

4-1994

Religious Nationalism in Russia: A Postmodern Identity?

Mikhail Sergeev
Temple University

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree>



Part of the [Christianity Commons](#), and the [Eastern European Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sergeev, Mikhail (1994) "Religious Nationalism in Russia: A Postmodern Identity?," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 14: Iss. 2, Article 4.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol14/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University.

RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM IN RUSSIA: A POSTMODERN IDENTITY?

by Mikhail Sergeev

Mikhail Sergeev is a native of Russia. He studied at Moscow Institute of International Relations. He received his M.A. from Temple University and is currently a doctoral student at the same institution. This article is based on a presentation he made at the American Academy of Religion in 1993 in Washington, D.C., at the Eastern European and Former Soviet Concerns Consultation, "Nationalism and Religion."

Since the 19th century the cultural life of Russia has been shaped by two major ideological movements which, as a famous Russian philosopher and writer, Alexander Herzen, once noted, were like the two heads of one eagle. The first party, the Slavophiles, claimed that Russia should follow its specific way based on the Orthodox Christian tradition while their antagonists, the Westernizers, insisted on joining the large root of the Western secularized civilization. The basis for this disagreement has not disappeared. In fact, it is still questionable whether the Communist project in Russia was part of or an alternative to the West?

There are two main positions regarding the succession of communism to the monarchist Russia. On the one hand, some historians affirm that while being an unprecedented event in human history, communism nevertheless continued the existing legacy of expansionist politics and autocratic rule in Russia. Their opponents, on the contrary, tend to idealize Russian history by claiming that communism came as an unexpected disaster which broke up the tradition. There is great distance, they argue, between the absolutism of Russian tsars whose reign was sanctioned by the Church and the authoritarian regime headed by secular dictators. However, the relationship of this new Communist Russia to the West remains unclear. Did Russia come through the Enlightenment or not? Can one speak of Russian cultural and political modernity, and if so, in what terms?

Those scholars who associate the cultural aspects of modernity with its specific political expressions by identifying the latter with the rise and establishment of democratic institutions are consequently convinced that Russia was never modernized. Russia's political system is indeed far from being democratic. Therefore, they point out, it is a backward country, but still a great power challenging the Western democracies.

In my opinion, such an extreme view while it seems attractive and can be supported by a commonsense argument, oversimplifies the situation. It is unable, for example, to give a satisfactory explanation of the fact that the ideology of communism was primarily based on Marxist doctrines which themselves grew out of the Enlightenment. Russia went through the 'semi-Enlightenment,' using the expression of another Russian thinker, Nicolas Berdyaev, who wrote in his book, New Middle Ages, "Russia--and here is the specificity of its destiny--never could have accepted as a whole the humanitarian culture of modern times, its formal logic and formal law, its religious neutrality, its secular meanness."

By virtue of its Orthodox Christian heritage Russia did not accept religious modernization as exemplified by Protestantism, but it did absorb the intellectual modernity expressed by the thinkers of the Enlightenment. When the reformation of religious institutions did not occur, these intellectual ideas were used differently than they were in the West.

It is well known that the project of the Enlightenment has been centered on the notion of science and the scientific worldview. Let me recall with Jürgen Habermas the words of Max Weber who "characterizes cultural modernity as the separation of the substantive reason expressed in religion and metaphysics into three autonomous spheres [which are] science, morality and art."

Hence, Habermas says, "the project of modernity formulated in the 18th century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consists in their efforts to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art according to their inner logic."

The privilege of the scientific narrative over all other narratives has led to the secularization of societies and to the belief in achieving the ultimate truth by scientific means. The Communist utopia in Russia radicalized this very enlightenment project by applying it to the realm of politics. In fact, if there is a group of people (a "new type party"), who possesses a true teaching (scientific communism) capable of leading people to universal happiness, what is the need for democracy? On the contrary, the execution of power by a majority of the people appears in this case to be less rational because the truth often is discovered by a genius against the rules and customs of the masses. Thus, while democracy might be seen as one side of modernity, totalitarianism is another, no doubt, much more cruel face of it.

Totalitarian reality is by no means a step back to the political modernity. Totalitarianism, perhaps, represents another, medieval worldview which was based on the authority of religion. The totalitarian mind is rather rooted in the crisis of religious consciousness and uncovers the depth of the struggle to recover a lost identity. The genealogy of totalitarianism begins with the collapse of traditional faith and goes through the temptations of secular nationalism. Without finding any solid ground there, it takes another step toward the abyss by creating an atheistic state which rejects both nationalism and religion.

I was born in the 1960s in the former Soviet Union which embodied such a society, and I belong to the third generation raised under its international and pseudo-religious dogmas. First and foremost, we were a 'new community of Soviet people' whose identity supposedly transcended national as well as religious borders. Even the memory of the culture was not fully available to us. The communist regime pretended to start our history over. As it was written in school manuals, before October, 1917, there were only wars, class struggles, and the suffering of the common people.

Today, following the collapse of communist ideology and the former Soviet Union, the Russian people are rediscovering their cultural past. The new government proclaims the

'sacred' goals of political democracy and a free market economy. However, in the light of our analysis of the ways of modern Russia to think that this nation is on its way back to capitalism would be another oversimplification. Instead of repeating the experiences of capitalist countries, Russia will most likely find her own path to a post-industrial stage of civilization. In other words, Russia is in search of a post-modern identity which would probably be as specific as Russian modern history is.

Generally speaking, post-modernism can be characterized as an ideology of a post-industrial community, "often also designated a consumer society, media society, information society, electronic society or high tech, and the like."³ This transition from the industrial to the post-industrial era is marked by the growing importance of information and the new technologies which have to do with its transmission. Knowledge becomes one of the products of consumption; it is produced in order to be sold. This mercantilization of knowledge brings about a whole new technology with a new world space of multinational capital which is accompanied by ideological multi-polarity and the denial of meta-narrative ways of social legitimation. As one of the champions of the post-modern condition, Jean-Francois Lyotard, puts it, "the Grand Narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation." Lyotard himself is advocating this 'delegitimation' through a variety of equally acceptable language games. He argues that "the social subject itself seems to dissolve in this dissemination of language games . . . nobody speaks all of those languages, they have no universal metalanguage."

The concept of science as one of these languages is being reexamined by postmodern thinkers as radically as the concept of history is. The ultimate authority of science during the Enlightenment age is being replaced by the relative importance of scientific discourse seen as only one of the domains of knowledge with its special rules and prescriptions. Finally, having rejected all possible meta-narratives, including political ones, postmodernism has found itself without defending either political radicalism nor extremism. Most postmodernist thinkers even when coming from a Marxian tradition recognize political loyalty, stress pluralism, and do not appeal to revolutionary changes.

However, in spite of such a very liberational spirit, the challenge of all privileges and absolute authorities has, like everything in our world, its negative side. By opposing political meta-narratives, it deconstructs the idea of democracy as a supreme ideal for the nations. The post-modern framework of equal language games also leaves room for religion as at least one of those possible games.

At the same time the post-modern movement does not break with its father, modernity, in a crucial issue of traditional faith. On the contrary, it reinforces the negation of the 'medieval' religious vision the same way it denies other meta-narratives. In these circumstances the authority of religion becomes easily combined with nationalism and acquires a more fundamentalist character.

That is how contemporary 'neo-conservative' post-modernism might well turn into religious nationalism just as liberal modernism has been paralleled by atheistic

totalitarian states in its fascist and communist forms. It is happening already in many parts of Eastern Europe, and the extreme danger of this process is being demonstrated by the war in Bosnia, a war which up until now no one has been able to stop. Unfortunately, this scenario also perfectly fits the former Soviet republics and, especially, Russia with its more than seventy years of Soviet political and cultural heritage.

The rediscovery of the pre-revolutionary past which was brutally repressed during the 'cosmopolitan' Soviet era spontaneously disposes Russians to emphasize their national feelings and belonging. Simultaneously, an over-reaction to the more than seventy years of persecution of religion in Russia might naturally lead to an Orthodox fundamentalism. If the Russian successor-state of the USSR under these circumstances will continue the totalitarian policy, it will likely surpass its predecessor in aggressiveness and will to destruction. The victory of the ultra-nationalist party led by Vladimir Zhirinovskiy in the recent elections may well be just the first manifestation of such a post-modern Russia.