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**THE INTERTWINING OF RELIGION AND NATION:
THE RUSSIAN ADMINISTRATION'S APPROACH TO RELIGIOUS LIFE AND
NATIONAL IDENTITY**

By Beth Admiraal

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In a February 2012 incident that is recalled with wildly clashing interpretations, members of a Russian punk band, Pussy Riot, wearing flamboyant balaclavas, unexpectedly entered Moscow's most politically-symbolic Christ the Savior Orthodox cathedral and began to cavort and lip sync in front of the altar area. The prank was quickly stopped by security guards and members of the band were arrested, charged with hooliganism. Footage of this prank was quickly released by the band in a video for a song laced with profanity that called for Mary, Mother of God, to help Russia get rid of President Putin. The song, *Punk Prayer: Mother of God, Chase Putin Away*, also included lyrics mocking the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), even calling the patriarch a bastard. The Putin Administration reacted immediately and fiercely, deriding the band for its behavior and putting band members on trial. Despite international support for the musicians, the trial ended with a guilty verdict and a two-year sentence for two of the singers, with the judge accusing them of committing grave crimes and insulting the Christian faith, motivated by religious hatred. The ROC released a statement accusing Pussy Riot of committing blasphemy and insulting the sanctuary in which they performed. Patriarch Kirill I said they were

doing the devil's work. Meanwhile, outside of Russia, politicians and celebrities commended the courageous behavior of Pussy Riot, applauding the band's bravery in standing up for free speech and democracy and against repression and autocracy. The incident underscored the increasing tensions between Russia and the West.

However, perhaps overlooked, the stunt in the main Russian Orthodox cathedral in Russia was intended by the band to do more than ridicule the president and patriarch as despots and fakes: Pussy Riot openly mocked the cozy relationship between Putin and Kirill. Several lyrics emphasize this: "The Church praises rotten dictators," and a few lines later, "Patriarch Gundaev [Kirill] believes in Putin; Better, the bastard, if he believes in God." Pussy Riot is not alone on this view: the band's commentary on the mutually sycophantic relationship is frequently noted across the political spectrum from within and outside of Russia. Kirill has referred to Putin's tenure in office as a "miracle of God," while Putin regularly refers to the ROC as the foundation of the Russian people. While it is a matter of debate whether the relationship is truly symphonic,¹ it is rather uncontroversial to claim that the Putin Administration relies on the religious marker of the Russian national identity for political advantage while the ROC benefits from the state's patronage.

The critical nature of Russian Orthodoxy for the Russian national identity has led the Putin Administration to make efforts to manage and strengthen its relationship with Orthodoxy

¹ 'Symphonia,' an expression of the complementary relationship between church and state with roots in early Eastern Orthodoxy in Byzantium, is the historical ideal for many in Russia, despite the unevenness of the relationship over time. Even today, with widespread recognition of the tight relationship between Putin and Kirill, there are points of disagreement over the extent to which the relationship today meets the ideal of symphonia. Recent efforts to redefine 'symphonia' for the ROC in the post-Soviet era, led by Kirill, have led to notable official church statements that reflect on this relationship. Here is a helpful overview and contextualization of these recent statements: Walter Sawatsky, "Russian Orthodoxy faces issues of the day and of the century," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 22, no. 2 (April 2002): article 2. Another is a useful summary of the complexity of the relationship during the Putin era: Gregory L. Freeze, "The Russian Orthodox Church: Putin Ally or Independent Force?" *Religion and Politics*, October 10, 2017, <https://religionandpolitics.org/2017/10/10/the-russian-orthodox-church-putin-ally-or-independent-force/>.

in many arenas and in many ways, leading to a surprising collection of groups who find themselves to be targets of both the Putin Administration and local officials who are generally strong supporters of Putin. Pussy Riot is only one of these targeted groups and an Orthodox cathedral is only one of those contested spaces. Minority religious groups, posing a very different threat to the Russian state—as competition in the relationship between Russian Orthodox Church and nation rather than ridiculers—have been the subject of increasing restrictions on their right to assemble, distribute literature, and engage in other forms of typical religious group behavior. Thus, bizarrely, conservative minority groups such as Jehovah’s Witnesses and Nursi Readers—a Sunni Muslim group—find themselves on the same side as Pussy Riot, generally derided and regularly persecuted by public officials. Questions arise from this: why are Russian officials threatened by such a varied set of actors; how do we make sense of their reaction to these groups? Stepping back from these specific questions, a broader question remains: Is there a theoretical framework from within which to explain the Russian state’s response to religiously-motivated behavior, anti-religious stunts, and religious minorities—in other words, how it manages the relationship between religion and nation?

To answer the broader theoretical question, this paper begins by clarifying the points of intersection between religion and nation. This articulation of the forms of this relationship can then shed light on the threat posed by minority religious groups and viewpoints. The second section applies the theoretical framework to the situation of three cases in Russia, illuminating a pattern in the way that religion is invoked by or attached to the nation across these cases. The conclusion is that in Russia, the Putin Administration and supporters are increasingly relying on geopolitical considerations and targeted exclusionary treatment of minority groups to advance the position of the Russian Orthodox Church in the configuration and practice of the nation.

Religion and Nation: A Theoretical Framework

A useful starting point for this project comes from sociologist Rogers Brubaker, who surveys the literature on the relationship between religion and nationalism, pointing out the variable ways in which the relationship between the two phenomena have been and can be usefully studied.² He settles on four primary approaches to this relationship that have dominated the literature over time: religion and nationalism as analogous phenomena; religion as useful for explaining nationalism; religion as filling the content of nationalist claims (i.e. religious nationalism); and religion as intertwined with nationalism.³ The latter of these four approaches to the relationship—treating religion as *part* of nationalism (rather than analogous to, an explanation for, or internal to nationalism)—is the most useful, though not necessarily the only, approach to evaluate the relationship between nation and religion in the post-Soviet space. The history of religion and nation in this area suggest that the two phenomena are intricately intertwined, with significant bearing on each other, rather than parallel to each other or subsumed by the other.

In his explication of the approach that focuses on religion as imbricated with nation, Brubaker suggests that there are two kinds of “intertwining” between religion and nationalism: the first kind involves the use of religion to define the boundaries of the nation and the second involves the use of religious language and imagery for nationalist purposes or “religious inflection of nationalist discourse.”⁴ I will make the case that the first type of intertwining—the boundary-defining mode—can be unpacked more carefully to fully explain the differences in

² Brubaker’s review of the literature in this article is extensive, drawing from historical, sociological, and political science texts, while nodding to the recent cascade of writing on this topic.

³ Rogers Brubaker, “Religion and nationalism: Four approaches,” *Nations and Nationalism* 18, no. 1 (January 2012): 2-20.

⁴ Brubaker, 9.

religious policy, attitude, and treatment of religious minorities in Russia and elsewhere in the post-Soviet space; and the second type—the appropriation mode—can be clarified so that it forms a continuum rather than a dichotomy with the previous modes.

The first type of intertwining, involving the “coincidence of religious and national boundaries,”⁵ is broken down into two parts by Brubaker, a weaker and stronger variant, both of which submit that religion is used in nationalist discourse to determine who belongs. In the weaker model, the nation encompasses a religion but does not have exclusive ‘ownership’ of the religion. The religion is necessary but not sufficient for perceived membership in the nation such that, for example, a Pole is expected to be Catholic but a Catholic is not automatically considered Polish. In the stronger archetype, the nation is perceived as encompassing all of those and only those who belong to a particular religious group. In both instances, religion is a necessary component of nationalist identity, though for the stronger variant, the nation comprises the religious group. In the stronger variant, the religion is necessary and presumably sufficient for acceptance in the nation.

Rather than treat the intertwining between the variables as two discrete types, I will suggest a sharper set of categories that views this relationship in four distinct categories. In addition, Brubaker’s choice of labels—weaker and stronger—is imprecise. For example, labeling the first type of intertwining as a *weaker* variant suggests it is less consequential in practice. In fact, it is plausible to believe that the requirement that a member of the nation is also a member of the national religion can lead to systematic, widespread, and violent violations against other religious groups. In sum, I would like to suggest more precise models that borrow from simple logical forms with sharper labels.

⁵ Brubaker, 9.

The first model, formed from Brubaker's 'weaker variant' option, is built on the necessity of religious membership for acceptance in the nation. This relationship between nation and religion can be expressed in simple logical form, as an internal relationship:

If p, q. Example: If Polish, then Catholic.

1. The class of all perceived Poles = {A, B, C}
2. The class of all Catholics = {A, B, C, . . . , X, Y, Z}

The critical piece is that being in group 2 is a necessary condition for being in group 1, but not sufficient. This internalist model—a more precise term that signals the internal nature of religion for the nation—leads to practices that can be very problematic for religious freedom, such as driving the creation of constitutions, laws, and rulings that make it difficult for nontraditional groups to register, foreign missionaries to obtain visas, and minority religious groups to buy property and build churches. The nation, then, is composed of only those who belong to the national religious group, and those who oppose this requirement find it difficult to be treated as 'true' and 'full' members of the nation.

For the stronger variant, to use Brubaker's language, the nation "is imagined as composed of all and only those who belong to a particular religion."⁶ This formulation, fundamentally, incorporates both the necessary and sufficient formulations, such that belonging to the nation requires membership in the religion, and membership in the religion requires membership in the nation.⁷ To clarify these two readings of the text, consider that it might take the following formulation:

⁶ Brubaker, 9.

⁷ One might also read this phrase, however, as suggesting that the nation is composed of all those who belong to a particular *religion*, as opposed to another religion. That leaves open the possibility that the nation incorporates, for example, non-religious adherents. These two formulations are distinct.

If p, q and if q, p. Example: If Russian, then Russian Orthodox and if Russian Orthodox, then Russian.

1. The class of all perceived Russians = {A, B, C, . . . X, Y, Z}
2. The class of all Russian Orthodox = {A, B, C, . . . X, Y, Z}

In this model, based on a necessary and sufficient relationship, it is seen as sufficient for a person, upon becoming a member of a religious group, to become a member of the nation. This relationship drives its own policies and appeals. For example, empire builders might utilize this model as an argument for extending beyond current borders. Or, this relationship can operate as a barrier to keep people outside the religion by requiring that they also accept a new national identity. An appeal to this relationship can help maintain a tight connection between nation and state by keeping the church ‘pure.’ In the second part of the paper, I will argue that this *strong internalist* model is now driving, in part, the Putin Administration’s approach to religion and religious issues.

Third, the relationship between nation and religion might also involve a sufficient but not necessary link, such that membership in the religion is sufficient for national membership. In this model, membership in the religious group is one of many possible sources of acceptance into the nation, and it can stand by itself as a characteristic of a member of a nation.

If q, p. Example: If a religious Jew, then a Jew by national status (without the necessity of holding other characteristics of Jewish national identity).

1. The class of all perceived Jews (nation) = {A, B, C, . . . X, Y, Z}
2. The class of all Jews (religious) = {X, Y, Z}

This model suggests that a nation is perceived as welcoming of members who carry a characteristic, such as religious membership, but that this marker is not the only or necessary

route into acceptance into the nation. For example, the diaspora of Jewish people who no longer share a common language, history, or other marker, can still be accepted into the ‘nation’ by meeting the religious requirement: the holding of requisite religious beliefs and/or observance of religious rituals.

In addition to these models built on necessary and sufficient markers, one of the dominating trends coming from the post-Soviet space is a model in which the nation is composed of members of various religious groups except ones that are deemed unacceptable for a ‘true’ member. In this model, acceptance into the nation requires a rejection of membership in religious groups that are deemed anti-nation.

If p, not q. Example: If Russian, then not Jehovah’s Witness.

1. The class of all perceived Russians = {A, B, C}
2. The class of all Jehovah’s Witnesses = {X, Y, Z}

This model is often driven by a distaste or fear of certain religious groups as threatening of the nation. For example, for geopolitical reasons, a state might want to protect its nation by ensuring that no perceived member of the nation accepts, in any way, the precepts or practices of a religious group that is attached to a suspicious neighbor. In addition, this model can be useful against domestic threats to the nation, such as undermining particularly vocal or historically ‘aggravating’ competitors to the majority religious group that operates in tandem with the nation. In addition to the strong internalist model, this *exclusionary model* is evidence in the policies and language of the Russian Administration and drives the local application of national policies in many regions of Russia.

Together, these four models showcase very different ways in which national and religious formulations and practices coincide, accounting for many of the differences in motivation for and

application of religious language, policy, and behavior that dominate the post-Soviet space. The model in play in any place, at any time, can well determine the position of and prospects for a religious minority group.

According to Brubaker, another kind of intertwining between nation and religion does not set the boundaries of the nation; rather, religious imagery, language, history, and beliefs are a part of the representation of a nation. Religion “supplies myths, metaphors and symbols that are central to the discursive or iconic representation of the nation;” religion determines “who we are” but not “who belongs.”⁸ Although not directly relevant to this paper, Brubaker, it seems, is dismissing the real possibility that when religious representation is widely promoted as a distinctive element of a nation, this will have bearing on who is considered to belong to or be a part of—or a reputable member of—the nation. Rather than use the labels ‘who we are’ and ‘who belongs,’ it is more constructive to build a model that posits religious identity to be external to the national identity. It is external not because the religion stands apart from or outside of the nation but because, in simple logical terms, it’s plausible, if more difficult, for a member of a nation to belong to a religious group other than the religion associated with the nation, and those with membership in the religious group are not assumed to be members of the nation.

If p, significant q. Example: If American, then favorable towards Protestantism.

1. The class of all perceived Americans = {A, B, C, . . . M, N, O}
2. The class of all Protestants = {M, N, O . . . X, Y, Z}

In this external model, the national identity incorporates a national religion, but neither the national church nor the state purports to organize the nation around a church or the exclusion of a religious group. Instead, the church is a source of nationalistic pride. The state uses this

⁸ Brubaker, 9.

external position to invoke the nation, calling on members of a nation to value the church in various ways, but does not compel them to become members or prevent them from joining other religious groups. This model might apply, for example, to the Romanian case. The Romanian Orthodox Church (RoOC) receives significant benefits from the state, while others receive fewer or no benefits, but there is typically full freedom to belong to another religious group, while still maintaining the perception of being Romanian, if not ideally Romanian. (The exception in the Romanian case is important, though: at local and regional levels, public officials and community leaders in some areas do rely on the internalist model, in which the message of the state suggests that to be perceived as fully Romanian, you must belong to the RoOC.⁹)

The state can appeal to any of these models in nation-building efforts, even utilizing more than one model in different contexts. For example, in the case of Russia, the evidence suggests that state actors are increasingly relying on the strong internalist model for geopolitical reasons, particularly when confronting obstacles to controlling the near abroad—its ‘neighborhood’—but otherwise have behaved more in line with the exclusionary model in repressing a few ‘nuisance’ religious groups that the ROC has signaled are particularly egregious, egging on the state to crack down on them.

These five models of the relationship between nation and religion are derived from formal logic, but in practice they are applied and practiced in a more flexible and fluid manner. For example, political actors from two different states might both favor the internalist model, which obligates individuals who want to be accepted as true members of the nation to belong to the national religion, but apply this model in different ways: one state might signal that the religious membership is nothing more than declaring oneself a member (perhaps attending

⁹ For more insight on this, see: Beth Admiraal, "Religion and National Identity in Borderlands: Greek Catholics and Hungarian Reformed in Transylvania," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* 35, no. 3, (2015):16-42.

services on major religious holidays) while the bar might be set higher for what counts as religious membership in other states. In other words, these models do not indicate the level of religiosity or belief that is considered to be necessary to belong to be considered a member of a religious group. Additionally, state actors might flip between models quite frequently or utilize more than one understanding of the relationship between nation and religion.

This fluidity is quite evident in the Russian case. The legislation governing religious life that has been passed over the last few decades stems from an increasingly internalist view of the relationship between religion and nation. The recent actions of the Putin Administration, however, show that it is recently toying with both a strong internalist and exclusionary model in different situations to suit its purposes. While news reports coming out of Russia simply conclude that the state is using the ROC as a marker of the nation to advance its own cause, or that the ROC is sycophantically feeding off the state, weighing the actions of public officials in Russia against more precise models suggests that Russia is pushing more and more into the strong internalist model for nationalist purposes and, as frequently, the exclusionary model of nation and religion to satisfy focused anger at religious groups that are an irritant to the Russian state. It is likely that in both scenarios, public officials are motivated by increasingly fraught geopolitical considerations.

Religious and Nation in Russia: Three Case Studies

In a rather familiar history for those who track Russian politics, the Russian Federation's legislative approach to religious organizations was based on the USSR 1990 law on religious freedom, which gave religious organizations legal standing, but was most notably refined by the

1997 law, *On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations*, which recognizes four traditional religions—Orthodoxy, Judaism, Islam, and Buddhism—with Orthodox Christianity as the primary traditional religion. In the 1997 legislation, the registration of all religious groups, regardless of historical status, is layered, such that those churches achieving organization status, particularly centralized organizational status, are entitled to significant autonomy while those with group status are significantly restricted in their activities, particularly public activities.¹⁰ This legislation immediately put up obstacles to religious groups that were streaming into Russia following the 1991 transition, primarily from the West, and overwhelmingly from the United States, however, most minority religious groups managed to register in the early years of the law. The overall implication of the law was that Russia was building the foundations of a national identity in which Russian Orthodoxy would be a basis for the formation of a post-Soviet national identity, giving content to the nation with Orthodox imagery, symbols, and norms, yet allowing other religious groups to organize and operate without initially denying members of these minority religious groups the option of seeing themselves as true Russians. All the while, though, the deepening concern about minority religious groups and the increasing favoritism of the state towards the ROC had the effective result of advancing a more internal understanding: it became apparent during the early Putin years that to be considered a ‘good’ Russian, it was important to also be Russian Orthodox, at least in name.

Subsequent amendments and legislation building on this 1997 law highlighted the internalist mindset: the 2002 Law on Extremism, 2006 Law on Public Associations, and 2012 Law on Foreign Agents, for example, added further layers of restrictions on religious

¹⁰ For a clear overview of the 1997 law, see “O svobode sovesti i o religioznykh obyedineniiakh,” Rossiiskaya 7 Federatsiia Federal’nyi zakon, *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* (October 1, 1997): 2-3.

groups.¹¹ These laws called for extensive monitoring of international organizations and required foreign organizations, including religious groups, to report every activity in excruciating detail. The sum effect of these laws for religious activity was to suggest that Russia was increasingly building a nation that fostered xenophobia in its attitude towards non-ROC religious activity.

The most recent legislative development for religion is the Yarovaya Law of 2016, restricting the activities of religious groups under the mandate of fighting ‘extremism,’ which is poorly defined and indiscriminately applied. Immediately following the law’s passage, the Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty noted that “one largely overlooked aspect of the law is garnering new scrutiny and worry: tight restrictions on the activities of religious groups, particularly smaller denominations.”¹² The law requires religious groups to obtain official permits for holding meetings, which must be held in officially recognized religious buildings. Members of a religious group are not permitted to proselytize or preach outside of officially recognized religious institutions. There was widespread speculation that religious groups that rely on house churches and emphasize door-to-door evangelism would be targeted by this law, with the Catholic Church mostly unaffected but Jehovah’s Witnesses and Mormons singled out as clear targets. In addition, it was noted almost immediately that linking religious behavior with extremist activity would lead to more harassment of Muslim communities. These two speculations have largely been borne out by recent events, as the following sections make clear. The legislation emerging from Russia over the past three decades has been pushing away from the externalist towards the internalist model, making it increasingly difficult to separate the Russian national and Orthodox identities.

¹¹ Although the latter two legislative series were directed most specifically at NGOs rather than religious groups, some religious groups were affected by the legislation.

¹² Mike Eckel, “Russia’s ‘Yarovaya Law’ Imposes Harsh New Restrictions On Religious Groups,” *RFE/RL* July 11, 2016, <https://www.rferl.org/a/russia-yarovaya-law-religious-freedom-restrictions/27852531.html>.

Yet, over the last few years, the more surprising development is the very focused harassment of a few religious minority groups who represent specific threats to the Russian nation and are therefore excluded not just from free expression of religious belief but are generally viewed as ‘not belonging’ to the nation. The experience of two minority religious groups showcase the exclusionary pattern that has developed in the nation-religion relationship in Russia. A short overview of two religious groups that have been targeted—Nursi Readers, a Sunni Muslim community, and Jehovah’s Witnesses, an American-based religious denomination—illuminate the way in which the Russian state is constructing an understanding of nation based on the view that membership in certain minority religious groups automatically eliminates one’s membership in the nation. These two groups are targeted by Russian officials for very different reasons; however, in both cases, we see the effects of the exclusionary model in play. At the same time, a different approach to the relationship between religion and nation has been developing along Russia’s borders. A brief overview of Russia’s play in the near-abroad suggests that Russia is also implementing and promoting the strong internalist model, in which the Russian Orthodox Church is critical, even sufficient, to the construction of the Russian nation. In this case, the implication is that those who are Russian are naturally Russian Orthodox, but more critically, those who belong to a Russian Orthodox Church are Russian, or Russian custody.

Case Study 1: Islam and Nursi Readers in Russia

Muslim minorities in Russia date back to its earliest days as an independent principality, when Tsar Ivan IV first absorbed them in the empire after the Battle of Kazan in the 1550s. Initially repressed by the authorities, Muslims were given a relatively secure position under

Catherine the Great and remained moderately free to worship until the revolutions of 1917, though with far fewer privileges than the Orthodox. The exceptions to this were the Muslims of the Caucasus and Central Asian regions, who were incorporated into the Russian Empire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, where sporadic rebellions against Russian authorities and a more nationalistic Islamic tradition triggered suspicion and suppression against Muslim communities and traditions in those regions. During the Soviet era, Lenin initially promised Muslims of Russia and the East relief from being “trampled upon by the tsars”¹³ but Stalin’s policies beginning in the late 1920s drastically reversed Lenin’s promises: persecution, deportations, and ethnic cleansing of Muslim groups led to thousands of deaths.

After 1991, newly found religious freedom led to a revival of Islam throughout Russia, even while there were shortages of funds for building mosques and reviving religious education for imams. In some parts of Russia, “the official Muslim revitalization was closely linked to the local revival of national identity, and occasionally Islam remained on a rather superficial level in the nationalistic identity rhetoric of secularized intelligentsias.”¹⁴ After a few decades of organization and reorganization, three principal Muslims communities have emerged, two of which compete for public visibility, media coverage, and favor with the Kremlin.¹⁵ The Council of Muftis of Russia (SMR), encompassing an assortment of groups and thought, is believed to have the stronger relationship with Putin’s administration than the second, the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims in Russia (TsDUM).¹⁶ Both groups, however, are regularly involved in public

¹³ Vladimir I. Lenin, “Appeal to the Moslems of Russia and the East,” 1917, <http://soviethistory.msu.edu/1921-2/the-muslim-east/the-muslim-east-texts/appeal-to-the-moslems-of-russia-and-the-east/>.

¹⁴ K. Aitamurto, “The Approved and the Disapproved Islam in Russia,” in *Religion, Politics and Nation-Building in Post-Communist Countries* ed. G. Simons and D. Westerlund, 1st ed. (Surrey: Ashgate Press, 2015), 99-116.

¹⁵The third main Muslim community, the Coordinating Center of Muslims of Northern Caucasus, has declined in stature over the last five years after internal controversy. Furthermore, its regional status has relegated it to a smaller public role.

¹⁶Aitamurto, 100.

activities that are organized by the state. Thus, at first blush, it appears that Islam is respected and accepted in Russian society.

In reality, however, the situation is more complicated and more worrisome. One piece of this is an increasingly negative perception and treatment of Muslims in Russia, particularly among the Muslim migrants moving into the bigger cities. The media is more likely to present Islam as a central factor in the difficulty with integration of migrants. Government officials have refused permits for new mosques. A survey dating back to 2011 shows that a near majority of Russians associate Islam with terrorism.¹⁷ Scholars note that among Russian nationalists, anti-Western and anti-Semitic rhetoric was, until recently, more common than anti-Muslim statements, with Eurasianists yoking Orthodoxy and Islam in their nationalist ideology. This is changing, as younger nationalists express stronger anti-Islamic tendencies.¹⁸ Thus, we have a situation in which official Muslim communities are treated as traditional religious communities for the Russian state, and the state has used public funds to help build mosques, but not in centrally 'Russian' places, such as Moscow and St. Petersburg, where permission to build mosques is consistently delayed. This situation led Geraldine Fagan, a scholar of religious issues in Russia and correspondent for Forum 18 News Service to remark: “. . . the enormous discrepancy between their [the ROC's] provision and that of mosques—reflecting the assumption that Russia is definitively Orthodox with inconsequential Muslim and other minorities—is turning explosive.”¹⁹ Despite the changes in public attitudes and difficulties on the local levels, the Putin

¹⁷ Samad, “Forty percent of Russians identify Islam with terrorism,” *Interfax* June 9, 2011, <http://www.siasat.com/news/40-russians-identify-islam-terrorism-poll-198917/>.

¹⁸ Marlene Laurelle, “The Ideological Shift on the Russian Radical Right: From Demonizing the West to Fear of Migrants,” *Problems of Post-Communism* 57, no. 6 (2010): 19-31.

¹⁹ Geraldine Fagan, “Russia: Religious freedom ‘the only viable option for consolidating Russia’s extraordinary diversity’,” *Forum 18* Nov. 6, 2012, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1764. This article is a partial abridgement of Fagan, *Believing in Russia: Religious Policy after Communism* (London: Routledge, 2013).

Administration and other public officials continue to proclaim the successful efforts to build a multi-confessional society, with Islam as one of the four traditional religions.

There is a peculiarly unsettling case in this complicated relationship between Muslims and the Russian national identity that differs from the generally permissible attitude of the Russian state towards moderate Muslim groups. Followers of Said Nursi, broadly referred to as Nursi readers, have faced a level of persecution in Russia that is more intense and more formalized than other moderate Muslim groups. Human rights advocates and social research centers, including Jamestown Foundation, Sova, Memorial, Forum 18, and the International Religious Freedom Commission, have noted the unusually harsh targeting of this Muslim group in light of its reputation as a moderate, mystical Islamic reputation.

Said Nursi was a Kurdish Sunni Muslim theologian from Turkey who died in 1960. In his life and writings, he advocated for an integration of Islam and scientific thinking, advocating for a modern approach to the role of Islam in society. He opposed—sharply—atheistic thinking, and advocated for education for Muslims, eventually developing a following who were attracted to his pietistic, mystical strain of Sufi Islam. After his death, his disciples continued to lead the movement, which eventually developed into two closely linked strains: Nourdjou—followers of Said Nursi—and Fethullahci, followers of the Nursi disciple, Fetullah Gülen. Nursi readers in both groups religiously study his fundamental text, *Risale I Nur*, and other related texts. Both Nourdjou and Fethullahci have spread out from Turkey into Russia, Azerbaijan, and Central Asia where, since 1992, they have been conducting religious activities and reading circles in private spaces. According to the director of Sova Center for Information and Analysis, a human rights organization based in Russia, some followers of Said Nursi consider themselves to be Gulenists

but others do not.²⁰ Russian authorities lump these groups together, which is explained by the “historically and ideologically close” relationship between the two movements.²¹

In Russia, initially, Nursi readers were not bothered by authorities since the Islamic community from which Said Nursi taught—Sufism—was seen as a welcome alternative to fundamentalist Islam. However, around the year 2005, the Russian government launched an anti-Nursi campaign, officially banning “Nurdzhular” (a russified word for Nursi followers) in 2008 and outlawing nearly 40 works of Nursi as extremist in subsequent years. Forum 18, a religious news organization, reports regularly on the arrests, imprisonments, and fines of Nursi readers who are accused of extremist activity—advocating for a total Islamization of Russia and laying the groundwork for the breakup of Russia.²² The raids of Nursi readings are led by heavily armed policemen who operate with very little public notice or information about the arrests. Follow-up questioning from human rights organizations yields very little from local security, prosecutors, and judges who are involved in the cases. The effort to stamp out Nursi readers is remarkable in the current religious climate in Russia surrounding Islam. Said Nursi was not considered a fundamentalist in any sense, and his disciples are not thought to have led fundamentalist movements either. Furthermore, a cursory reading of Nursi’s texts don’t reveal a noticeably extremist position, especially in comparison to many religious texts and certainly in comparison

²⁰ See interview report with Sova director in Canada: “Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada”, *Russia: The Fethullah Gulen Movement (Hizmet movement), including activities and regions of operation; treatment of members by society and authorities; recourse available to members, including state protection*, February 19, 2015, RUS105066.E, <http://www.refworld.org/docid/56b06aa24.html>.

²¹ Igor Rotar, “The Nursi Movement in the Former Soviet Union: Islamic Radicals or Agents of Turkish Influence?” *Jamestown Foundation* March 11, 2013, <https://jamestown.org/program/the-nursi-movement-in-the-former-soviet-union-islamic-radicals-or-agents-of-turkish-influence/>.

²² Forum 18 reports in late 2018 that there are currently six Nursi readers who are serving prison sentences for their religious activity with others receiving fines or under house arrest. See Victoria Arnold, “Russia: Muslims, Jehovah’s Witnesses arrested, Muslims convicted,” *Forum 18*, October 25, 2018, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2426.

to the Quran. Muslim communities that are considered more problematic from a security standpoint are not subject to the same scrutiny.

The rationale for the harassment of Nursi followers is most effortlessly explained by the historical geopolitical tension between Russia and Turkey. A specialist on Islam at the Centre for Ethnopolitical Studies within the Russian Academy of Sciences, Akhmet Yarlykapov commented to Forum 18: "The Russian authorities will always consider the books of Nursi, Fetullah Gulen, their readers and members of any corresponding organisations to be 'extremist' due to a completely irrational fear of so-called 'pan-Turkism.' This bogeyman has been around since the days of the Russian Empire, and is likely the result of the centuries-old rivalry between Russia and Turkey."²³ Russian officials have all but confirmed this view: Still posted on the website of the Russian Embassy in Turkey, a March 2004 *Rossiiskaya Gazeta* article suggests that Nurdzhular was a "Turkish religio-nationalist sect" that conducted "pan-Turkic and pan-Islamic manipulation of Russian youth." An article by a local arm of RIA Novosti state news agency warned that "conspiratorial cells of Nursi readers . . . aim to unite all Turkic peoples around Turkey in a Turkic empire." Furthermore, Nurdzhular is supported by the intelligence agencies of Turkey and the USA, "whose aims are to weaken and then completely destroy Russia."²⁴ This account of the position of the Russian state towards Said Nursi points to the exclusionary model of religion-nation. It is possible to be a Muslim and still be counted as a member of the Russian nation, with the exclusion of Muslim groups that are disapproved Muslim communities—most prominently Nursi readers.

²³ Geraldine Fagan, "What's the Matter with Said Nursi?" *Forum 18*, March 5, 2013, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=1811&layout_type=mobile.

²⁴ Reported in Fagan, "What's the Matter with Said Nursi?" 2013. Author was unable to locate this article on the website of the Russian Embassy in Turkey in 2019.

Additionally, there is a form of the strong internalist model at play here, alongside the exclusionary model. The efforts to undermine a dedicated, educated, and internationally respected Islamic group is necessary for Putin to maintain the tight relationship between religion and nation. If Islam is only a weak or superficial presence in Russia, disconnected to any other nation, it is easier to view these Russians as Orthodox because, well, they are not anything else that matters strategically, or even informally. In fact, in this weak form of strong internalism, it is a conceptual possibility to be an atheist Orthodox²⁵ or a moderate Muslim or a modestly-observant Jew and still slide into the category of ‘Russian Orthodox’ in which to be Russian Orthodox allows one to belong to another religious group—a religious group that is not too loud.

Case Study 2: Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia

The Jehovah’s Witnesses were a miniscule religious minority in the Soviet Union until the post-World War II settlement and fallout, in which Moscow gained portions of Eastern Europe that housed Jehovah’s Witnesses, including Ukraine and Belarus in 1939, and Moldova and the Baltics in 1940. The new Soviet leadership treated the religious organization with deep suspicion despite the small number of adherents. In fact, the evidence suggests that it was persecuted to a greater extent than almost any other religious group. Zoe Knox, a scholar of religious life in the Soviet Union, writes, “The particular rancour with which Soviet authorities treated the [Jehovah’s Witnesses] suggests that their belief system, organizational structure, and religious literature posed a unique and intractable challenge, one which extended beyond the

²⁵ This seemingly contradictory phrase is a reference to the findings in polling data that some respondents will state that they do not believe in the existence of God but will still consider themselves to be Russian Orthodox.

religious realm.”²⁶ Knox continues to argue that the Jehovah’s Witnesses were portrayed as a foil to the “new Soviet man”—American spies with no loyalty to the party or state and, additionally, unfit parents.²⁷ In 1961, the organization was officially banned. This persecution benefited the organization, with a substantial increase in membership, particularly to the East where Witnesses had earlier been exiled. In late 1991, there were approximately 200,000 active practitioners in a still-atheist state. Today, the organization puts its own estimate for Russia at over 170,000 across 400 or more local organizations, a number that is generally accepted by scholars.

Despite receiving the right to register as a religious group in March of 1991, the Jehovah’s Witnesses encountered difficulties. Although they did manage to register as a religious organization under the 1997 Law, in the years following the registration, and most notably in the past decade, difficulties in carrying out religious activity have mounted. Jehovah’s Witnesses are most frequently targeted for distributing extremist literature and holding illegal gatherings. These accusations of possessing and doling out prohibited literature were heightened with the passage of legislation that led to a Federal List of Extremist Materials, a list that began with 14 titles in the middle of 2007 and now is over 3000. In a great show of irony, Russian customs confiscated 4000 Bibles from Jehovah’s Witnesses in 2015. One of these Bibles dates back to 1881 and is the only complete Bible written in Ossetian. Around 80 Jehovah’s Witnesses texts are on the list of banned materials. Additionally, the website of the Watch Tower Society was officially banned, the only banned website across all of Russia. Radio Liberty noted in 2016 that the persecution of Jehovah’s Witnesses in Russia “proceeds with such consistency and geographic scope that the campaign already seriously violates the right to freedom of religious confession, that is, the

²⁶ Zoe Knox “Preaching the Kingdom Message: Jehovah’s Witnesses and Soviet Secularization” in C. Wanner, ed., *State Secularism and Lived Religion in Soviet Russia and Ukraine* (1st. ed. Woodrow Wilson Center Press with Oxford University Press, 2010), 2.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 11, 23.

constitution of the Russian Federation.”²⁸ In the two and a half decades of post-communism, local and regional organizations of Jehovah’s Witnesses were banned at an increasing pace, with more court cases, a greater number of arrests, and an increase in individuals receiving fines.

The Jehovah’s Witnesses was officially banned in Russia in 2017 as an extremist group. Since that time, localities across Russia have activated FSB security, the Interior Ministry, other state bodies to raid homes and offices to search for banned materials and other evidence of ‘extremist’ activity. Forum 18, which continues to document the plight of followers of Jehovah’s Witnesses, notes that some of those arrested have been charged under an article in the criminal code for financing extremist activity, punishable by up to eight years in prison. Between January and October 2018, they documented armed raids on 24 homes across Russian regions.²⁹ The Associated Press reported at the end of 2018 that there were 100 Jehovah’s Witnesses facing charges and another 25 awaiting trial in prison even while Putin promised to investigate claims of persecution against Jehovah’s Witnesses.³⁰

The intense harassment of Jehovah’s Witnesses is often tied to Soviet era politics. As reported in Radio Liberty, the priest and journalist Yakov Krotov blames Stalin’s dislike for Jehovah’s Witnesses because they were persistent pacifists. Putin, he argues, is continuing this tradition, or at least intentionally ignoring local officials who are carrying forward this Soviet custom.³¹ Although there may be carryover resentment of Jehovah’s Witnesses, their connection to the United States, active evangelizing style, and commitment to what they see as ‘truth’ may explain more potently the provocation against this religious group. In an interview with National

²⁸ Irina Lagunina, “Why are Jehovah's Witnesses persecuted in Russia?” *Radio Liberty* March 6, 2016, <http://www.svoboda.org/a/27592103.html>.

²⁹ See Victoria Arnold, “Russia: Muslims, Jehovah's Witnesses arrested, Muslims convicted,” *Forum 18* October 25, 2018, http://www.forum18.org/archive.php?article_id=2426.

³⁰ “Vladimir Putin Decries Persecution of Jehovah's Witnesses in Russia,” Associated Press, December 18, 2018, <https://www.apnews.com/392856ef9df44ecc80c3a29cf7fd3ac9>.

³¹ Lagunina, “Why are Jehovah's Witnesses persecuted in Russia?” <http://www.svoboda.org/a/27592103.html>.

Public Radio, a former priest and theologian argues, "In their literature, there are some very harsh statements and very insulting statements about other faiths. Of course, every religion has the right to criticize other faiths, but that should be done in a non-insulting manner, especially if you are talking about the faith of the majority."³² Other commentary suggests that their sharp deviation from standard Christian beliefs—such as the trinity—marks them as heretics. Although the exact motivation for the exclusionary treatment of Jehovah's Witnesses is difficult to ferret out, it has clearly been pegged as a nuisance religious group that poses a particular threat to religious life and identity in Russia. A quick glance at the US State Department's International Religious Freedom Reports for the past decade showcases a long list of violations against Jehovah's Witnesses. Other minority religious groups with American roots also face some harassment—Mormons, Scientologists, and Pentecostals—yet, the Jehovah's Witnesses are clear targets for discrimination and far more likely to be harassed. While other religious groups identified as 'American' continue to meet for worship and study and are able to find spaces to rent and even build, the Jehovah's Witnesses cannot. They are the only group in this list to face a federal ban.

As is the case with Nursi Readers, the cherry-picking of problematic religious groups for extended harassment and then a full ban suggests that the Russian Administration is applying the exclusionary model, in which certain religious groups are deemed particularly problematic for geopolitical reasons. The situation is reminiscent of the game of whack-a-mole, in which religious groups ('moles') that poke their head out of the ground are liable to be struck with a mallet, wielded by the Russian administration. Both the Jehovah's Witnesses and Nursi Readers were found to be nuisances, and the hammer has come down hard.

³² Alexander Dvorkin, "Russia's Jehovah's Witnesses Fight 'Extremist' Label, Possible Ban," *NPR*, May 17, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2016/05/17/476898973/russias-jehovahs-witnesses-fight-extremist-label-possible-ban>.

Case Study 3: The Russia-Ukraine Conflict

In addition to formal legislation, which is vague enough to allow courts and officials to exclude disfavored groups, the relationship between religion and nation in Russia plays out in the license and benefits given to the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) to play a privileged role in state and national affairs, and increasingly in international affairs. This has led to an increase in the use of the strong internalist model, in which applying the ‘Orthodox’ label to a population implies that this population belongs to Russia. The structure of the Orthodox church has, until recently, aided this effort. Before January 2019, the Russian Orthodox Church, an autocephalous entity, had canonical ecclesiastical control over the Orthodox in Ukraine (and other regions, such as Belarus). Patriarch Kirill I was accepted as the legitimate leader of both the Russian Orthodox Church and the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, both subsumed within the Moscow Patriarchate, discounting the existence of two small Ukrainian Orthodox Churches that claimed independence from Moscow--the Kiev Patriarchate that dates to 1991 and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church that dates further back to 1921. The Moscow Patriarchate governs an extensive number of Orthodox communities beyond its own borders, most of them in the near-abroad, and until recently its largest holding was the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

The tight relationship between nation and religion, utilizing the ROC’s authority outside of its borders, presented a strategic opportunity for the Russian state in its support for the rebel movement in eastern Ukraine, in which demonstrations by pro-Russian groups in the Donbass region of Ukraine turned into a military conflict between the government of Ukraine and Russian-backed rebels beginning in 2014. The Russian Orthodox Church has become a centerpiece in the justification for Russian control of the eastern regions of Ukraine where, in

addition to the majority ethnic Russian-speakers, the Russian Orthodox Church has held historical leverage over Ukraine. Early in the conflict, Kirill appealed to the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople, the senior cleric who is a leader among equals, claiming that the Ukrainian military was provoking a religious war to “overpower the canonical Orthodox Church.”³³ In the meantime, Russian Orthodox priests have been known to provide cover and support for the rebel movement, including the use of churches as military bases and storehouses.³⁴

The justification for this action was given life in 2009, when the newly elected Patriarch Kirill utilized Putin’s concept of ‘Russian world’ as a transnational state, certifying that the baptism of Rus’ in 988 is evidence that Russia is not limited by its borders. Ukraine, he argued, was part of the Russian state by the church’s historic jurisdiction.³⁵ Putin justified the annexation of Crimea in early 2014 by arguing that Crimea was the ‘Temple Mount in Jerusalem’ for Russians, the same narrative utilized by Kirill.³⁶ The membership of Ukrainians in the Russian Orthodox Church provided a powerful claim that the Russian identity could subsume the Ukrainian identity. The ROC was an avenue for control over Ukraine, not just politically, but culturally, as well.

In January, 2019, the ecumenical patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholomew, granted a *tomos* to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, a piece of parchment which made the church autocephalous, therefore fully independent of Moscow. The Russian Orthodox Church and the

³³ Andrew Higgins, “Evidence grows of Russian Orthodox Clergy’s Aiding Ukraine Rebels,” *New York Times*, Sept. 6, 2014.

³⁴ For further examples of the significant role of ROC clergy in the Crimea and Donbass conflicts, see: Emily Bayrachny, “Church, State and Holy War: Assessing the Role of Religious Organizations in the War in Ukraine,” *Logos: A Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 58 (2017): 215-250.

³⁵ “Moscow promotes ‘Russian world’ as cultural alternative to McWest,” *Russia Today*, November 3, 2009, <https://www.rt.com/usa/moscow-promotes-russian-world/>.

³⁶ Carl Schreck, “Crimea Is A ‘Sacred’ Land. But for Whom?” *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty*, December 4, 2014, <http://www.rferl.org/content/putin-crimea-orthodox-vladimir-great-religion-ukraine-russia/26725761.html>.

Russian state both fought hard—and dirty—to head off this outcome. For months, officials tried cajoling, then hacking, and finally threats, to convince Bartholomew not to grant the Ukrainian Church independence from the ROC, but in a momentous decision in late 2018, Bartholomew decided on autocephaly. The *tomos* was officially signed on January 5, 2019, and showcased to the public at St. Sophia Cathedral in Kiev. The Russian state news program on January 6 reported the news on the *tomos*, calling Ukrainians ‘schismatics.’ The visible cost is the loss of property and parishioners. There’s more though. In an op-ed NYT piece, historian Michael Khodarkovsky notes, “. . . the struggle over the Ukrainian Church has played out against a background of Mr. Putin’s efforts to recast a much-weakened Russia, where 20 percent of the population is Muslim, as a land of unified people with a single identity. In that effort, one of his strategies has been a growing reliance on the church as a core of Russian identity and a stalwart supporter of his regime.” Autocephaly means that “a large portion of the Ukrainian population will now be under the influence not of Moscow on church matters but of an independent church in Kiev. In other words, Russia may have annexed Crimea, but it has lost Ukraine.”³⁷

In these events in Ukraine, it is clear that the Patriarch sees himself as the leader of “Holy Rus,” which refers both to the Kingdom of Heaven and also the state in the Middle Ages that incorporated the land of today’s Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. In this case, the strong internalism model operates the most palpably. If those who identify with the Ukrainian state and nation can be classified as Russian by virtue of their membership in the Russian Orthodox Church, this gives Putin a distinct edge in his claims that this territory in Ukraine rightfully belongs to Russia. If Russian Orthodox, then Russian (and vice versa). Thus, Putin and the ROC

³⁷ Michael Khodarkovsky, “Putin’s Dream of Godliness: Holy Russia” *New York Times*, Jan. 22, 2019.

fought hard to stop Patriarch Bartholomew from granting autocephaly to the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.

Conclusion

The relationship between religion and nation that is promoted by a state will have tremendous effects on religious minority groups. For religious minorities in Russia, the forms that are most utilized by the state are exclusion and strong internalism. The former leads the state to cherry-pick troublesome religious groups for exclusion, for failing to be ‘Russian’ enough, leading to serious impairment for religious groups that are singled out by the state as threats to the nation. With regards to the latter formulation, the Russian Orthodox Church is the basis for a strong internalist mechanism, determining who is in and who is out: those who are Russian are assumed to be Russian Orthodox (at least notionally); those who are Russian Orthodox are assumed to be Russian (or Russian kin and Russian controlled). It is the case, however, that this relationship will matter for other citizens, as well. Recall the Russian punk band Pussy Riot: while not typically paired with religious faithful in Russia, such as the Jehovah’s Witnesses or Said Nursi, this band violates a central tenet of Russian life today—that Russian Orthodoxy is a critical identity for the nation, and those who ridicule this relationship will be quickly and decisively disciplined. For now, the Russian national identity is a tightly controlled identity, of chief importance to the current administration.