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## Studying Russian Religion Since the Collapse of Communism

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### Article abstract

This review article surveys the field of the religious history of Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union. Increased accessibility to the archives in the early 1990s coincided with historiographical developments such as the “new cultural history” and the “lived religion” approach to the study of religious cultures, favouring a renewed interest in religious topics. The article argues that the lived religion approach has allowed scholars to rethink the classic question of the relationship between church and state, to demonstrate the significance of religion to the social, intellectual, and political transformations experienced in late imperial and early Soviet Russia, and to reconceptualize Russian Orthodoxy’s relationship with modernization and modernity. This research demonstrates the need to correct the traditional neglect of the Orthodox experience in histories of religion in Europe and in theorizing religious change and secularization in the modern era.

# Studying Russian Religion Since the Collapse of Communism

HEATHER J. COLEMAN

## *Abstract*

*This review article surveys the field of the religious history of Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union. Increased accessibility to the archives in the early 1990s coincided with historiographical developments such as the “new cultural history” and the “lived religion” approach to the study of religious cultures, favouring a renewed interest in religious topics. The article argues that the lived religion approach has allowed scholars to rethink the classic question of the relationship between church and state, to demonstrate the significance of religion to the social, intellectual, and political transformations experienced in late imperial and early Soviet Russia, and to reconceptualize Russian Orthodoxy’s relationship with modernization and modernity. This research demonstrates the need to correct the traditional neglect of the Orthodox experience in histories of religion in Europe and in theorizing religious change and secularization in the modern era.*

## *Résumé*

*La présente recension d’écrits explore le champ de l’histoire religieuse en Russie depuis la chute de l’Union soviétique. L’ouverture progressive des archives au début des années 1990 a coïncidé avec certains renouveaux historiographiques, dont la « nouvelle histoire culturelle » et la théorie de la « religion vécue » portant sur l’étude des cultures religieuses, ce qui a ravivé l’intérêt pour les sujets touchant à la religion. Le présent article avance que l’approche de la religion vécue a permis aux chercheurs de jeter un regard nouveau sur la question classique de la relation entre l’Église et l’État, de montrer l’importance de la religion dans les transformations sociales, intellectuelles et politiques vécues à la fin de la Russie impériale et au début de la Russie soviétique, et de revoir la relation de l’orthodoxie russe avec la modernisation et la modernité. Cette recherche fait voir la nécessité d’éviter la tendance habituelle de*

*négliger l'expérience orthodoxe dans les histoires de la religion en Europe et d'élaborer des théories sur le changement religieux et la sécularisation à l'ère moderne.*

In 1991, the year the Soviet Union collapsed, with a few notable exceptions, the topic of religion constituted an underdeveloped backwater on the margins of the field of Russian and Soviet history. Yet when restrictions on archival access melted away, scholars interested in the study of religious life — young and old, Russian and foreign — appeared, as the Russians would say, “like mushrooms after a rain.”

It was more than accessibility to the archives that sparked this sudden turn to religious history. Among scholars in the English-speaking world, the coincidence of complementary political and historiographical developments also fostered the trend. As the communist state disintegrated in the late 1980s and early 1990s, forces in Soviet life that had been largely discounted by scholars, including nationalism and religion, suddenly demonstrated their renewed currency. This expression of alternate identities to the official Soviet ones coincided with the more general historiographical turn toward issues of identity, culture, and language and away from explanations of these phenomena that focused primarily on socio-economic factors. Practitioners of the “new cultural history” adopted a broad, anthropological conception of culture and argued that culture must be seen not simply as an expression of social or economic structures but also as creating and giving meaning to those structures.<sup>1</sup> In a related development, many historians of religion were adopting a “lived religion” perspective, one that rejected a bifurcation of religious cultures into “elite” and “popular” religion, exploring instead what Robert Orsi calls “the mutually transforming exchanges between religious authorities and the communities of practitioners.”<sup>2</sup> Finally, Western scholars were liberated from the strictures of an historiography shaped by the need to respond to Soviet scholars’ research agenda and by Cold War preoccupations about the legitimacy of the 1917 Revolution. How do the social, political, cultural, and religious currents at play in pre-revolu-

tionary Russia look now that the collapse of communism made the victory of Bolshevism seem less inevitable?

In the past 15 years, religious history has emerged as one of the liveliest subfields in Russian history, especially that of the imperial period (1700–1917). Prize-winning books and articles have been challenging the traditional stories of the Russian Orthodox Church as a moribund institution shackled by the state, and of Orthodoxy’s increasing irrelevance in private lives and the public sphere. Historians are now illuminating topics such as: the religious structures of power of the imperial state itself, from the eighteenth to the twentieth century; the evolution of the relationship between church and state; the transformation of the clergy and its culture; religion in the emerging public sphere; and how individuals across the social spectrum experienced religious faith. Yet the Russian experience has remained peripheral (if not invisible) to how historians have written the history of religion in Europe and of Christianity more generally.<sup>3</sup> In this brief review, I want to show how the focus on “lived religion” has not only transformed our understanding of the classic question of the relationship between church and state in imperial Russia, but also forced a reconsideration of Russian Orthodoxy’s potential to meet the challenges of modernity. This recent scholarship firmly establishes the significance of the religious lens for understanding Russia’s complex modernization in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; furthermore, it places the Russian experience in the continuum of European religious developments in this period, and suggests that the particularities of the Orthodox experience, as they were lived in Russia, need to be taken into account as historians address broader patterns of religious change and secularization in the modern age.

### Rethinking the Russian Church

In 1985, before the fall of the Soviet Union, Gregory Freeze challenged researchers to rethink the traditional view of the Russian Orthodox Church as the “handmaiden of the state.”<sup>4</sup> This has indeed become one of the central questions animating the debate

in the new studies of religion in Russia. However, most historians have not centred their work on “church-state relations” in a narrow sense, or even taken up Freeze’s institutional and social history approach, as they seek to bear this question in mind while investigating other issues, including popular religious piety, religious dissent, or the relationship between Orthodoxy and empire.

Whether or not their focus of inquiry is the Orthodox Church itself, scholars have been trying to re-conceptualize the place of religion in Russian state life. Thus, for example, Nadieszda Kizenko investigates the relationship between church and state in her work on confession — a sacrament and also an annual legal requirement for Orthodox subjects of the tsar, — while Christine Worobec explores the complex interplay of church, state, popular, and medical authority in her study of the phenomenon of spirit-possessed peasant women.<sup>5</sup> Scholars interested in the large non-Orthodox population of the empire are increasingly illuminating the Orthodox Church’s efforts to protect its believers and proselytize its creed, the evolution of the Russian state’s religion-based system of governance, the challenges the state faced in managing ethnic and religious diversity, the ways in which the system it devised shaped the structure and religious experience of the various non-Orthodox confessional groups, as well as the Orthodox Church’s own response to this diversity.<sup>6</sup> Meanwhile, Vera Shevzov, in her work on notions of sacred community in late imperial Russian Orthodoxy, has argued forcefully that the way in which Freeze and his predecessors posed the very questions of “church/state relations” and “church reform” ignores the fact that the diverse community of lay believers made up “the church” just as much as the clergy did. As she points out, by the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, discussions of the nature of *tserkovnost’*, a term meaning “churchness” or “ecclesiality,” and the “churchly” qualities of various practices and ecclesiastical organizational principles were widespread in the writings of lay commentators on religious matters. Issues of authority and of the nature of the Orthodox community also underlay tussles between communities at the grassroots and their bishops or the religious authorities in St. Petersburg over

the legitimacy of various local practices.<sup>7</sup> The problem of church reform was a dynamic three- or four-way conversation.

### Modern Orthodoxy

Shevzov's intervention is rooted in the lived religion approach, which has been leading to a reconceptualization of modern Orthodox spirituality in recent scholarship. Orthodox theology centres on the idea that humans are made in the image of God and so each person is God's icon in the world. The aim of the Christian life is to preserve and intensify this union between God and humans, to become more and more God-like.<sup>8</sup> This assimilation is a complex process bringing together the mind, body, and soul. The liturgy reveals how Orthodoxy is both a religion of the Word and a profoundly "embodied" expression of the Christian faith: the Bible imbues the words of the service, while icons represent the stories of the Old and New Testaments and often depict the saints studying scripture; yet the liturgy also includes gestures and actions which, together with the words, express the truths of the faith. Proper ritual behaviour is critical to being transformed into the true image of God. Similarly, the religious images that adorn Orthodox churches and homes serve not as decorations but as revelations of the spiritual world and channels to venerate God, the uncreated spiritual prototype of the painted icon.<sup>9</sup>

Modern social scientific theories of history and religion tend to presuppose the superiority of a "scriptural" or "doctrinal" religiosity over a material or "imagistic" mode. These theories were derived from a western Christian and, indeed, Protestant context that strongly privileged texts and direct communication with God. A wide range of popular practices, religious imagery, and ritual have tended to be treated as non-Christian or remnants of an unreformed medieval Christianity.<sup>10</sup> Such assumptions played no small role in the longevity of the view of the Russian Orthodox Church as a state-bound and moribund institution in Imperial Russia: both Russian and foreign studies of church-state relations tended to purport that one of the causes of Orthodoxy's

alleged submissiveness lay in the fact that, in the words of one widely used textbook, “religious content ... lagged behind religious form.”<sup>11</sup> But a tidy opposition between the “spiritual” and the “material” or the “text” and the “image” misses the interpenetration of these principles in Orthodoxy.

Vera Shevzov has led the way in exploring the intertwined worlds of scripture and ritual practice in imperial Russia and the overlapping and mutually influencing worlds of religious professionals and lay believers. She has studied communities’ attachment to their icons, but also the hymns that honoured icons and the sermons that were given on icons’ feast days in order to reveal their living history in human communities and their critical role in the transmission and assimilation of scriptural messages.<sup>12</sup> Unlike the Roman Catholic Church of the time, the Russian Orthodox Church in the late imperial period sought to put the Bible in the hands of believers; Shevzov and others are unveiling a rich culture of Bible reading among both laity and the priests.<sup>13</sup> Although, like elsewhere, the clergy sought to correct lay practice and the laity to assert the validity of their versions of the faith, modern Orthodoxy fundamentally valued materiality, as it strove to deepen believers’ knowledge and understanding of the Bible and of rituals. Evidence from miracle tales, the veneration of saints’ relics, pilgrimage narratives, and the correspondence of believers with their spiritual mentors — including the religious ‘superstar’ of the late imperial period, Father John of Kronstadt — reveals how these religious experiences crossed social cleavages while also being inflected by class, gender and local culture.<sup>14</sup>

Finally, recent scholarship has done much to challenge the traditional view of Orthodoxy as a quiescent faith paralyzed in the face of modernity.<sup>15</sup> Robert Green argues, for instance, in his study of the worship of saints’ relics, that “Russian Orthodoxy was, in fact, an active — indeed, proactive — religion whose consoling power lay in the promise of divine intervention to rectify terrestrial misfortunes and provide solace in this life.”<sup>16</sup> Jennifer Hedda’s work on St. Petersburg priests’ social activism compares their ambitions and activities to the social gospel movement in



the West, asserting that the central common ideal among the Orthodox clergy was that of making the Kingdom of God a reality on earth.<sup>17</sup> And Laurie Manchester, in a path-breaking book on priests' sons, who made up a substantial proportion of the Russian intelligentsia, suggests that the classic intelligentsia values of self-improvement, social engagement, and service to a higher collective good can be traced to a great extent to the values and practices that these men had imbibed in the clerical estate of their youth.<sup>18</sup> How Orthodoxy helped believers to make sense of modernity and how the Orthodox Church sought to respond to and shape the rapidly modernizing society of late imperial Russia constitute important themes of recent studies.

This short survey focuses on the imperial period, where scholarship has been especially rich, but the studies it addresses also inform our understanding of the Soviet period and beyond.<sup>19</sup> From their very first months in power, the Bolsheviks launched the greatest state-sponsored secularization campaign to that time. The campaign's successes now seem less inevitable in view of changing understandings of religion's (and particularly Orthodoxy's) vitality in the last decades of the imperial era. Moreover, as Catherine Wanner has recently argued, state-sponsored anti-religious campaigns resulted in dynamics different from secularizing processes at work in western Europe, ones that contribute to the broader questioning of the previously normative European model. Furthermore, distinctive features of Orthodoxy, the dominant faith in the Russian imperial and Soviet space, such as its national denominational structure and its mystical orientation, also contributed to distinctive secularization patterns.<sup>20</sup>

Recent histories of religion in Russia thus comprise methodologically sophisticated scholarship, deeply in conversation with broader currents in European and North American historiography of religion, identity, and empire. This is why this research deserves to be better taken into account by those interlocutors. After all, there are three main branches of Christianity and the first major Eastern Christian society to modernize was Russia. The study of modernizing Orthodoxy potentially offers theoretical advances, especially thanks to the exploration of a faith



that combined a rich material culture with a commitment to putting the Bible in the hands of the laity. Possible comparisons with Anglicanism, for example, are interesting avenues still to be explored. It is time to write the Russian religious experience into mainstream histories of religion in Europe and of Christianity in the modern age.

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### Endnotes:

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- 2 Robert Orsi, "Everyday Miracles: The Study of Lived Religion" in *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice*, ed. David D. Hall (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 62. For a survey of this then emerging field, see: Caroline Ford, "Religion and Popular Culture in Modern Europe," *Journal of Modern History* 65, no.1 (March 1993): 152–75.
- 3 An instructor searching for a textbook on religion in modern Europe will find Russia (and the Orthodox tradition) completely absent in standard works such as: Hugh McLeod, *Religion and the People of Western Europe*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997); Frances Knight, *The Church in the Nineteenth Century* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2008). In the excellent *Cambridge History of Christianity* published recently, Orthodoxy is treated in its own volume (with an entire section devoted to Russian Orthodoxy), whereas Western Christianity receives chronological treatment across eight volumes: Sheridan Gilley and Brian Stanley, eds. *The*

- Cambridge History of Christianity*. Vol. 8. *World Christianities c. 1815 to c. 1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) and Michael Angold, ed. *The Cambridge History of Christianity*. Vol. 5. *Eastern Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).
- 4 G. L. Freeze, "Handmaiden of the State? The Church in Imperial Russia," *Journal of Ecclesiastical History* 36 no. 1 (January 1985): 82–102.
  - 5 Nadieszda Kizenko, "Written Confessions and the Construction of Sacred Narrative" in *Sacred Stories: Religion and Spirituality in Modern Russia*, eds. Mark D. Steinberg and Heather J. Coleman (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), 93–118; Christine Worobec, *Possessed: Women, Witches, and Demons in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2001).
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  - 7 Vera Shevzov, "Letting the People into Church: Reflections on Orthodoxy and Community in Late Imperial Russia" in *Orthodox Russia: Belief and Practice under the Tsars*, eds. Valerie A. Kivelson and Robert H. Greene (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 66, 70–3.
  - 8 Timothy Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, New Edition (London: Penguin, 1997), 219–21, 231.
  - 9 Chris Hann and Hermann Goltz, eds., *Eastern Christians in Anthropological Perspective* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2010), 12.
  - 10 Hann and Goltz, 5; Meredith McGuire, "Embodied Practices: Negotiation and Resistance" in *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives*, ed. Nancy T. Ammerman (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 187–9.
  - 11 Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *A History of Russia*. Fourth Edition (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 201; quoted in Valerie A. Kivelson and Robert H. Greene, "Introduction: Orthodox Russia" in *Orthodox Russia: Belief and Practice Under the Tsars* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 4.
  - 12 Vera Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy on the Eve of Revolution* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004); Shevzov, "Scripting the Gaze: Liturgy, Homilies, and the Kazan Icon of the Mother of God in Late Imperial Russia" in *Sacred Stories*, 61–92.

- 13 Stephen K. Batalden, "Colportage and the Distribution of Holy Scripture in Late Imperial Russia," in *Christianity and the Eastern Slavs*. Volume II. *Russian Culture in Modern Times*, eds. Robert P. Hughes and Irina Paperno (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 83–90; Kizenko, *A Prodigal Saint*, 13–6; Kizenko, "Written Confessions to Father John of Kronstadt, 1898–1908," and Heather J. Coleman, "'From Ignorance to Truth': A Baptist Conversion Narrative," in *Orthodox Spirituality in Imperial Russia: A Source Book on Lived Religion* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2014), 154, 292–5.
- 14 Christine D. Worobec, "Miraculous Healings" in *Sacred Stories*, 22–43; Roy R. Robson, "Transforming Solovki: Pilgrim Narratives, Modernization, and Late Imperial Monastic Life" in *Sacred Stories*, 44–60; Robert H. Greene, *Bodies like Bright Stars: Saints and Relics in Orthodox Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010); Irina Paert, *Spiritual Elders: Charisma and Tradition in Russian Orthodoxy* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2010); Nadieszda Kizenko, *A Prodigal Saint: Father John of Kronstadt and the Russian People* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2000), 149.
- 15 For a classic statement of this view, see: Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime* (New York: Scribner, 1974), 221–2.
- 16 Greene, *Bodies like Bright Stars*, 5.
- 17 Jennifer Hedda, *His Kingdom Come: Orthodox Pastorship and Social Activism in Revolutionary Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008), 10.
- 18 Laurie Manchester, *Holy Fathers, Secular Sons: Clergy, Intelligentsia, and the Modern Self in Revolutionary Russia* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2008).
- 19 For a review of the initial burst of this work, see: Heather J. Coleman, "Atheism versus Secularization? Religion in Soviet Russia, 1917–1961," *Kritika* 1, no. 3 (2000): 547–558. More important studies recently published include: Emily Baran, *Dissent on the Margins: How Soviet Jehovah's Witnesses Defied Communism and Lived to Preach About It* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Greene, *Bodies Like Bright Stars*; Sonja Luerhmann, *Secularism Soviet Style: Teaching Atheism and Religion in a Volga Republic* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011); Scott Kenworthy, *The Heart of Russia: Trinity-Sergius, Monasticism, and Society after 1825* (New York: Oxford, 2010); Edward E. Roslof, *Red Priests: Renovationism, Russian Orthodoxy, and Revolution 1905–1946* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002); Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock, "A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: Soviet Atheism, 1954–1971" (Ph.D. diss., University of California at Berkeley, 2010).
- 20 Catherine Wanner, ed., *State Secularism and Lived Religion in Soviet Russia and Ukraine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 6–7.