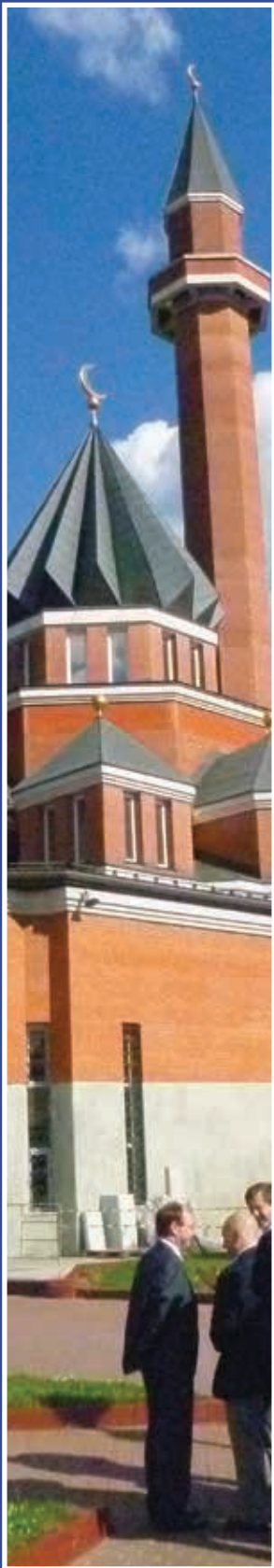




THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY: THE MOSCOW WORKSHOP

Lomonosov Moscow State University
Moscow, Russia
June 19, 2013

Sponsored by the
Henry R. Luce Initiative on
Religion and International Affairs



Newly constructed mosque, part of an effort to address the shortage of mosques for Moscow's burgeoning Muslim population.

Luce Moscow Workshop

The Moscow workshop for the Orfalea Center's Luce Project on religion in global civil society was co-sponsored by the Faculty of Global Processes at Lomonosov Moscow State University, and involved a small group of Russian scholars and religious leaders discussing the place of religion in contemporary Russian society. Ilya Ilyin, Dean of the Faculty of Global Studies at Lomonosov Moscow State University, facilitated the discussion, and Mark Juergensmeyer, director of the Orfalea Center, posed many of the questions.



Mark Juergensmeyer and Ilya Ilyin, workshop co-conveners.

The Special Role That the Russian Orthodox Church Plays in Russian History

Father Michail Zakharov, Archpriest of the Russian Orthodox Church and Deputy Director of The Institute for Religious and Social Studies of The Russian Academy of Science, provided an overview of the role of the Orthodox Church in the lives of the Russian people and the relationship between the state and the church.

"The history of our country, our people, and the history of the Russian Orthodox Church are inseparable," Father Zakharov explained. "This affinity was particularly evident during critical moments of history. I can recall several such examples—for instance, the Times of Troubles, when Russia was invaded by Polish interventionists. The attempt to foist Catholicism on the country led to the popular uprising that protected not only the fatherland but also the faith. Recently, a new monument was unveiled for martyr Patriarch Hermogenes who played a big role in that uprising. In his messages to the people, he called on the faithful to rise up in order to liberate Russia. During the patriotic war of 1812, the icon of the Mother of God of Smolensk was brought to the battle of Borodino in order to have church service for the troops. This example is yet more evidence of how people protected their fatherland and their faith. Furthermore, during the Great Patriotic War (World War II), even though the state was officially atheist and the church was almost completely destroyed before the outbreak of the war, after the most critical episodes of the war the state changed its attitude toward the church because faith played a major role in the outcomes of the war. As a result, it became customary to have prayer services before battles. Weapons were blessed with holy water. Also, during the blockade of Leningrad faith saved the city. In addition, the church and the faithful donated a lot of money for the production of tanks and planes. In short, we have a proverb: there are no atheists during a war."

The Russian Orthodox Church in post-Soviet Russia

Father Zakharov pointed to the more open religious situation in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union. "The state no longer impedes the work of the church. That is, the faithful are permitted to attend and open new churches. Also, churches are finally opening Sunday schools and conducting other educational activities."

Dean Ilyin noted that in this more open situation, "Many churches have been restored and transferred to the church's ownership. Moscow State University has its own church of the Saint Tatiana. The church has a community of Christian students and faculty... It was returned to the rightful owner after having been used as a student hall, and its parishioners are diverse." The state, he believes, "does not interfere and, to a certain extent, provides help even though many disagreements about ownership of properties remain. Thus, the church is separated from the state—but in what manner, and where is the separating line? What is allowed and what is not allowed?"

Religion and Nationalism in Russia

According to Dean Ilyin, religion has provided national solidarity after troubling times. "In the twentieth century," Ilyin said, "Russia lived through two significant ruptures. These ruptures are connected with the transition away from the guiding principles of life such as faith, fatherland, monarchy—faith in the czar and fatherland, and towards complete atheism and rejection of God. This was followed by another rupture that brought us back to our roots and origins. All of this happened in a very short historical time frame. One hundred years is very little for a state's life and particularly for the Russian Orthodox civilization that traces its origins to Byzantium's religious and historic tradition which, in turn, is closely connected with the origins of European civilization—Rome for instance."



Workshop participants from left to right: Professors Zoya Bocharova, Natalia Smakotina, and Olga Leonova of the Faculty of Global Processes.



Section of Iconostasis in one of the chapels of the Trinity Monastery.

“The religious institutions of a national society or social group suggest common traditions and norms that can become a uniting factor for a society. It is in the conditions of political and spiritual disintegration of modern society that we can turn our attention to the religious norms and ceremonies in our search for ethics and the purpose of life. The important point is that religion helps to keep and cultivate national culture in Russia.”

— Olga Leonova

Role of Religion in Multicultural Understanding



Monk participating in the ceremonies on the feast of the Holy Trinity at Sergeev Posad, Segeyev Trinity Monastery.

Olga Leonova, Professor of Global Studies at Moscow State University, explained that “religious institutions can help to build peace and mutual consent in a multinational and policonfessional society in Russia.” According to her, “The church does not divide people into national or racial categories.” Because it avoids such divisiveness, “the church can guide the efforts of reconciliation between hostile nations and states. For example, the Russian Orthodox Church has great experience in mediating conflicts between citizens who belong to different confessions and it demonstrates respect for their religions’ rights, but—and this is very important—with due regard for the interest of the majorities.”

“The important point,” Leonova went on to say, “is that religion helps to keep and cultivate national culture in Russia.” Invoking the theory of the “balancing of powers,” Leonova expanded on its application, stating that it “is

the system of fair distribution of spheres of influence of many religious institutions in a civil society, in a peaceful way. The government of a country is able to find political and practical instruments and to use the experience of other multinational states to provide peaceful coexistence. The theory of the balance of powers is confirmed by the history and experience of peaceful coexistence of the Orthodox Church and Islam in Russia. The conclusion must be that religious institutions in civil society ensure protection and maintenance of both national identity and the integrity of cultures and civilizations in a global world.”

Does the Role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russian Nationalism Marginalize Other Religious Communities?

Father Zakharov did not think so, and went so far as to claim that “Islam in Russia is as traditional as the Orthodox Church, but there are far fewer Muslims in Russia.” He maintained that “the cooperation among religious confessions always existed.” As an example he noted that, “in Czarist Russia, there were special military regiments which were composed exclusively of Muslim soldiers with an imam attached to them. And there were no major conflicts among the traditional religious confessions: Orthodoxy, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism. There are not that many followers of these religions in Russia, really. Among these religions, in my opinion, there have never been any significant controversies in Russian society.”

New Muslim Immigrants—Are They Accepted?

The discussion turned to the contemporary issue of Muslim immigration to Moscow from Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and from the Caucasus region. The question was whether the relationship between nationalism and the Orthodox Church creates a situation where the new immigrants find it difficult to integrate into society or accept Russian nationalism as their own.

Father Zakharov responded that, “the church accepts everyone irrespective of nationality; the church tolerates other religious confessions. The fact that people from different religious confessions are coming here from the countries of the ‘near-abroad’ is a matter of politics. The church does not interfere in politics. If some of these people violate the law, then it has to be dealt with by the appropriate state authorities. It is not the church’s business.”

Leonova added: “When we celebrated Easter, the first congratulatory statement came from a Kazakh Muslim woman. Even more, if a Muslim comes and asks for help, the local community church will ensure that he will be fed; he will be dressed and brought home. So there is a very warm relationship between Muslims and Christians in Russia.”

Threat of Radical Islamic Movements in Russia

Professor Leonova claimed that radical Muslim activists are influenced from outside. “The events that took place in Chechnya unfolded under foreign influence,” she said, “from places like Saudi Arabia, where fundamentalist Islam is being practiced. Or simply from terrorist organizations which, under the guise and banner of Islam, seek to accomplish their goals. However, again, this is an external influence with which, I suppose, we need to fight. On the other hand, we do not have any problems with the traditional Russian Islam.”

A Russian Muslim Perspective

Moscow State University Provost Idris Tsechoev, a spokesman for the Russian Muslim community, confirmed that “It is indeed true that the religious confessions in the Russian Federation, especially traditional ones, are peacefully coexisting with each other. The recent construction of several Muslim mosques in Moscow serves as evidence of this peaceful coexistence. In the republics of the North Caucasus, where the overwhelming majority of the population is Muslim, every republic has Christian churches.”

Tsechoev affirmed those statements by adding that “the radical processes that took place in Russia and which manifested themselves in the Caucasus Mountains were first motivated by politics; religion came to the fore of the conflict at a later time.” Considering the question further, he added: “If we talk about how we should exist in the future and how we can build a just relationship among people in our society, particularly from the perspective of the Russian authorities, we must, in my opinion, create dignified conditions for the existence of every religious confession. And I am convinced that when people are denied the dignified conditions for comfortable practice of their faith, then it will radicalize them and force them to go underground. That is why all religious confessions in Russia must be equal and have dignified conditions to freely practice their faith.”



St. Basil's Cathedral in Red Square, Moscow.



Statue of General Georgi Zhukov, hero of Stalingrad, at the entrance to the Kremlin.

Has Globalization Been a Challenge to Russian Religion?

Natalia Smakotina, Professor of Global Studies at Moscow State University, posed the following question: “Why, in the context of globalization and with the opening of the borders in the 1990s, have there not been belligerent moments in the religious sphere?” She answered the question by saying that there has been a tradition of religious pluralism in Russia that enables it to adapt to the multicultural aspects of the global world.

According to Professor Smakotina, “There are historical reasons that explain why Orthodox Christianity was always closely connected with the government and regarded the monarchy as sacred; the church has always supported this worldview. Sometimes, the church performed the governing role as the guardian of moral norms and values. But the point is that all other traditional religions regarded life as a short journey from a human life to eternity. That is, the moral values of all four religions were practically identical.” She went on to say that “this principle of religious pluralism in Russia has worked in the following fashion: it did not permit a serious religious conflict to take place. However, this does not mean that there were not clashes. The leading religions play a transformative or a stabilizing role. I think the fact that these four religions did not allow a religious conflict to take place in Russia could serve as a great example for the world’s civilizations.”

Returning to the previous issue, Smakotina acknowledged religious nationalist tendencies in Russia, but noted that “these tendencies are mainly brought from the outside, particularly in the last decade of the twentieth century. The opening of Russian society allowed a foreign strand of Islam to enter our territory.”

Impact of New Religious Ideas in Post-Soviet Russia

The issue of new religious influences was raised with workshop participants who echoed agreement that after 1990, Russian society was open to novel influences, including religious ones. They agreed that missionaries began arriving from America and elsewhere to try to convert and to start new religious organizations in Russia. Among them were Evangelical Protestant groups and new movements such as Hare Krishna and Scientology.

According to Professor Smakotina, following the collapse of the Soviet Union some people “filled the evident ideological vacuum with these religions. However, it was done on a small scale.” Mikhail Gelvanovsky, Director of the Institute for Religious and Social Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, disagreed with Smakotina on this point and asserted that “during that period, those nontraditional Christian movements started to substitute their own beliefs for the official forms of Christianity and it was done in a very aggressive manner because they were able to influence mass media and television. As a result, sometimes they managed to fill huge stadiums with their followers—and not only the Protestant missionaries. There were others too.”

Smakotina conceded: “Yes, indeed there was a significant entry of these movements into Russia in the Nineties.” But she continued to insist that “these movements failed to occupy the same big niche already occupied by the traditional religions, which are widespread and have been living and functioning in Russia for a long time.”

Role of Religion in Providing Social Services

In the Soviet era the government took care of all social services. But in the post-Soviet era there is an opportunity for religion to play more of a social role in helping with education, with welfare, with relief efforts. A question was raised about whether this transition has been a significant change, and how it has come about.

Father Zakharov explained that during the Soviet era “the church could not carry out any type of educational activity, with the exception of the internal education of new clergymen. Social service was practically impossible. Even when a terminally ill patient in a hospital would be dying and he/she had a need to invite a priest, it would be forbidden under the official guidelines, although sometimes it was done in spite of the rules and prohibitions. Generally, doctors would allow a priest to enter a hospital when it was needed. However, in theory the head of the hospital could prohibit and not allow a priest to visit a dying patient.”

Zakharov gave this assessment of the present situation: “Sometimes the government supports us financially, but mostly it supports us with words. After all, the majority of our people are Orthodox Christians. I will not say that they are faithful because not all people who consider themselves to be Orthodox Christians actually attend church on a regular basis. So, in order to gain the sympathy of the people, sometimes the authorities come to churches for celebrations of religious holidays to show that they are close to the ordinary people, and they interact with the people in this manner.”



UC Santa Barbara and Moscow State University colleagues touring Red Square.



Statue in Victory Park honoring Soviet sacrifices and the defeat of the Nazis.



Church of St. George on Poklonnaya Gora.

Religion—How Deeply is it Experienced?

Professor Gelvanovsky questioned how deeply Orthodox Christianity has been accepted in Russian life. He said that “in spite of the fact that for past twenty years we have been living in an allegedly open society, in reality, we continue to live in a de facto atheist state because three quarters of a century of atheism have left a mark. That is, culturally speaking people associate themselves with the Orthodox Christianity, but they have a very poor understanding of the religion. They know that they need to paint eggs and bake sweet bread on the eve of Easter, and that is it. It is very bad when one goes to a church, lights a candle, and immediately regards himself or herself as a faithful person. But when this person is confronted with the demands of Christianity, then he or she has a tendency to drift away, unable to endure fasts, prayers, and confessions.”

The Financial Aspect of Church–State Relations

Father Zakharov explained that the state provides very little funds for the Orthodox Church. He claimed that he was “aware that in Germany, for example, the government collects a tax on behalf of the church. That is, the state sustains the church financially. We do not have anything even remotely similar.” Instead, he affirmed that a parish “is completely self-sufficient in its financial activity.”

Particularly with regard to the financial changes after the fall of the Soviet Union, he offered an example noting that before the collapse, “priests were not eligible to receive state pensions upon reaching retirement age. There was a pension foundation which was created under the auspices of the patriarchate. This foundation would pay a meager monthly pension to the priests who retired and stopped their service. However, as long as they continued their service they would not receive the pension until they stopped working because of medical reasons. They were paid a very small pension: one ruble for each year of service. In the 1980s the amount of the pension increased to two rubles for each year of service. However, in the 1990s the patriarchate’s pension foundation was transferred to the state’s authority and priests were recognized as civil servants. As a result, priests became eligible to receive a pension upon reaching retirement age.” He went on to clarify that “the church does not pay any taxes unless it is involved in some sort of financially profitable activity, which happens very rarely. The main activity of the church is service, social service, and in order to carry out these services the church receives private donations which cannot be taxed.”

“Let’s look at the situation in our multinational society. If religious factors in social and cultural aspects of a society are absent, then there will be a certain vacuum which can be filled by some abstract human values because these human values are rooted in religious dogmas. This vacuum, inevitably, will be occupied with elements and values of another religion from the outside of the territory of the state. The original national culture will be diluted and alienated. There are two alternatives. The first one: the national religion is absent in the spiritual sphere of the life of the country and, as a result, this vacuum is being occupied by elements of an alien culture or religion. This is the experience of Europe. The second alternative: the national religion is present in spiritual, social and cultural spheres of the life of the country and it holds back, it restrains the expansion of alien culture and religion. In this situation a phenomenon comes into being in which two or more religions of a society have to look for and try the way of peaceful coexistence.” — Olga Leonova



Workshop participants and staff.

Role of Non-Governmental Organizations in Russia

The discussion turned to the presence of international NGOs in Russia, such as World Vision, Catholic Relief Services or the International Red Cross. Questions were also raised about the role of Human Rights Watch and other human rights organizations.

“This is our weak spot,” Professor Gelvanovsky admitted. “We have very few Christian-oriented social organizations. In general, the main activity is concentrated around parishes. That is why such significant segments of social life, such as medicine, education, and other social services originate without the church’s nourishment. And these segments of social life demand the biggest return and participation of individuals.”

Asked about particular organizations, Gelvanovsky affirmed that Russia has “all of these organizations, such as Human Rights Watch and the Red Cross, but these are not religious organizations.” When Juergensmeyer wondered whether the NGOs were “competitive with the Russian Orthodox Church,” Gelvanovsky thought that competition was “not a pattern in this case. There is no persistent environment of competition.”

New Religious Movements

Professor Gelvanovsky said that “the problem regarding new religious sects is a separate topic” related to “the weakness of the church—that is, as soon as the influence of the church declines, the sects become more powerful. The weakening of the church leads to a threat of proliferation of cults and cult-like practices. It is a serious problem for our country because it gives birth to business practices associated with cults.”

Immigrants and Radical Islam

Zoya Bocharova, Professor of Global Studies at Moscow State University, talked about the Islamization of Europe caused by the need for labor and “the attraction of the followers of Islam to the Russian labor market.” According to her, “This is certainly a big problem which has global implications and touches on all aspects of life, including political and cultural areas. Thus, the members of European civilization and the Russian people have many complaints about the migrants who come from countries where Islam is a prevailing religion.”

“It is impossible to teach someone what is good and what is evil, in my opinion. Similarly, it is impossible to know what beauty is. That is why science is occupied with the search of the truth with regard to the structure of our world. But the questions about good and evil are dealt with by religion. If we were to eliminate one of these dimensions, then the life of a human would become dulled. That is why religion is one of the most important elements in the life of a person and a society as a whole. Thus, when a person possesses all three of the dimensions, then he has a holistic worldview and religion plays a significant role in this process.”

— Archpriest Father
Mikhail Zakharov

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Are the US and European Countries Imposing Their Standards on Human Rights Issues?

The sensitive topic of human rights was raised, particularly with reference to the announcement by former U.S. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton that the United States government would use its diplomatic support in favor of gay rights and it would not support countries that did not provide similar support. The question was raised as to whether this was solely a political issue, or also a religious one. Could these human rights positions be taken as attempts to challenge religious and moral principles?

Gelvanovsky said that “This question was recently discussed at one of the meetings of our council on religious and social research. I am afraid that this problem is shifting into the sphere of politics... First of all, what are human rights? Any rights outside of the context of a legal system are not rights. It is more appropriate to speak about a citizen’s rights. This is the most important, because what often follow human rights are the attempts at imposing them: ‘here is what we have and therefore you must do the same.’ We have philosophers who clearly explain this phenomenon as a mode of introduction of a foreign culture into another culture. It is an infiltration at the ideological level. This is the first point. The second point is that this process creates an artificial conflict. But in reality there is no problem. A human being leads his life as he or she wishes and no one should try to constrain him or her. I may have a negative or a positive attitude towards someone, but I have no right to touch him, and so I must let him do what he pleases. However, when people impose their norms and lifestyle by demonstrating them at parades, then it becomes an element of propaganda and it is an entirely different matter.”

Gelvanovsky continued by claiming that “Solzhenitsyn noted a very interesting moment when the rights of ethnic Russians in Central Asia were being violated, which caused their mass exodus from the region, and these human rights organizations were silent. No one said anything about it. But when the same conflict happens here—which by the way has nothing to do with religion or nationality, but which involves people from different countries, particularly Central Asian countries—then this conflict is inflated for the purposes of conversation about human rights.”

Russian Society in Global Context

Juergensmeyer noted that “in today’s world, almost everywhere you look there are Chinese, Indians, Russians and Americans, and everyone else. We all live in the same community. So we have to learn how to live together.” In many ways the challenge of globalization in Europe, the US, China and Russia, are similar: learning to value diversity without losing one’s sense of traditional values.

Professor Gelvanovsky conceded that “perhaps it is pleasant to see people like a bouquet of flowers with different cultures and traditions. And if you only have a bland, mixed and homogenous broth, then life is no longer interesting.”

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS



Dean Ilya Ilyin and his staff in the Faculty of Global Processes at Lomonosov Moscow State University hosted this workshop. They took care of workshop logistics, conducted tours of religious sites in and around Moscow, and saw to the needs of workshop participants. We are deeply grateful to our hosts for their time and generosity.

This summary of the workshop discussion was compiled by staff at the Orfalea Center for Global & International Studies. Sergey Salushev completed the transcription, while Aaron Sokoll and John Soboslai were the lead writers. Victor Faessel and Dinah Griego edited the text, and Regina Rivera was responsible for the graphics and layout.

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ABOUT THE ORFALEA CENTER PROJECT ON THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY

This workshop summary is one in a series that is part of a Luce Foundation Sponsored initiative on the role of religion and international relations.

The Orfalea Center project will host regional workshops to:

- bring scholars and practitioners together to identify and discuss issues relating to religion that are important in the field;
- develop curriculum and resource materials that will be available as a teaching tool for programs training international NGO leaders;
- infuse the study of religion in the curriculum of UCSB's own graduate program in global and international studies.



This workshop was funded with generous support from the Henry Luce Foundation.

The Luce Foundation's Henry R. Luce Initiative on Religion and International Affairs, seeks to deepen American understanding of religion as a critical but often neglected factor in international policy issues.



The Orfalea Center for Global & International Studies at UCSB, inaugurated in the 2005-06 academic year, provides an intellectual and programmatic focus for the University's activities in global, international, and area studies. The Center provides financial support and arrangement facilities to sponsor public programs, seminars, publications, and research planning for units across the campus.