

POLITICS AND FOLK RELIGION IN THE PERIOD OF TRANSITION*

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Abstract: The several decades of totalitarian aggressive atheism have drastically changed the folk religion. In new political conditions this legacy remains very important, because it develops some typical features of contemporary religion–politics interrelation. The Orthodox religion became more and more linked with the political discourse. What was forbidden for a long period of decades out of a sudden became first official and then even obligatory, like atheism before. Some facts taken from Russian mass media of the nineties illustrate how the legacy of the Soviet past and the new popular version of Orthodoxy correlate with the politics.

Keywords: folk religion, politics, communist, Russia, the USSR, atheism, paganism, stereotypes, Orthodoxy, mass media

In this paper I will discuss some examples of relationship between folk religion and politics before, during and after the era of perestroika. I will also concentrate on the significance of the traditions and stereotypes in these links, exploring mainly the cases from my own experience.

It would be reasonable to start long before the crucial 1985, but it is impossible to do so in such a short talk. I will allow myself only to remember the fact that after long years of persecution of the church and the priesthood in Russia the very concepts of folk religion and politics acquired a very specific nature. Even more specific and diverse was their correlation, particularly if we take into account such basic oppositions as geographic (central–rural parts), ideological (strong–weak oppression of the officials), confessional (Christianity–Islam), sociological (communist bureaucracy–“ordinary” people), national (Russia–other nationality), etc. The role of the individual (e.g. family background, personality) is very important in every single occasion. We can speak of the rural regions as the places where in spite of the oppression of the local authorities and the lack of churches, religion, folk beliefs and folk faith were saved and honoured in form of as we call it folk Orthodoxy. It was characteristic not only for Russians, but for other nationalities living in the USSR as well. I will give only one example from my field work of this period. In 1984 I took my students to the former Moldavian Republic where Moldavians, Ukrainians, Russians and Bulgarians lived in big villages. I chose one village, I have been to be-

* This research is supported by Russian Foundation of Fundamental Studies (RFFI), grant “Speech and Mental Stereotypes in Synchrony and Diachrony” 97–06–80015.

fore. I knew that the head of the local committee was my colleague, who had graduated from the Moscow State University, German Department. When I explained to him the purpose of our expedition (to put down archaic traditions, folklore, etc.) he said briefly: "We fight against all this, you won't find anything interesting". Embarrassed, I still started to interrogate the people and the very first woman (the village teacher) I met told me that they still performed many rituals (like asking for rain and many others) in spite of the ban of the local communists. The pagan rite for rain was frequently followed by a service, a prayer to which the whole village came. "At least several drops of rain would fall from the sky", – concluded the teacher. Then I discovered that folk beliefs were a still crucial part of life not only for the elder, but for the younger people as well, who knew the rituals in detail and took part in some of them. My colleague definitely knew it, being born and brought up in this village. But he also knew that the cultural anthropologists or ethnolinguists at that time were not allowed to study folk religion. The scholars could not use the terminology, even in such innocent subjects, like, let's say folk calendar customs. The books on these topics were very rare as well. (I will add in brackets that several years later this field of research became very popular and the demand for the books on religion and folk traditions is huge).

Hypocrisy was part of the Soviet politician's attitude to religion and folk tradition. It is not surprising that there were (and still are) so many narratives describing how in a miraculous way atheists started to believe in God (Orthodox Miracles 1993, pp. 27–29). To be objective I have to add that there are many stories telling how communists started to believe in magic (like the evil eye, the importance of pagan commemorating acts, etc.). The canonical and folk Orthodoxy coexist even in depicting the images of politicians (Big Communists, as they are called in the popular tradition, which was a synonym for atheists, the believers in communist principles and ideals).

The several decades of totalitarian aggressive atheism have failed to destroy the folk religion. The attempts of the politicians (leaders and ideologists of the Communist Party) to create a new religion with new "saints", rituals, values and formulae were successful only for a limited period of time. By the 80s the ideological clichés and the new-speak in the nonofficial discourse were only used in numerous anecdotes and jokes.

We are still not able to adequately analyse the role of perestroika in all the spheres of the life of an individual and the country as a whole. The consequences of reconstruction embrace everything – not only the ideology, philosophy, politics and economics, art, but also the language, mentality, religiosity of the people, their everyday habits, etc. What is primary and what is secondary here, it is difficult to judge, but, I think, the most interesting thing is the interrelation of different areas during this period of time. Such an example is the correspondence between politics and religion. It is a very topical problem now, and not only for Russia, but for other former socialist states as well.

When perestroika started and freedom and democracy step by step penetrated into the society, one could observe several tendencies which are still relevant. Infor-

mation for a scholar was and still is everywhere – in the everyday life, in mass media, in church. The aggressive atheism of the officials gave place to religiosity. First of all, the revival of the Orthodox Church meant some material changes: opening of closed churches and monasteries,¹ reconstruction of the ruined churches, creating of Sunday schools for children and adults, publishing of the Bible and all sorts of religious literature, etc. The Orthodox religion became more and more linked with the political activity. What was forbidden for a long period of decades out of a sudden became first official and then even obligatory. I will never forget my impression when I first saw the slogan in front of the Kremlin: “Merry Christmas” instead of “Happy New Year, Comrades”. It was a shock, which was doubled probably by the fact that in Russian “Merry Christmas” sounds not secularly, it definitely has some Church Slavonic characteristics (as you know the language of the Church is Slavonic, not modern Russian).

The physical presence of the religious practice at the end of the 80s became more and more perceptible. It could be compared to the Christianization of Russia by the scale. It was followed and supported by other tendencies in the society, for example the changing image of the mass media. Mass media which are tightly connected with politics (both official and nonofficial) started to grow in their quantity and to differentiate in their content. Thus the language of the newspapers, magazines, radio and TV diametrically changed. To speak on the faith, religiosity, on observance of celebrations, to quote the Bible became very popular. Sort of a fashion was and still is to use quotations from the Holy Gospels in the advertisements – a new item for the post-Soviet reality. Again aiming at creating an image as attractive as possible, the copy-writers transform the sentences making the sense opposite (“The last will be the first” – the slogan of a Russian bank, that disappeared after August, 17, 1998). The TV translation of liturgy, Easter service with comments became ritual. The politicians also changed diametrically. Many of them gave up their atheism and became ‘pure’ Christians. At the very beginning when Eltsin, Luzhkov and others just started to appear in these programs holding a candle in the church some people very wittily called them “candlesticks”.

A very indicative part of the image of the modern Russian politicians is their religious practice. They do not think that the society cannot forget very quickly the atheistic position of the Communist Party, that the quotations from the New Testament in their speech cannot be perceived adequately. G. Zjuganov, General Secretary of the Committee of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, uses Christian allusions all the time, once in his interview on the radio he said: “Not the people, nor the God would understand and forgive us, if we take part in this demonstration”. This tendency lasts, here is a very recent example: on the 14 of September (1999) after the explosions in Moscow the vice-president Gustov said on the radio: “I lighted a candle in the church, praying that Putin’s Cabinet would not be

¹ Compare some statistics: the number of monasteries and nunneries has changed during the last decade from 18 to 400, the priesthood has doubled (HIEROMONK ILARION 1999).

disbanded”.² To be a Christian is not only fashionable now (how it was at the beginning of perestroika), it is a must for officials. That’s why all the public activity of our government (especially opening of the new banks, exhibitions, etc.) is often accompanied by the acts of consecration. Again, hypocrisy is part of the official policy in modern Russia, comparable to the behavior of their Soviet counterparts I described at the beginning.

These facts are on the surface. But there is something more specific which ties the politics with the religion and constitutes the political programmes of different parties. It is not characteristic for all the parties. A universal development of the concept of religion in the political discourse is the tight liaison of the religion with the ideas of nationalism and patriotism. Every day one can hear or read something which illustrates some of the points of this interrelation, especially now, when the election campaign started. Most interesting and objective facts can be found in the special publications of the “Russkaja Mysl” and “Nezavisimaja Gazeta”.

I will give only two extreme examples, taken from the recent articles in mass media. Russia of the future in the programs of Christian political parties is the Saint Russia, based on the East Orthodoxy. The mixture of ideas allows the commentators to talk of “political racist neopaganism” (VERKHOVSKY 1999). One can find an interesting confirmation of this idea in the program of the “Orthodox Russian National Council”: “Orthodoxy is the state religion of Russia. Together with this a serious research of the Pre-Christian culture and religion should be undertaken. Thus we unite the spiritual values, which in the whole make *national folk religion*... The Orthodox religion is cluttered up, 60% of it is not Russian, it is alien” (Op. cit.).

Another example – rather funny now – the information on the sect, the members of which venerate Lenin as God and think of him as the second part of Christ. They call themselves Communist Party “Unity Vsevolod” – Union of all confessions, nationalities and peoples, or cosmic communists. The specific feature of this movement is the idea of Lenin as Christ, but calling the two figures “two bases of the Universe, incarnations of principles ‘in’ and ‘jan’” undoubtedly shows that this mixture of religious terms and concepts is very typical for the state of mind of the people for at least the last fifteen years (SEROV 1999).

These two publications give a critical point of view, while hundreds of smaller newspapers, church booklets, etc. sometimes contain such ideas which have nothing to do with the Orthodox religion but pretend that their position is the only right one. This mixture of Christian faith and so to say pagan beliefs, superstitions is quite evident in our parishes nowadays. The neofits who come to the church bring over their spiritual background which is far away from the Orthodox faith. I have to recall that when the freedom came to Russia, the search for new spiritual values was so intensive, and the lack of knowledge was so huge, that ordinary people reading thousands of publications just got lost. The old Russian folk beliefs (fortune-tellers, rituals,

² This sentence could be understood only in the context of the political history of last year, when three Prime Ministers were dismissed one after another.

everyday recommendations, demonology, weathercasts, etc.) often falsified could have been combined with whatever one can just think of – old Greek or Roman beliefs, Hindu rituals, esoteric ideas, etc. I remember once my elderly relative – woman in her 60s (baptized and active Russian Orthodox) called me and said that on that day at midnight I should fumigate the corners of the rooms. I said, Why? She answered that on the TV there was a program and that on this night people should venerate the Goddess Vesta, who helps the families to live in peace. Another thing from the spiritual practice of this woman is her visit to a healer who said to her that she was ill because of her sins. A priest was present there working together with the healer, so he read some prayers. “The healer told me I should come once more for a prayer and I will forget about my illness” – the lady went on. (The healer was an extrasense, as the Russians call them, they are very popular in Russia, there is a sort of cult of them and their abilities).

The mixture of magic and miracle can be observed everywhere. I was present in the church once when christening took place. I heard the lady who was preparing to become Godmother of a three-years old child saying: “Look at this man! (Actually, it was the priest.) He is holding light in his hands, some magic will happen now”³. We can find the same potpourri of words, symbols and beliefs in numerous advertisements of the new Russian magicians, healers, fortune-tellers. Some of the texts are incredible, like “Peter Smirnov. Apostle and Bishop of Black Magic. Your beloved will crawl to you on his knees. 500% guarantee”. The cross, candles are in the neighbourhood of the cup with the medical symbol (the snake), the emblem of the Russian Monarchy (the two-headed eagle) and so on and so forth.

Light was partly shed on this problem in some recent publications (BUZIN 1999). The problem of contamination of Orthodoxy and paganism with sometimes dominating of the latter in the behavior of the parishioners is very serious now. One of the reasons for such a situation is that the parishioners do not understand the service, partly because of the archaic language, partly because people do not want to understand it. Before, when the books, even the Bible were not available they would have an excuse. Then the folk notions would cover the Orthodox ideas.⁴ The border between folk tradition and Orthodox faith is very difficult to mark (and this is a long dispute already). Now the problem is of a different kind: the books and TV and radio programs on religion are so numerous, that to find the right way becomes difficult again. The books sold in the parishes which are supposed to educate the newly baptized contain information which is far away from the real faith – it is a sort of

³ In Russian the words for ‘magic’ and ‘miraculous’ are partly synonyms. They come from different discourse, the first one definitely is associated with folk tales and folklore in the whole, it cannot be used in the canonic texts about the saints, etc. If it is used, it has negative sense, opposed to Christianity as paganism.

⁴ We know this fact very well from our field research from the beginning of the 80s. The situation has not changed by now. Folk Orthodoxy has its own concepts, it can be very firm in some ideas, which compare or even mix personages, like Eve and Mary, Christ and Nicholas, etc. (it is universal, compare the Bulgarian data – BADALANOVA 1999). The folk tradition ascribes some relations to the saints, as, for example, I was told by an old Russian Christian lady, born in a village close to Moscow, that Saint Nicholas is the Father of Jesus Christ, and many other examples in our archives.

strange superstitions of modern times. For example a series of books “Give me an advice, Father” discusses whether a priest is allowed to drive a car or to go to the swimming pool. The answer is “No”. Another open public discussion which started in July-August in Russia, was whether it was sinful to have a dog as a pet at home.

To my surprise I found the practising Orthodoxy and folk faith in their total mixture at a very sad occasion, when my aunt died. We called an agent, who showed himself well-prepared from the point of view of the church and folk traditions. He was absolutely sure in his statements (by the way the lack of hesitating, the typical Soviet desire to teach everybody and everywhere still exist in our country). He knew everything in detail. He even could foresee his clients’ political preferences. When choosing the colour of the coffin (there were two colours – blue and red) he tried to help us asking “what are the colours for the newly-born boys and girls?” When he saw that we were still choosing, he said: “Don’t hesitate, red does not mean the Communist in the funeral. The communists do not bury their comrades in red coffins”. This case deserves a special analysis, due to the unbelievable chaotic contamination of the information taken from different world religions, but I will stop here because of lack of time.

To conclude I want to underline that in spite of the new conditions in our country (democracy, revival of the church, change of values, etc.) some stereotypes still work. The mass religion is very pragmatic, almost pagan in its essence, it does not presuppose Faith, or obedience, or observance of the Commandments. The mixture of concepts is widely used by the politicians who aim in their programs at exploiting the Orthodoxy in the form it exists in modern Russia.

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