

**A Church Of Empire:** Why the Russian Church Chose to Bless Empire - [Sergei Chapnin](#), November 2015 - First Things

<http://www.firstthings.com/article/2015/11/a-church-of-empire>

Retrieved on June 21, 2016

I joined the Russian Church late in 1989, becoming actively involved in its life soon thereafter. This was two years before the fall of the Soviet Union, and times were hard – inflation, recession, and empty shelves. Our parish community in Klin, some fifty miles outside Moscow, was given the ruins of an old church at the town center. We raked rubble from this deserted building, the first in the Moscow Region to be returned to the Church. It seemed to us a symbol of the new era.

This was the time of the so-called “Church Revival” in Russia – part of the broader cultural transition that was epitomized by the collapse of the Soviet Union. The Russian state underwent an identity crisis in the 1990s, with a choice either to democratize or to become a new empire. Its initial decision, in the early Yeltsin years, was in favor of democracy. A similar trend characterized reforms in the Russian Church. Once a Soviet-controlled system, now church life became open to new movements and lay involvement. By the decade’s close, however, these changes in Church and state were proving ephemeral. Today, the Russian Church Revival is complete – and the Church that has been revived is not the one we intended when we rebuilt the ruined church in Klin. o the young parish community I joined in Klin, it was clear that the spiritual renewal of Russia would require de-Sovietization. This meant overcoming a complacent mentality that settled for the status quo and did not value individual initiative. We were in need of *metanoia*: penitence and conversion. This is a difficult task for an individual, more so for a culture. But we were high school and university students, and we had hope.

Beyond our parish, too, the Church Revival was taking anti-Soviet forms, corresponding to the democratic character of the early post-Soviet state. Lay movements arose, among them the Union of Orthodox Fellowships, which brought together grassroots Christian initiatives from all over Russia in the fields of mission, charity, and youth work. In the newly independent states of the former Soviet Union, dioceses became autonomous churches within the Moscow patriarchate. New martyrs and confessors, the victims of Soviet persecution, were glorified. This was an important instance of the new openness, for the mere mention of these martyrs and confessors had entailed serious risk a few years before.

Under Soviet rule, priests had been able to celebrate traditional liturgical services – and nothing more. A sermon that irritated local communist authorities could lead to the transfer of the priest to a distant village. Having tea with a priest after Sunday service was a dangerous proposition. Feasts and festivals were illegal. Komsomol (Young Communist League) activists would take the names of participants in Easter processions and report the participants to their bosses. Komsomol controlled baptisms, weddings, and funeral services.

But in the early 1990s, all of these restrictions were lifted. In many places, parish life was revitalized, and parishes became dynamically developing communities. It was a period of optimism and democratic experimentation.

This early phase of the Church Revival may be called “Church Revival 1.0.” In these years, the Church was esteemed, protected, and accorded public significance as an anti-Soviet force. Most Russian citizens were attracted by what the Church had preserved: a culture that was Russian and traditional, but non-Soviet. This was true even for those who had no interest in church doctrines or worship. They wanted to take part in this culture, without quite knowing how. Their instinct, arising from decades of Soviet conformism, was to trust and respect the Orthodox clergy. In this way, supporting Church Revival 1.0 became an important cultural dimension of de-Sovietization, even while most of its advocates understood little about the Church they proposed reviving.

During Church Revival 1.0, relations with the government were complex. No legal mechanisms existed for cooperation between Church and state. There were no settled procedures for transferring church property to ecclesiastical control, and church educational endeavors were in an unofficial limbo. The government provided money to the Church only on an ad hoc basis. The process of establishing the needed mechanisms was slow and contested. Most state authorities in the 1990s were the same people who had held power during the Soviet era. They were in important ways still pro-Soviet, though in deference to public sentiment, they accommodated the Church. They allowed the Church to establish new seminaries, reopen monasteries, ordain young candidates to the priesthood, develop publishing and media activities free of censorship, and organize pilgrimages within Russia and to the Holy Land, Egypt, and Europe.

The early trends were auspicious. But the process of reform proved slow, incomplete – and reversible. Already by the mid-1990s, ominous signs were coming from the church hierarchy. During the Soviet era, the church leadership had mostly been loyal to the state, incorporated into the Soviet establishment. Bishops participated in public ceremonies and enjoyed the same special access to medical treatment and other perquisites as state and Communist Party leaders. One of the few who had stood aloof was Metropolitan Alexis Ridiger. In 1990 he

became Alexy II, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia, the first patriarch since the revolution to be chosen without government pressure. Alexy had been born in independent Estonia and remembered its brutal occupation by the Soviets. The personal distance he maintained from the Soviet regime was largely responsible for what independence, or apparent independence, the Orthodox hierarchy maintained in the 1990s.

Meanwhile, no bishop in the Russian Church appreciated the importance of lay movements to Church Revival 1.0. The post-Soviet Church suffered from a shortage of clergy. Moscow in 1989 was a city of ten million, served by only one hundred priests. The revitalization of parish life thus required the organized efforts of laypeople. The episcopate, however, resisted any vision that accorded a greater role to the laity, and feared the laypeople who sought to articulate such a vision. Perhaps the bishops, still Soviets at heart, regarded the lay movements as dangerously democratic, a threat to top-down control of church institutions.

Nonetheless, some lay movements emerged. In October 1990, for instance, the Brotherhood of the All-Merciful Savior received official state recognition. This fellowship united several Moscow-based parishes, their dozen priests, and hundreds of laypeople. Its projects included youth summer camps, gymnasiums, the first pro-life center in Russia, an orphanage, a center for traditional Christian culture, and a publishing house. Its greatest achievement was the catechetical courses that later became St. Tikhon's Orthodox University, today the largest theological school in the former Soviet space.

But in the mid-1990s, the bishops moved to restrict the new lay organizations, subordinating them to parish rectors. Many fellowships closed down. In a move sadly typical of ideologues, searches for enemies began. The first group to be persecuted was the community of Fr. George Kochetkov, which focused on parish building and catechesis. Fr. Kochetkov's critics accused his movement of being "anti-church." The community escaped condemnation by church authorities. But this incident inaugurated the open division of the Church into "liberal" and "conservative" camps.

During the Soviet era, the persecuted Church had valued unity above all things. Church leaders maintained informal, often friendly, contacts with religious dissidents. By the mid-1990s, the situation changed. Conflict between liberals and conservatives became a defining feature of church life.

In the Communist Party, mainstream ideas were known as the "general line." By demanding conformity with the general line, the Soviets suppressed dissent and maintained unity. Now, as the Church became a respected part of post-Soviet culture, many members turned their attention to managing and manipulating

her influence. If the Church intended to set the spiritual and ideological agenda for the nation, these members thought, then she could not do without a general line. The “conservatives” were those who took it upon themselves to formulate this general line and determine who was in accord with it and who was not.

Thus the two camps solidified. The conservatives’ task, as they saw it, was to reestablish the social and political power of the Church. In liturgy and catechesis, they defended received practices. The “liberals,” by contrast, were those like Fr. Kochetkov, concerned with improving catechesis and promoting the role of liturgy in community life. To a degree that would have been unthinkable during the Soviet era, the two camps became mutually hostile. Church members who disagreed on theological or practical issues were now calling each other “enemies of the Church.” Designating themselves “defenders of the faith,” the conservatives ventured to criticize not only the laity and lower clergy, but the bishops themselves, charging them with “departures from Orthodoxy” and even, on occasion, heresy. Church Revival 1.0 fizzled.

After 2000, almost imperceptibly at first, but then more and more overtly, the Russian state abandoned the democratic model for an imperial one. It did so out of a desire to play a larger role in international politics and to overcome, in the eyes of Russians, the humiliation it had suffered with the collapse of the Soviet Union. As the state became imperial, so did the Church. As a result, ideas of what it meant to advance the Church changed radically.

This phase, which we may call “Church Revival 2.0,” continues to this day. Pastoral care has been deemphasized in favor of attention to what the Church can do in partnership with the state. The Church now focuses on the construction and restoration of property, and on the acquisition of state funds for this purpose. In the early 2000s, the Church lobbied successfully for a law returning church property that had been confiscated by the Soviet state. More and more money has been allocated for restoring old properties and constructing new churches and diocesan offices. In 2015, that allocation was about one billion rubles, enough to merit its own line in the state budget. Another ambitious plan has been to build two hundred new churches in Moscow, with the support of the government in Moscow. Meanwhile, the bureaucratization of the Church has gained momentum, with the establishment of new church agencies and an increase in paperwork and in the numbers of officials and staff. Undertaking to shape Russian national identity, the Church promotes patriotism and traditional values in coordination with government propaganda.

The Church has taken on a complex ideological significance over the last decade, not least because of the rise of the concept of *Russkiy Mir*, or “Russian World.” This way of speaking presumes a fraternal coexistence of the Slavic peoples —

Russian, Ukrainian, Belarussian – in a single “Orthodox Civilization.” It is a powerful archetype. It is an image of unity that appeals to Russians, because it gives them a sense of a larger destiny and supports the imperial vision that increasingly characterizes Russian politics. The currency of “Russian World” within the Church today indicates that Orthodoxy is becoming a political religion.

That the Church has come to mirror the state in its rhetoric and animating vision is hardly surprising. The imperial state needs religion to provide moral legitimacy for its rule. State leaders have concluded that the democratic legitimacy arising from elections is insufficient. This is partly because it is difficult to view recent elections as truly democratic, and partly because Russia does not have a civic tradition that regards the will of the people as a convincing mandate.

In these cultural circumstances, people in high places in both the government and Church see that, with an imperial outlook of her own, Orthodoxy might be able to fill the vacuum left by the defunct Communist Party in the system of post-Soviet administration. This potential has been clear even to those functionaries who keep their distance from the Church. The need for a political religion was formulated by state authorities around 2010 – something that coincided with the election of Kirill, a Russian World enthusiast, to the Patriarchal See of Moscow.

It is in one sense natural that church leaders such as Kirill would wish to promote a Russian World that transcends the political boundaries of present-day Russia. Orthodox believers are united theologically even if they live in different countries, and many are formally united under the authority of the Patriarch of Moscow. Church leaders are certainly right to further this unity, expanding and deepening our friendship in Christ across geographical borders.

But as critics point out, speaking of a Russian World serves the state more than it serves the Church. It mobilizes religion, especially the esteem of the Slavic peoples for the Patriarch of Moscow and all Russia, for political purposes. Its primary effect will surely be not church unity, but rather the strengthening of Russian influence in Ukraine and Belarus.

In this 2.0 phase, the Church is circling back to Sovietism, promoting conformity and dreaming of imperial expansion. In one sense, these sympathies should be understood pragmatically, as a means of currying favor with state authorities. Nonetheless, there are genuine pro-Soviet sentiments within the Russian Church. Their presence is easily explained.

In its 1.0 phase, Church Revival failed to address its top priority: “churching” those who were attracted to Orthodoxy, which meant catechizing Russians and incorporating them into the Church. The mass baptisms of the 1990s left the newly baptized unprepared for life in the Church. The Church had welcomed the uncatechized, counting on a “natural” churching to take place later, as if Christian identity would come automatically. Bishop Panteleimon of Smolensk and Vyazma describes the result:

At the beginning of the 1990s, we saw a surge of people coming to the Church. . . . Not just coming, but swarming into it. Alas, not many stayed inside. The period of active attention to the life of the Church and so-called “churching” ended very quickly. . . . In my estimation, people who go to church every Sunday amount to one percent of the country’s population, or even less.

In most cases, the newly baptized Soviet people had no interest in *metanoia*, no desire to change. Of course, change did arrive. It was the new post-Soviet culture (which only too soon became neo-Soviet) that changed the Church, rather than the other way around. The result is a Sovietized Christianity.

Over the last generation, the appeal of the Church to individuals and society has come down to tradition—the need to preserve it, the danger of neglecting it. These are legitimate concerns. But the newly baptized ex-Soviets of the last two decades have a rigid and impoverished understanding of “tradition,” which they understand as a set of rules and regulations: when to pray and what set of prayers to read, what not to eat and what else not to do during Lent, what to wear to church, and so on. For them, tradition is not a living tradition, and an understanding of tradition as a common and personal experience of life in Christ comes under suspicion as too “liberal.”

Beyond liturgy and piety, other traditions were revived: respect for the family, opposition to abortion, the banning of homosexual practice and propaganda. These measures are seen as asserting traditional Russian mores in opposition to the decadence of the West. They seem to add up to a healthy Christian conservatism. But this is rhetoric, not living tradition. The actual statistics in Russia are disastrous: 640,000 divorces to 1.2 million marriages in 2010; sixty-three abortions per hundred live births in 2011. The supposed revival of Russian morality is propaganda, not a genuine effort of social renewal. It is a way of elevating Russia over the allegedly more corrupt cultures of Western Europe and North America—a way of talking once again about East versus West, us versus them. The West is constructed as not just a political and economic enemy, but a spiritual one as well. This sort of thinking is the general line.

In today's Russia, pre-revolution traditions are difficult to recover. Too much time has passed since 1917. Too many generations have been born and died, too many institutions and repositories of tradition have been eradicated. Thus, to invoke the Russian Church's traditions of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries requires us to engage in historical reconstruction rather than to nurture beliefs and practices that are ongoing. The pre-revolution Christian traditions are dead, and they will not be revived.

In the current patrimony of Russia – whether cultural, historical, social, philosophical, or religious – there is only one tradition that is being passed on to the next generation. It is the Soviet tradition. Hence the appeal of everything Soviet, not just for the elderly but for the young. The return of this tradition in recent years, perhaps best described as neo-Soviet, is the best proof that little else is left alive in Russia.

And so the Church Revival, which in its 1.0 phase sought to revive pre-revolution Christianity, has become Church Revival 2.0, a post-Soviet civil religion providing ideological support for the Russian state. The Russian Church has become a Church of Empire, with ecclesiastical practices and institutions shaped accordingly. We seem to be at the dawn of a new epoch in Russian Orthodox history, one that in all likelihood will be known as “neo-imperial.”

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