency on the part of many politicians to overestimate the political influence of Orthodoxy and thus make undue efforts to associate with church leaders or participate in religious rituals.[6] Yet, as Irina Papkova has pointed out, a study of party and election programs from the mid-1990s onwards demonstrates a certain overestimation of the significance of the religious constituency, but equally, a fairly utilitarian approach to winning religious votes—a seat in the state Duma might well be worth a mass, even for previously atheistic communists.[7]

With Putin we have a very different politician, one who seemed to have some sort of personal, if theologically vague, commitment to Orthodoxy and one who obviously knew how to behave in a church. As a child, Putin was taken to

Leningrad's Preobrazhensky Cathedral for baptism by his mother, though it may be that his communist father was not aware of this. While it is said that he never takes off his baptismal cross—something confirmed by pictures of the vacationing president in the summer of 2007—and he has made regular visits to church services and pilgrimage sites during his period in office, the precise nature of his religious faith is less certain. In January 2000, he offered Christmas greetings to Orthodox believers, stressing that "Orthodoxy had played a special role in Russian history...and largely determined the character of Russian civilization," and he went on to argue that its ideals "will make it possible to strengthen mutual understanding and consensus in our society, and contribute to the spiritual and moral rebirth of the Fatherland."[8] Church leaders increasingly spoke of him as a believing president, and in the early years of his rule it was suggested that he was particularly close to Archimandrite Tikhon, the head of Moscow's Presentation monastery, a vibrant religious community rebuilt since 1991 and often seen as the headquarters of the conservative nationalist wing of the church.[9] Whilst claims that Putin enjoyed connections to Tikhon appear to be exaggerated by those around this cleric who had been a staunch critic of Yeltsin, the point of making these claims was perhaps to suggest that Putin identified with a particular section of the church community.[10] Yet, for all his sympathies with the Orthodoxy, there is little evidence that Putin's thinking is fundamentally influenced by a theological perspective. Putin is essentially a pragmatic politician and probably aware that there is not a distinctive religious community that can be mobilized for political ends. Though he very occasionally makes references to religious matters and there exists a Presidential Council on Relations with Religious Associations, religious affairs, according to one Kremlin insider, "rarely cross the president's desk."[11]

## President and Patriarch in Perfect Harmony?

Having emphasized the marginality of religion for the Putin administration, this should not be read as suggesting that issues over religion and politics have not flared up during this period, engendering both public debate and some degree of presidential engagement. Religious matters tend to reach the public agenda when they impact national security or social harmony, or on issues in which the instincts of the church leadership find themselves in tune with those of the president. This is not entirely surprising insofar as both sides are very much products of the Soviet era, with the church still largely dominated by individual hierarchs whose biographies are very familiar to the successors of the KGB and who were appointed under communist party guidance. Here we isolate four areas where there has been some affinity of interest and ideology, though also occasional differences of emphasis. The first area, which in a sense underlies the other three, stems from a shared discomfort about liberalization and the uncritical acceptance of Western influences on Russian life.

This, in turn, shapes views about the limits of pluralism, religion as a potential security threat, and the need to combat perceived threats to state and church with public education that embraces religious values.

## Liberalization, Westernization and Globalization

As Lilia Shevtsova pointed out, Vladimir Putin came to power with a rather vague political image, a "tabula rasa on which everyone could write what he or she wanted." One assumption made by many, however, was that he would be less enamored of the West than his predecessor.[12] His rhetoric in succeeding years, with its focus on restoring Russian greatness, on order and social discipline, and his greater intolerance of criticism, all seemed to presage at least some degree of authoritarian development. He also spoke often of the need for Russia to follow its own path of development and not slavishly follow what others had done. For Putin, democracy is a good thing so long as it does not obstruct the efficient functioning of the state. As Herspring has suggested, his natural instinct is that simply "transplanting Western institutions and ideas would create chaos in Russia."[13] Having said that, this is not a mindless or ideological opposition to Western influences, but a pragmatic approach rooted in a deep sense of Russia's need to have a strong state and its right to be a great power. As such, it does not require a rejection of market reform, much of which has been strengthened by legislation such as tax reform and the loosening of restrictions on foreign investment approved under his administration. In addition, it does not exclude attempts to engage with international bodies such as the World Trade Organization though it does require that Russia is taken seriously.[14]

Though it is difficult to speak of the Russian Orthodox Church as a monolithic body with a single viewpoint, its ideological center of gravity is much more inclined to a nationalistic and anti-Western perspective that has been shaped by Soviet-era thinking, 19th century anti-Western thought, and the much older East–West split in Christianity. This has led to a tendency to see the West not just as a source of heresy, but as the source of the moral corruption that has allegedly followed from the collapse of communism. At the end of 2000, Patriarch Aleksii II blamed the West for the moral degradation of young people, with its powerful "corruption industry" bringing pornography, sexual liberation and social decay. He described this as a "planned, bloodless war" being carried out with the aim of destroying the Russian people.[15] The heart of the problem was "liberalism" with its focus on individual autonomy as an overriding value. In a much quoted article, Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad, generally recognized as the second most senior cleric in the Russian Orthodox Church, argued that:[16]

> Today there exists no wall that is able to secure the spiritual health of nations and their religious and historical autonomy against the expansion

> of alien and destructive socio-cultural forces or from a new manner of life that has arisen outside of all traditions and which has been created under the influence of post-industrial reality. At the foundation of this manner of life lie liberal ideas, which have united within themselves pagan anthropocentrism, which entered European culture at the time of the Renaissance, Protestant theology and Jewish theological thought. These ideas came to a head in the Enlightenment in a certain complex of liberal principles. The French Revolution was the culminating act of this spiritual and philosophical revolution, at the base of which lay the rejection of the normative significance of tradition. It was absolutely no accident that this revolution began with the Reformation, for it was the Reformation that rejected the normative significance of tradition in the sphere of Christian doctrine. Within Protestantism, tradition ceased to be the criterion of truth: personal interpretation in the study of Holy Scripture and personal religious experience became the criteria of truth...The liberal idea does not call for a liberation from sin because the very concept of sin is absent in liberalism. Sinful manifestations by a person are permitted if they do not violate the law and do not infringe upon the freedom of another person...Thus from the liberal idea flows the generally accepted concepts of civil liberties, democratic institutions, market economy, free competition, freedom of speech, and freedom of conscience, all of which constitute the understanding of "contemporary civilization."[17]

The basic argument that Russian problems with the West were rooted in the liberal idea of unlimited freedom and individual autonomy, without any reference to the good of the community or moral restraint, was repeated in numerous speeches and interviews by church leaders throughout this period.[18]

This conception, often rooted in a very limited understanding of the realities of Western society, underlay the much stronger anti-Westernism promoted by many within the church leadership and provided the foundations for their skepticism about closer ties with the West and their wariness of democratic politics. This could be seen in Metropolitan Kirill's concern that if millions of Orthodox were to join the European Union they could not simply be expected to accept the prevailing liberal consensus with its alien values, a consensus they had played no role in creating.[19] It could also be seen in the more extreme conspiracy theories floating around in parts of the church, which saw Orthodoxy as the last obstacle to the creation of a new liberal world order.[20] Above all, it was evident in the skepticism about democracy, which church leaders shared with the president.

For Father Vsevolod Chaplin, deputy chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's department for external affairs, democracy could be accepted but it was not ideal

because it was rooted in competition rather than the church's view of society as "a unified body that sees disagreements as unnatural and unhealthy."[21] This skepticism also underlay the major statement of the Orthodox social position set forth in the *Social Concept* published in 2000—probably the first Orthodox attempt to develop an official position on social issues. Here it was suggested that in an ideal world the church would prefer an Old Testament judgeship or a monarchy that recognized the state's religious mission.[22] Given this, it was hardly surprising that a 2001 survey found 37 percent of bishops supporting the suggestion that "democracy is not for Russia."[23] In a similar vein, Metropolitan Kirill argued that Russia should not be an "eternal student of the West" when it comes to politics, and that "Russian democracy is not a model of division, competition and clash of opinions. This model is one of unity and agreement, even whilst taking into account different opinions and interests." For Kirill, Russian democracy had to develop in accord with national traditions, though critics suggested it was not always clear what this meant in practice.[24] In 2006, however, an effort was made to respond to this criticism by defining a distinctly Orthodox concept of human rights. This definition stressed the prior right of "internal freedom from evil" and the need to ensure that individual rights did not "trample upon religious or moral traditions, insult religious or national feelings"—a qualification slightly reminiscent of the Soviet traditions that rights had to be exercised in accord with socialist values. It also spoke of the church as collaborating with the state in "preserving the rights of nations and ethnic groups to their individual religion."[25]

This focus on nation and community tied in very closely to the rhetoric of the Putin administration, as did the skepticism about liberalism and democracy as ends in and of themselves. Though less wary of globalization than the church leadership, the presidential administration shared the concern that this should not mean being dictated to by the West, nor should it represent an encroachment on the territorial integrity and sovereignty (political or religious) of Russia and other nations. Speaking in 2005, Putin stated his commitment to democracy as one that had to take into account Russia's "historical, geographical and other characteristics."[26] Further, there was an affinity between the president's attitudes towards nongovernmental organizations and the church's view of its critics. This could be seen in the president's attack on NGOs "led by puppeteers from abroad."[27] It was also reflected in Father Chaplin's rather intemperate Soviet-sounding remarks about "well paid professional warriors for religious freedom...who just do not like Russia and try on every occasion to provide political fodder for those organizations that finance them."[28] Whilst the church often sounded negative, there were also signs of an attempt to respond more positively, evident in the construction of a distinctive view of human rights and also in Metropolitan Kirill's 2007 proposal for an interreligious assembly at the United Nations, which could "evaluate world processes through the prism of traditional morality."[29]

## Managed Pluralism

Numerous commentators assessing Putin's attitude towards democracy have latched onto the concepts of "managed democracy" and "managed pluralism." For the Russian president, it seems that the political form is less important than the consequences—if democracy strengthens the state and enhances social harmony then Putin is for it, but if it challenges those fundamental objectives then other political forms may be preferable. Central to this notion is his nostalgia for some of the order of the Soviet period and, conversely, dislike of the chaos of the 1990s. There is also the perception that Russia has to find its own developmental path and, perhaps, a suspicion of public criticism, which President Putin tends to see as a sign of disloyalty. There is also a tendency, evident in some of the discussion of the 2006 law on NGOs, to impugn the motives of those who criticize the state or defend an unrestricted understanding of human rights. There is also a tendency to suggest that they are unpatriotic and that their primary motivation is the pursuit of external funding. As we saw above, this latter, rather Soviet approach to criticism is shared by many within the Orthodox hierarchy, who are not arguing for a return to Soviet-era religious policies but who seemingly share a commitment to "managed pluralism" in the religious sphere.

The Orthodox attitude towards pluralism appears to be rooted in two notions, one sociological, the other theological. For Russian church leaders, offering a legal and status preeminence to the Orthodox is a natural consequence of the fact that they represent a sociological majority in the country. In March 2001, Metropolitan Kirill could speak of allowing complete freedom of choice as a divisive approach in a country where 80 percent of the population was "culturally Orthodox." His claim appeared to be supported by a poll later that year which showed that 73 percent of Russians identified themselves as Orthodox.[30] Yet, what this claim to be Orthodox meant was less clear. For many commentators, the clue lay in Kirill's reference to "culturally Orthodox." The more liberally inclined theologian, Hegumen Innokenty Pavlov, could argue the need for a more realistic approach on the part of the church, noting that while many claimed to believe, surveys repeatedly suggested that only around 5 percent of the population participated in Orthodox religious activity with any degree of regularity. A 2002 Pew Research Centre survey reported that only 14 percent of Russians said that religion played an important role in their life.[31] In similar vein, surveys of participation in the key Easter and Christmas liturgies during 2005–2007 indicated that even these events were attended by no more than 5 percent of the population in the capital city.[32]

The other concept underlying the Orthodox position has been the notion of "canonical territory," which was developed in the 1990s but came to the fore again following the Roman Catholic Church's decision to create four dioceses for Russia at

the beginning of 2002. This idea is rooted in an established church tradition of "one city—one bishop—one church," which, in the Russian context, has been interpreted to mean that Russians as Orthodox should not be proselytized by other Christian groups. This argument was first adduced in response to missionary activity in the 1990s, which the Orthodox saw as almost imperialist in nature, and as failing to recognize that Russia had its own spiritual traditions. From this viewpoint, there was no problem with Lutherans working among Germans, or Catholics amongst Poles, within Russia, but they should keep their hands off ethnic Russians who belonged to Orthodoxy. Thus, the creation of Catholic dioceses was taken as indicative of a desire to set up permanent structures for Russia. This sparked a major controversy in 2002–2003 that drew in church, public and government figures.[33] As the row gathered pace, government officials appeared to back the church by denying entry to foreign priests and bishops, and the controversy effectively ended the ailing Pope John Paul II's desire to visit Russia. At the same time, there appears to have emerged a difference with Putin, who seemed keen to invite the Pope, which led to a period of strained relations with the Patriarchate. Though publicly the president spoke of the need for Orthodox and Catholic leaders to sort out their differences first, this did not stop him meeting with the Pope during a visit to Italy in late 2003, and then with Benedict XVI in March 2007.

These attitudes ensured that Orthodox leaders remained ambiguous about the virtues of religious pluralism and found themselves in sympathy with Putin's vision of "managed pluralism." This is not the place to explore in detail what this meant in practice, but a number of things stand out. Firstly, there was the willingness of the church to make explicit its attitude in the *Social Concept* adopted in 2000, which spoke of freedom of conscience as a sign that "society has lost its religious goals and values and become massively apostate." Yet, it also recognized that the practice permitted the church to function in a largely secular society.[34] One of the consequences of this has been that, though the central government under Putin has generally inclined to more liberal understandings of the 1997 law, when disputes arose the Orthodox Church has often been found on the side of those advocating restrictions of religious freedom. In many specific cases, Orthodox leaders welcomed, and sometimes campaigned actively, for the banning of the religious activities of minority groups, as in the case of Moscow's banning of the Jehovah's Witnesses, despite their recognition at the central level.[35] The Orthodox Church continued to devote considerable efforts to "anti-sectarian" activity, which focused on new religious movements. Yet, during the Putin years, the church has also devoted considerable attention to neo-Pentecostals whose exuberant style of worship has attracted particular hostility.[36] All of this points to a degree of affinity between the approaches of the Kremlin and the Orthodox hierarchy. Though Putin's attempts to bring a degree of standardization

into the implementation of law may have helped many religious groups, Orthodox bishops and activists often appear to be on the side of local officials fighting to maintain their own way of doing things, a system which allows local church leaders greater influence on decisions relating to the activities of religious minorities.

## Religion and Security

Many commentators have noticed how Putin's background shapes his political style and, in many cases, contributes to a securitization of political issues. At one level this is a natural response to the ongoing threats emerging from conflicts in Chechnya and the North Caucasus. It also stems, however, from Putin's own background in the KGB, his heavy reliance on the *silovki* (representatives of the military and security agencies appointed to key political positions) and a Soviet style tendency to see the world in terms of friends and foes. Though often pragmatic in his approach to politics, under pressure this attitude often comes to the fore, as in response to criticism of human rights abuses in Chechnya or in his attitude towards NGOs which, especially after the revolution in Georgia and Ukraine, tended to be depicted by the Kremlin as servants of Russia's enemies.

In the religious sphere, this securitization was evident early on in a new *National Security Concept* published in January 2000, which, unusually for a security-oriented official document, spoke of the need for "the spiritual restoration of Russia." In particular it warned of the need to combat "religious extremism," "religious conflict and terrorism," and of "counteracting the negative influences of foreign religious organizations and missionaries."[37] This sort of rhetoric had become increasingly familiar during the late 1990s, with critics charging that foreign missionary work often served as a cover for the activities of foreign intelligence services who sought information about Russian policies and strategic activities. In 2001, Nikolai Trofimchuk, head of the religious studies faculty at the Russian Academy of State Service published a book entitled *Expansiya* (Expansion), which suggested that whatever the personal intentions of missionaries, most served the interests of the countries from which they came. For that reason, he suggested that "spiritual security" should be given a high priority in the years ahead.[38] In similar vein, K. Prokoposhin argued, "it is no secret that various cults are one of the instruments of USA's defense of its geopolitical interests. In the 1980s, the most active cults were selected in the USA that could become weapons for the destruction of the USSR."[39] It was also in this context that there appeared a new law on extremism during 2002, which included religious extremism amongst its targets. In particular, the law focused on those who might use religion to foment ethnic conflict or social disharmony, or by preaching exclusivity, and the superiority or inferiority of citizens on religious basis.[40]

This tendency to see religious difference as, at least in part, a potential security threat is shared by the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church, its position being shaped both by a particular view of national belonging and a pragmatic desire to constrain the activities of religious competitors. Whilst Section II of the 2000 *Social Concept* text rejects "aggressive nationalism, xenophobia, national exclusiveness," Kathy Rousselet notes that the talk of "universal values," characteristic of the Gorbachev and Yeltsin years, has disappeared.[41] Instead, an appeal is made to "Christian patriotism," manifested when the believer "defends his fatherland against an enemy," and in the need to "preserve and develop national cultures and peoples' self-awareness."[42] In this sense religion is linked to nationalism: With Orthodoxy as the national religion, competitors (especially Catholics and "sects") can be depicted as threats to the religion of the nation, and thus to the nation itself.

Islam, as a security threat, is more problematic for church and state alike. The former accepts Islam as one of Russia's traditional religions; the president frequently stresses that he has no problems with Islam as a religious tradition so long as it promotes peace.[43] Yet, there is an ambiguity for both sides that comes from the perception of the role of Islam in inflaming the security situation in the North Caucasus, Chechnya and Central Asia. Despite routine calls for a peaceful solution to the Chechen conflict, the church leadership has been reluctant to criticize Kremlin strategies. Father Vsevolod Chaplin has attacked Western critics of Russian human rights abuses for failing to see that Chechen opponents are responsible for civilian deaths.[44] At the same time, the kidnapping and murder of several Orthodox clergy has helped to shape an attitude that is generally supportive of the president's Chechen policy.[45] Again, we find the church leadership and the president tending to share certain attitudes, stemming from both, a common view of the need to restore Russian greatness and sense of nationhood, as well as the church's feeling that the securitization of religion may strengthen their argument for recognition as the church of the nation.

## Moral-Patriotic-Religious Education

Putin tends to be seen as a conservative, keen to promote a sense of patriotism and traditional moral values. As his 2000 Christmas address to Orthodox believers suggested, there is a belief in the need for a "spiritual and moral rebirth of the Fatherland."[46] These are all values that the Orthodox leadership can identify with and, as already noted, the *Social Concept* promotes the notion of Christian patriotism. Church organizations have been keen to contribute to the promotion of both Orthodox and patriotic values in the military; by 2000, the Russian military academy was offering courses in Orthodoxy that Metropolitan Kirill hoped would revive "models for a way of living that are organic to Russia."[47] Since then military

chaplains have been appointed to many military units though to some extent this is dependent upon the wishes of individual commanders. This has not been uncontroversial—in March 2006 the Council of Muftis of Russia expressed reservations about their role in a hierarchical setting where believers of other faiths might be pressured into participation.[48]

On issues of personal morality, there has also been a degree of congruence between the Orthodox Church and the administration. Though the state has not backed the church's position on abortion, they have a shared concern with the future of the traditional family and a distaste for homosexuality, seemingly shaped as much by concerns over Russia's demographic future as by theological beliefs. For the church, the chaos of the 1990s represented a moral collapse that it often associates with Western influences and an excessive individualism encouraged by a more open politics. As with other Orthodox churches, the issue of homosexuality has been of particular concern since the collapse of communism, with regular denunciations of the practice as sinful, contrary to God's will and harmful to society. In 2003, a priest who blessed a homosexual couple was disciplined and the Russian Orthodox Church froze relations with the U.S. Episcopal Church after it consecrated an openly gay bishop.[49] The church also strongly supported Mayor Luzhkov's ban on gay pride marches in Moscow during 2006 and 2007, with Metropolitan Kirill telling a group of Moscow university students that while discrimination against gays was not acceptable, sexual minorities should not be able to dictate their views to majorities or propagate untraditional views in public demonstrations.[50]

**For the church, the chaos of the 1990s represented a moral collapse associated with the West.**

The central and most contested issue during the Putin years, however, has been the issue of religious education in state schools. During the 1990s, much depended upon the activism of local clerics and the willingness of teachers to permit such education; however, since the beginning of this century, the church has sought to promote religious education, particularly a course called "The Basics of Orthodox Culture," based on a similarly named textbook by A.V. Borodina. The church's argument was that such a course would not be like the Tsarist-era "Law of God," which promoted a denominational view and thus would not contravene the constitutional separation of church and state. Instead, it would focus more on the culture, art and history of Russia, which was infused with Orthodoxy; it would be more about the restoration of memory, combating the historical distortions of the Soviet period.[51] Yet, proponents claimed more, with forty Duma deputies in 2003 describing its study as "the best inoculation against moral degradation, alcoholism and drug addiction, which are ensnaring our youth."[52] Church spokesmen repeatedly pointed out

that religion was taught in schools in many countries, despite the formal separation of church and state. Above all, the church returned to its argument from a sociological majority perspective, with Patriarch Aleksii II suggesting that "educational activity should be naturally and justly guided by the desires of the majority of pupils and their parents" who he assumed to be Orthodox.[53] Critics were less convinced, arguing that the proposed course was in effect a denominational text and would divide pupils on a religious basis if made compulsory in schools. A number of critics, including some within the church, also pointed to the low quality of the text, which they claimed promoted intolerance, anti-Semitism and crude notions of Orthodoxy inappropriate to the modern world.[54]

Whilst the church eventually moderated its position, calling for the course to be voluntary and modified in religiously divided areas, as well as supporting an equivalent course on the basics of Muslim culture, the government's position has been ambiguous. Andrei Fursenko, minister of education and science since 2004, has repeatedly stressed his preference for a more general course on world religions and commissioned such a text from the Academy of Sciences. He has consistently argued that this is better than promoting the views of a single tradition, while Deputy Prime Minister Dmitri Medvedev argued that religion could only be taught on a voluntary basis.[55] In July 2007, the issue flared up again. A letter was sent to President Putin from a group of academicians, headed by Nobel Prize winner Zhores Alferov, criticizing the Russian Orthodox Church's promotion of religious education in schools and theology in secular universities.[56] In response, church spokesmen attacked the political motives behind the letter, which they attributed to antireligious elements within the education ministry. In September 2007, President Putin intervened in the debate, restating his position that the constitutional separation of church and state could not be undone, and expressing the view that the issue's resolution had to be "acceptable to the entire society."[57] Though the government and Putin appear to prefer a non-denominational approach, in the summer of 2007 a number of regions, including Ulyanovsk, Voronezh, Bryansk, Kaluga, Smolensk and Tver were planning to introduce the course into secondary schools in the forthcoming school year.[58] Less clear was whether these courses would have opt-outs for parents and pupils, or whether the government would intervene to ensure Fursenko's preference for a course on world religions.

## Asymmetric Symphonia

Issues of religion and politics have rarely been of central importance during the Putin years, and the Russian Orthodox Church, though broadly in sympathy with the president's aims and political style, has not enjoyed the political influence that liberal critics feared. Despite the visible presence of religious leaders, on occasions

there have been significant differences of emphasis, as on the issues of a proposed papal visit and religious education in schools. While one can point to a culture war rooted in religious difference—evident in the debates that erupted when the Sakharov Museum held an exhibition entitled "Caution, Religion," clashes somewhat reminiscent of the U.S. debates over the work of Robert Mapplethorpe—this should not be exaggerated. The relationship between Putin and the church leadership is rooted in a shared Soviet-era experience and has been largely characterized by common values about Russia, the importance of traditional values, and pride in the country's heritage. The president is happy to allow Orthodoxy a position of primus inter pares, so long as its leaders continue to use that position to play a generally supportive role in society. Nevertheless, Putin is clearly the dominant partner in this relationship. The church's ideal may be symphonia, with church and state working in perfect harmony, but this is very much an asymmetric symphonia, and one that may become more so should Russia elect a less sympathetic president in 2008.

## NOTES

[1] Communication Service of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department of External Affairs (CSMPDER) "Primate of the Russian Orthodox Church blesses new Russian president," 10 May 2000 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews: I have made extensive use of this service. Where possible I have tried to rely on the Russian version, but some electronic Russian news services do not keep archives, making it difficult to compare if I have not seen the texts when originally published).

[2] A useful survey is provided in Dimitry Pospielovsky, *The Orthodox Church in the History of Russia* (St Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998).

[3] Patriarch Aleksii II sometimes argued that the religious free market needed proper regulation to work effectively and to prevent undesirable elements from entering Russia. See his interviews in *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 13 April 1996; and *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 6 January 1997.

[4] On the 1997 law, see John Anderson, *Religious Liberty in Transitional Societies: The Politics of Religion* (Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 115-38; Jeremy Gunn, "The Law of the Russian Federation on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations from a human rights perspective," in *Proselytism and Orthodoxy in Russia: The War for Souls*, ed., John Witte and Michael Bourdeaux (New York: Orbis, 1999), 239-64.

[5] The terms "managed democracy" and "managed pluralism" were in common usage amongst commentators seeking to capture the essence of Putin's political vision. See the discussion in Michael McFaul, Nikolai Petrov and Andrei Ryabov, "Introduction," in *Between Dictatorship and Democracy: Russian Post-Communist Political Reform*, eds., Michael McFaul, Nikolai Petrov and Andrei Ryabov (Washington DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2004), 1-22; and for a wider discussion of this concept in the religious context, see James W. Warhola, "Religion and politics under the Putin administration: accommodation and confrontation within 'managed pluralism'," in *Journal of Church and State* 49, no.1, 75-95. The latter article is less concerned with church-state relations than with relations between religious groups and with the potential for religious based conflict.

[6] A survey undertaken in 2000 suggested considerable public suspicion of politicians participating in religious services, especially of former communists and of Yeltsin, but less so of Putin. See http://bd.english.fom.ru.

[7] Irina Papkova, "The Russian Orthodox Church and political party platforms," *Journal of Church and State* 49, no. 1 (Winter 2007), 117-34.

[8] "Putin hopes Orthodox Christianity will strengthen Russia," Interfax, 6 January 2000 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews).

[9] Archimandrite is a title that may refer to the head of a monastery but can also be an honorary title for a senior cleric.

[10] "Pastor from Lubianka," *Moscow News*, 5 September 2000, (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews); "Archimandrite Tikhon: Putin and family are Christians. That's the main thing," *Izvestiya*, 8 December 2001, (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews); and Maxim Shevchenko notes Tikhon's comments that "a democratic state will inevitably try to weaken the influential church in the country." See "Who dares to discuss president's soul?" *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 11 December 2001, (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews).

[11] Geraldine Fagan, "Kremlin Doesn't Trust Orthodox Leadership, Says Top Official," Keston News Service, 10 September 2001; "V. rossii zavershilas' pereregistratsiya religioznykh ob'edinenii," Mir-religii, 29 May 2001. Mir-religii is a Russian religious news service that can be found at http://www.religio.ru/news/index.html.

[12] Lilia Shevtsova, *Putin's Russia* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Affairs, 2003), 70.

[13] Dale R. Herspring, "Conclusion," in *Putin's Russia: Past Imperfect, Future Uncertain*, ed. Dale R. Herspring (3rd edition, Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 221.

[14] On some of these measures see Peter Rutland, "Putin's economic record," in *Developments in Russian Politics 6*, eds., Steven White, Zvi Gitelman and Richard Sakwa (London: Palgrave, 2005), 186-203.

[15] "Aleksii II attacks West," *Moscow Times*, 15 December 2000 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews).

[16] The title Metropolitan is used in different ways by the Orthodox churches, but in Russia it usually refers to a senior hierarch who occupies one of the more important diocesan sees.

[17] "Standards of faith as norm of life," *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 16-17 February 2000, (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews).

[18] See the interview with Patriarch Aleksii II, "Liberal idea extremely dangerous and deceptive," *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 24 December 2002 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews).

[19] "Metropolitan Kirill delivers lecture at MGU," CSMPDER, 4 April 2000 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews).

[20] "Pravoslavnye antiglobalisty schitayut RPTs posobnitsei antikrista," Mir religii, 25 July 2001.

[21] Vsevolod Chaplin, "Orthodoxy and the societal ideal," in *Burden or Blessing? Russian Orthodoxy and the Construction of Civil Society and Democracy*, ed., C. Marsh (Boston: Institute on Culture, Religion and World Affairs, 2004), 33.

[22] Russian and English texts of the Social Concept can be found on the Moscow Patriarchate's website. http://www.mospat.ru.

[23] "How can the Russian Orthodox Church influence political processes in Russia," *Segodniya*, 19 January 2001 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews).

[24] "Mitropolit kirill zayavlyaet, chto demokratiya v Rossii dolzhna imet' svoyu spetsifiku," Mir religii, 3 August 2005.

[25] In a document entitled "Russian Declaration of Human Rights" adopted by the World Council of Russian People "on behalf of the distinct Russian civilization," and appearing around the same time that the Kremlin pushed through a controversial law on NGOs. See "Russian Declaration of Human Rights," World Council of Russian People, http://www.sras.org/news2.phtml?m=608&print=1.

[26] Herspring, "Conclusion," 221.

[27] "Putin warning in puppet NGOs," BBC News Online, 31 January 2006, http://news.bbc.co.uk.

[28] "Russia and freedom of conscience," Religiya i SMI, 27 December 2004, (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews); cf. "Mitropolit Kirill nadeetsya na ispol'zovaniye idei VRNS

v rossiiskom zakonodatel'nom protsesse," Mir religii, 21 April 2006.

[29] "Mitropolit Kirill predlagaet sozdat' mezhreligioznuyu assembleyu pri OON," Mir religii, 13 March 2007.

[30] "It is dangerous to mix religion and politics stresses Metropolitan Kirill," *Trud*, 14 March 2001, (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews); "Vo chto i kak veryat zhiteli Rossii?" Mir religii, 7 September 2001.

[31] "Church members and the number of Orthodox believers: the story of a methodological forgery," Sobornost, 15 January 2001 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews); "Religion plays important role in life of only 14% of Russians," Portal-credo, 23 December 2002 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews). Portal-credo is an electronic religious news service which can be found at http://portal-credo.ru/. For earlier references I have taken material from Paul Steeves translations, but for later ones have consulted the Russian site.

[32] "Easter statistics and Orthodoxy of the future," Portal-credo, 5 May 2005; P. Krug, "Chto my otmechaem v Rozhdestvo," *Nezavisimaya gazeta* , 17 January 2007.

[33] cf. Mir religii, 22 April 2002, which publishes a series of short reports on this controversy and the expulsion of Catholic bishops; "Acting in awareness of responsibility before God, history and humanity," CSMPDER, 5 July 2002 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews).

[34] *Social Concept*, Section III.

[35] "Representatives of traditional confessions of Russia consider court's decision to prohibit Jehovah's Witnesses legitimate," Portal-credo, 30 March 2004 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews).

[36] cf. "Svoboda dlya izbrannyk?" *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 1 June 2005; "Pentecostals will not be instrument of 'orange revolution'," Interfax 13 June 2005 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews), where the increasingly outspoken Pentecostal leader Sergei Riakhovsky suggested the situation was reaching the stage in some parts of the country that some Pentecostals might have to consider to reverting to the Soviet practice of underground activity.

[37] "National security concept of the Russian Federation," Nezavisimaya gazeta, 14 January 2000 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews).

[38] Keston News Service, 4 September 2001.

[39] "Comradeship in faith," *Kommersant-dengi*, 31 October 2001 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews).

[40] "Antiekstremistskii zakon organichit deyatel'nost' religioznykh organizatsii," Mir-religii, 7 June 2002; Keston News Service, 3 July 2002.

[41] *Social Concept*, Section II; also see Kathy Rousselet, "The challenges of religious pluralism in the post-Soviet period," *International Journal of Multicultural Societies* 2, no. 2 (2000), 68-69.

[42] *Social Concept*, Section II.

[43] See Putin's comments at a June 2006 meeting with the General Secretary of the Islamic Conference Organisation, "Putin na vstreche s gensekom OIK vystupil protiv popytok razdela mira po religioznomy printsipu," Mir religii, 7 June 2006.

[44] N. Kevorkova, "A community of repentant sinners," *Novaya gazeta*, 30 July 2001 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews).

[45] Andrew Mcgregor, "Crescent under the cross: Shamil Basaev's Orthodox enemy," *Chechnya Weekly* (Jamestown Foundation) 7, no. 4 (January 2006), http://www.jamestown.org.

[46] "Putin hopes Orthodox Christianity will strengthen Russia," Interfax, 6 January 2000 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews).

[47] "Department of Orthodox culture opened at the military university in Smolensk," CSMPDER, 17 March 2000 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews).

[48] "Sovet muftiev RF podverg kritike zakonoproekt o voennykh svyashchennikakh i vystupil protiv vve-

deniya 'Osnov pravoslavnoi kul'tury' v programme shkol," Mir religii, 13 March 2006.

[49] "Russian Church in gay wedding row," BBC News, 4 September 2003; and "The church cannot approve of the perversion of human nature created by the creator himself," CSMPDER, 17 November 2003 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews). This despite allegations of a 'gay lobby' within the Moscow Patriarchate—see Sergei Bychkob, "Synod appoints bishops," *Moskovskii komsomolets*, 24 December 2002 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews).

[50] Na vstreche so studentami MGU Mitropolit Kirill zatronul problemu geev I zhenskovo svyashchenstva," Mir religii, 19 October 2006.

[51] John Basil, "Orthodoxy and public education in the Russian Federation: the first fifteen years," *Journal of Church and State* 49, no. 11, 2007, 31.

[52] "Group of deputies ask Russian Ministry of Education and mayor of Moscow to introduce 'Foundations of Orthodox Culture' into secondary school curriculum," Interfax/Radonezh, 12 December 2003 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews).

[53] Interview with Patriarch Aleksii II, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 24 December 2002 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews).

[54] V. Valiaminov, "Orthodox ideology or civil society?" *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 20 August 2003.

[55] "Prepodabat' osnovy religii v shkolakh mozhno tol'ko na osnvoe dobrovol'nosti, schitaet Dmitrr Medvedev," Mir religii, 5 March 2007.

[56] "Academicians protest Orthodox interference in public life," Portal-credo, 23 July 2007 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews).

[57] "Political decree behind academicians letter criticizing Church," Portal-credo, 25 July 2007, for the Moscow Patriarchate's response; for Putin's opinion see "Putin schitaet, chto izuchenie religioznykh predmetov nel'zya vvodit'prikazom sverku," Mir religii, 14 September 2007 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews).

[58] "Increase in crime leads to study of Orthodoxy in schools," Portal-credo, 9 May 2007 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews); Mikhail Pozdnyaev, "Are variations possible?" *Novye izvestiya*, 31 May 2007 (translated by Paul Steeves, http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews).