

Russia's Modernization: The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church¹

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These theses form part of a book length project on the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the modernization of Russia. In it I will seek to explain why the rise of traditional religious institutions in Russia is occurring at the same time that the government and society are embarked upon a massive program of modernization. Social science theory suggests that modernization ought to be accompanied by a decline in both religious sentiment and the influence of religious institutions. Exactly the opposite has happened in Russia since the collapse of USSR, and we need to understand why.

I ask how the social visions of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian government compare, and how this unique relationship might evolve and affect Russia's future development.

First, **what is the social agenda of the government's modernization program?** It is to boost economic growth, to make it self-sustaining through investment in infrastructure, innovation, and institutions (Medvedev's four "I"s). At the same time, little is said about what Max Weber considered most important about a society's ability to modernize—its cultural and psychological preparedness for modernity.

Interestingly, this is true for both Putin and Medvedev. Putin, however, seems to feel that social and economic modernization proceed on separate tracks, and that economic modernization is a prerequisites for socio-political modernization, while Medvedev seems to see socio-political and economic modernization as proceeding simultaneously.

This is not an oversight, but a conscious choice. First, because an evolutionary approach to reforms appeals to the Russian Orthodox Church. Second, because no new socio-political modern for Russia is needed. It already exists—Holy Rus [*Святая Русь*].

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Now, let us look briefly at **the Russian Orthodox Church's social agenda**. It is partnership with the state, a modern version of the Byzantine ideal of *symphonia*: the church and state working together to promote social harmony, charity, and public morality. There is even a foreign policy aspect to this partnership, in the construction of a multipolar and multicultural world.

But these are only short-term goals. What the Russian Orthodox Church ultimately aspires to, according to Patriarch Kirill, is “the second Christianization of Rus’,” and at this points to some important divergences between the two “partners” over Russia’s future.²

I see **three sources of potential conflict**:

First, given its ultimate objective, the Russian Orthodox Church’s support for the policies of the Russian government can only be conditional. Specifically, it is based on whether or not these policies permit individuals to live a righteous life, as the Russian Orthodox Church understands it. There is no intrinsic value to political beliefs or actions.

Second, as a matter of principle, the Russian Orthodox Church rejects the secularization of society and seeks to reverse it.

Third, the Russian Orthodox Church does not see itself as one constituency among many in society; it sees itself as the soul of society. Its purview therefore exceeds that of all other social groups and even the government itself, for while the government may speak to the values of the present, the Church speaks to the values of society over the entire span of existence; i.e., for the eternal values of Holy Rus’. As Russian philosopher Vladimir Solovyov put it, “the idea of a nation is not what it thinks about itself in time, but what God thinks about it in eternity.”³

Let me offer **a few scenarios for the future**.

For the time being the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian government are in marriage of convenience. The Russian Orthodox Church is given free reign to try to change social mores through public institutions like the media, films, the military, and the educational curriculum. In return, the government gets the support of what President Medvedev in February 2011 called, “the largest and most authoritative social institution in contemporary Russia.”⁴

² “Patriarch Kirill challenges Church to ‘reset’ people's minds,” *Interfax* (November 16, 2010).

³ «Русская идея» (1888).

⁴ Alex Anishyuk, “Russian Orthodox Church allowed to enter politics,” *Reuters* (February 3, 2011).

This limited partnership is likely to continue for the foreseeable future because the Russian Orthodox Church feels it cannot offer explicit political support to any secular movement, and also because, while it can support certain aspects of economic modernization, it staunchly opposes secularization. As a result, what the Russian Orthodox is looking for, and what the government would probably embrace, if it could be achieved, is modernization without secularization.

Is such a thing possible? On the one hand, Western social scientists, with very few exceptions, say “No!”⁵ There is an overwhelming consensus that secularization is a central characteristic of modern society.

On the other hand, émigré Russian religious philosophers of the early twentieth century, like Anton Kartashev, Georgy Fedotov, and Ivan Ilyin, who are now being widely discussed in religious circles, say “Yes!”⁶

To be globally competitive, they say, Russia must be true to her Orthodox heritage. Their writings are replete with references to “creativity,” “freedom,” and “new social and political ideals”—the very issues that lie at the heart of social and psychological modernization—but rooted in Russia’s historical tradition. They define their social ideal—“organic” or “corporativist” democracy—as a balance between the duties to state and society, and respect for the individual. Historically, they claim, Christianity has sought this balance within itself, therefore, in modern times it should help to spread this notion of balance to the rest of society.

My **tentative conclusion** is this: the Western model of modernization is predicated on what the late Aaron Wildavsky aptly termed “people-changing.”⁷ Typically this has meant the eradication of old social traditions, and their replacement with rational and secular models of development.

Russia pursued this path briefly in the early 1990s, but already by the late 1990s rejected it, in no small measure because doing so allowed the Russian Orthodox Church to play a much vaster role in social affairs.

The role of the Church is a distinctive feature of Russian modernization. It is also the very feature that makes modernization in Russia implausible to many

⁵ An exception of note is the late Shmuel Eisenstadt.

⁶ For a comparison of the socio-political ideas of these three, see Nicolai N. Petro, “The Challenge of the ‘Russian Idea:’ Rediscovering the Legacy of Russian Religious Philosophy,” in Nicolai N. Petro, ed., *Christianity and Russian Culture in Soviet Society*. Boulder: Westview Press, 1990, pp. 203-33.

⁷ Aaron Wildavsky, “How Cultural Theory Can Contribute to Understanding and Promoting Democracy, Science, and Development” in *Culture and Development in Africa*, edited by Ismail Serageldin and June Taboroff, Washington, D.C.: The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development/The World Bank, 1994., p. 148.

Western social scientists. Whether it will lead to failure, or instead require social scientists to come up with a broader definition of what it means to be modern, only time will tell.