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## The Orthodox Church and Religion in Revolutionary Russia, 1894-1924

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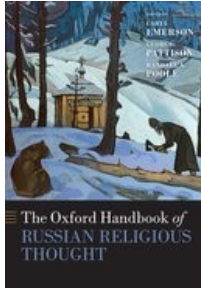
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### CHAPTER

## 3 The Orthodox Church and Religion in Revolutionary Russia, 1894–1924

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### Abstract

This chapter examines the fate of the Russian Orthodox Church—as an institution and community—during Russia’s years of revolution, from the reign of Nicholas II through the 1917 February Revolution and subsequent Bolshevik coup. It argues that Orthodoxy’s legal status as a ‘primary and predominant’ faith, and the state ascription of the ‘Russian people’ to Orthodoxy from birth under imperial rule, were in large part responsible for Orthodoxy’s institutional turmoil during these years. Further, the chapter challenges the use of the term ‘secularization’ with respect to the Bolshevik regime’s anti-religious policies. In the span of weeks, the Bolshevik regime not only homogenized Orthodoxy into the mix of ‘traditional faiths’—all pinpointed for eradication—but also relegated Orthodoxy to the position of least desired and most hazardous within that mix. Accordingly, this work argues that, from any observant believer’s perspective, Bolshevik efforts to cultivate the New Soviet Person—which included initiatives targeting the disestablishment, denigration of ‘liquidation’ of religious leaders, and the nationalization, destruction, and museumification of sacred objects, as well as widespread ‘re-education’ in ‘scientific materialism’—are better understood as a form of ‘internal’, spiritual colonization, and a qualitatively new chapter of Russia’s history.

**Keywords:** [antireligious](#), [atheism](#), [Bolsheviks](#), [freedom of conscience](#), [internal colonization](#), [Lenin](#), [Nicholas II](#), [Russian Orthodox Church](#), [Russian Revolution of 1917](#), [secularization](#)

**Subject:** [Religious Studies](#), [Religion](#)

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IN November 1917, in the midst of Russia’s revolutionary upheaval, and only two weeks after the Bolsheviks’ coup, Tikhon (Belavin, 1865–1925), son of a rural parish priest and recently elected Metropolitan of Moscow, was installed as Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia. He was the first patriarch to occupy that seat in two hundred years. With Emperor Nicholas II’s abdication and the subsequent fall of the Romanov dynasty the previous spring, the imperial presence and lavish public ceremony that historically would have dominated this rite were conspicuously absent. Instead, the ceremony—updated to take into account the

absence of an emperor—took place amidst artillery-damaged Kremlin churches, groups of Bolshevik guards, and a procession of workers and soldiers carrying red banners to the graves of fallen comrades buried in the Kremlin. This scene did not go unnoticed by observers. More than one newspaper described it as an encounter between ‘two worlds’—be it a ‘capricious interweaving’ by fate, or one of total, mutual incomprehension (Silano 2019).

p. 39 Internally coexisting and often divisive ideational worlds were not new to Russia. Nevertheless, insofar as members of these worlds mnemonically engaged Orthodoxy—or another metaphysically informed ‘religion’—1917 marked an unprecedented watershed.<sup>1</sup>↳ Despite an outwardly antiquated ‘look’, by 1917, the ‘Orthodox world’ that Patriarch Tikhon represented had emerged as avant-garde within its tradition. The reign of Nicholas II, and a brief period of Provisional Government rule, saw an upsurge in lived, intellectual, and artistic engagement with and within Orthodoxy. Orthodoxy’s church intelligentsia, most of whom had attended Russia’s theological academies, actively engaged in pressing issues of the day—democracy, socialism, freedom of conscience, personhood, and ‘progress’. At the same time, however, inextricably tied with a regime in the throes of rapid industrialization, a prolonged bloody World War, and increasing social and political unrest, Russia’s institutional Church faced harsh realities associated with modernity: individual autonomy, civil freedoms, scepticism, and pluralism.

The germination of a renewed Church—free from state control and intellectually prepared to meet such challenges—took place, therefore, in the midst of a fierce political storm. The years 1894 to 1917 witnessed the gradual erosion of bonds between the Church and the emperor, whose active involvement in Orthodox Church life had been understood as part of the ‘sacred order of things’ since Byzantine times (*Zhurnaly* 1:140). The Church’s uncoupling from the state did not, however, come easily. Rapidly evolving events exposed deep philosophical fault lines among Orthodox Christians across all segments of society. Orthodox hierarchs proved particularly vulnerable to criticism as ‘servants of the state’ for supporting, if not directly contributing to, Orthodoxy’s imperial legacy, internal corruption, and institutional stagnation. Despite the Church’s entanglement with a crumbling imperial regime, widespread Orthodox debates about the fate of the Church as an institution and community, and about the viability of Orthodoxy and religion more generally in modern times, nonetheless demonstrated a staunch commitment to a world with which any future regime would have to contend.

Modern Orthodox thinking and reform efforts were interrupted, however, by a series of unanticipated events: the Bolshevik coup in October 1917; the Bolsheviks’ dissolution of the Constituent Assembly; a brutal civil war; the new regime’s recourse to extreme violence; and its commitment to a utopian vision that sought to cultivate a new ‘godless’ Soviet person. In the span of weeks, the position of Orthodoxy as an institution and a faith shifted dramatically. The Bolshevik regime not only homogenized Orthodoxy into the mix of ‘traditional faiths’—all of which were submerged under the single canopy of ‘religion’ and pinpointed for eradication, or, at best, ‘natural death’—but also relegated Orthodoxy to the position of least desired and most hazardous within that mix. Despite Bolshevik policies that initially seemingly privileged Russia’s non-Orthodox faiths, all confessions ultimately converged in their eyes. As Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) noted, they were all ‘unspeakable abominations’—or, as the managing director of the Council of the People’s Commissars V. S. Bonch-Bruевич (1873–1955) maintained, ‘superstitions’ that the new regime had the ability to destroy with a ‘heavy hand’ (Luchshev 2012, 9; 2016, 39).

p. 40 The history of Orthodoxy during the Soviet period has received significant academic attention. Indeed, some scholars have even concluded that the ‘history of direct and indirect control of religious believers under Soviet rule has been exhaustively researched’ (Kelly 2016, 12). The fact remains, however, that there is a dearth of English-language ↳ studies about Orthodoxy and religion during the years of Russia’s revolution and civil war (Kenworthy 2018). Furthermore, scholars have yet to grasp fully the complex nature of the Bolshevik project from the perspective of ‘religion’, and the project’s long-term impact on Russia’s numerous religious traditions and their adherents.

## The Twilight of Orthodox Imperial Rule

On the eve of the First World War, the Orthodox Church enjoyed a formidable presence in Russia's landscape, appearing deceptively united and stable. As an institution, it boasted 54,174 churches and 23,593 chapels served by some 113,129 clergymen distributed among the empire's sixty-three dioceses. Many of the more than 1,000 male and female monastic communities, in which some 21,303 male and 73,299 female monastics and novices lived and worked, served as pilgrimage destinations for millions of people (*Vsepoddaneishii*; Worobec 2009). The imperial regime considered Orthodoxy as the 'primary and predominant' faith, thereby privileging the Orthodox Church as a state church.

At the same time, Orthodoxy was only one of many faiths in Russia. Islam, Judaism, Buddhism, Shamanism, Catholicism, various Protestant groups, Orthodox Old Believers, along with a host of indigenous religious traditions and 'sects', cultivated their own faith cultures, and Russia's culture overall. Based on the long-rooted premise that 'each people had its own "natural faith" (*prirodnaia vera*)', the imperial regime defined its subjects primarily in confessional, rather than ethnic or national, terms (Werth 2014, 45). Consequently, its laws made no provision for the 'non-religious' or 'unaffiliated' in the contemporary sense of this term (Lee 2015). Accordingly, if by the term 'Russian' we mean the territorial '*rossiiskaia*', and not the ethnic '*russkoe*', the history of 'Russian religious thought' would include an impressive, culturally diverse array of thinkers associated with a wide variety of faith traditions.

Although privileging Orthodoxy, the imperial state governed its diverse groups of imperial subjects through what Paul Werth has termed a 'multiconfessional establishment'. Despite its politically motivated strategies, the state was surprisingly mindful of the integrity of Russia's numerous non-Orthodox confessional communities. Not only did Russia's state officials involve non-Orthodox religious representatives in deliberations regarding the codification of their respective laws, but state officials also attempted to ensure that regional legal codes were based on each faith's traditions (Werth 2014). Ironically, although only the Orthodox Church enjoyed the right to proselytize, Orthodox subjects were also the most constrained in terms of their freedom to choose faiths. Until 1905, conversion from Orthodoxy was prohibited.

p. 41 Nevertheless, even though its 'favoured' imperial status gave the Orthodox Church an aura of invincibility and stability, it also contributed to the Church's social marginalization ↴ and lack of internal cohesion. Aware of the compromised position in which Orthodoxy found itself as the state's 'primary faith', clergy and educated laity began advocating for the Church's institutional independence from the state in order to allow for its members more effectively to navigate the social and political turmoil increasingly engulfing Russia.

Two major factors underpinned the Church's institutional struggles for self-determination in the years before 1917: (a) a two hundred-year-old state-imposed infrastructure based on a view of Orthodoxy as little more than 'a body of beliefs shared by the emperor's subjects' (Meyendorff 1978, 170), which left the Church with no structurally independent identity or shared self-definition among members; and (b) state ascription of the 'Russian people' to Orthodoxy from birth (through the sacrament of baptism). Both of these factors problematized the meaning and understanding of 'Church', the nature of 'belonging', and the imagined sacred worldview and order that 'Church' represented (Shevzov 2004).

Contrary to conventional wisdom, Orthodoxy's legally privileged position became an increasing burden and liability to its members, especially as revolutionary undercurrents grew stronger. Although many of Russia's state bureaucrats may have considered themselves Orthodox, their primary concern was Russia as a state and empire. Consequently, state officials often utilized Orthodoxy and the Church strategically, to serve their political goals. In doing so, they often engaged issues inherent to Church affairs without even consulting state-appointed members of the Church's ruling body, the Holy Synod (Werth 2014).

The politically oriented world of State Orthodoxy, accordingly, had its own 'sacred' ordering principles that did not necessarily correspond with most believers' existential day-to-day realities; it had little interest in the notion of 'Church' defined as a community of freely ascribed believers. In many ways, Nicholas II only exacerbated the institutional Church's burdens. Legally endowed with the position of 'guardian of Orthodoxy' and 'Head of the Church' in the spirit of his Byzantine imperial predecessors, Nicholas II held a deep commitment to the perceived sacrality of his office. As a result, however, Nicholas II generally regarded Orthodox bishops and clergy as little more than state functionaries, whose primary obligation was loyalty to the emperor and shepherding 'the Russian people' accordingly (Firsov 2002a, 64). Moreover, his sometimes mystical approach to his duties, and his firm belief in an indissoluble sacred bond between himself and 'the people', blinded him to the conditions in which those same people lived and died.

After 1905, Nicholas II's and Empress Alexandra's close relationship with the pseudo-elder Grigory Rasputin (1869–1916) only further compromised the Emperor's image as a competent head of Church and state. Even though they subsequently attempted to warn the Emperor about Rasputin's questionable character, several of St. Petersburg's high-placed clergy nonetheless had initially facilitated the lay Siberian peasant qua elder's entry into aristocratic circles (Smith 2016, 263). The Church, therefore, did not escape Rasputin's shadow. Rasputin's subsequent influence over the promotion of clergymen to the episcopal ranks only bolstered growing frustrations among well-known hierarchs with the tsarist regime.

p. 42 In addition to an understanding of the Church as 'one' with Russia's ruling regime, Nicholas II also inherited a legal definition of 'Church', focused primarily on clergy as a distinct state service rank; lay men and women were excluded since, as imperial subjects, their service lay elsewhere. Such an identification of 'the Church' exclusively with clergy ran counter to the ancient Orthodox-embraced understanding of Church as *ekklesia*, referring both to the local assembly of Christians and to the universal community of Christians that each local assembly was understood to embody. Indeed, according to Russia's Petrine-inspired law code, lay believers, for all practical purposes, were incidental to the definition and institutional functioning of 'the Church' (Shevzov 2004, 23).

Insofar as it was identified with the state, therefore, the institutional Church entered Russia's years of revolutionary upheaval with a massive public image problem, fuelled by the fact that, independently from the state, it and its membership were ill defined. Even Russia's legal experts and historians of church (or canon) law could not agree on a definition of the term 'Church' (Dorskaia 2004, 99). Whether cultivated through lived experience, or impression from a distance, peoples' associations with 'the Church' were conflicted at best. When identified with the episcopacy and bureaucratic chancellery officials, 'the Church' often repelled those seeking existential authenticity, prompting them to search for life-meaning elsewhere. In contrast, for those who thought of 'Church' primarily in terms of the sacred space of a church building (*khram, tserkov'*) and the prayer and rituals associated with it, parish clergy were primarily facilitators of an experience-based 'ritual knowledge'. In this context, clergy were not part of an 'institution'; they were a part of a broader sensory and relational field by in which believers 'construed and constructed their worlds' (Jennings 1996, 112). For the vast majority of believers, bishops figured little, if at all, in this sacred place-defined notion of 'Church'.

Not surprisingly, then, debates about 'the Church'—what it was and what it should be—dominated Orthodox discourse during the final years of Romanov rule and the short period of Provisional Government rule. Despite the fact that both Russia's intelligentsia and members of the Church's institutional establishment had long spoken of mutual estrangement, many of Russia's intelligentsia were children of clergy (Manchester 2008). Moreover, a long history of personal interactions among Russia's lay theologically trained 'church intelligentsia', university-trained intelligentsia, and clergy helped to shape prominent trends in both 'religious' and 'Orthodox' thought. Therefore, while members of the Church establishment and Russia's intelligentsia may have perceived each other as inhabiting 'different worlds', their history of interaction testifies to a more complex relationship. Indeed, initiated by D. S. Merezhkovsky

(1865–1941) and his friend, V. A. Ternavtsev (1866–1940), a lawyer, theological academy auditor, and one-time secretary for the reform-minded Metropolitan of St. Petersburg, Antony Vadkovsky (1846–1912), the groundbreaking Religious–Philosophical Meetings in St. Petersburg were more of a manifestation of a rich history of cultural interactions *within* an Orthodox-informed hermeneutical cultural circle than a meeting of two hermeneutically isolated and opposing worlds.

p. 43 Characteristically, the first gathering of the Religious–Philosophical Meetings in 1901 featured Ternavtsev’s lecture on the topic ‘The Russian Church before a Monumental Task’ (Polovinkin 2005, 5–19). The subject of his talk—‘the Church’—generated heated discussion. Commenting on Ternavtsev’s presentation, the dean of St. Petersburg Theological Academy Sergius (Stragorodskii, 1867–1944) underscored the inaccurate yet widespread identification of the term ‘Church’ exclusively with clergy. The religious philosopher V. V. Rozanov (1856–1919) summarized the problem from the perspective of many of Russia’s educated lay believers, in particular the intelligentsia:

I am a believer, but experience some bewilderment. I have wandered in faith ... but why? Well, where was I supposed to go? The understanding of the Church as the eternal body of Christ developed at this meeting was very beautiful... . But, pardon me, where, nevertheless, am I supposed to go with my doubts—to this same intangible ‘Body of Christ?’ ... Asking myself about the Church, I can find its doctrines, its liturgical services and its rituals. But I open the pages of Filaret’s [Drozdov, 1882–1867] catechesis and read: ‘the Church is the community of believers united together dogmatically and sacramentally’. Then I look around and ask myself, ‘Well, where is this community?’ ... It is proposed that the intelligentsia ‘reconcile themselves with the Church’, that they enter ‘the Church’. So, here I am—a member of the intelligentsia. But I do not know with whom I am supposed to reconcile, or where I am supposed to go, because that which according to Filaret is designated as ‘the Church’ ... does not seem to exist.

(Polovinkin 2005, 40)

Although Orthodox believers might have empathized with Rozanov’s complex identification with—and simultaneous sense of alienation from—‘the Church’, believers’ ‘Church experience’ was anything but uniform. Insofar as it was not generally linked to frequent participation in the Eucharist, the communal experience that the phenomenon of ‘Church’ implied was not necessarily sought in the parish church to which believers were territorially assigned. People could experience ‘Church’ in a variety of settings, including chapels, pilgrimage sites, monasteries, icon visitations and processions, and family home prayer, thereby making regular church attendance an arbitrary marker of committed Orthodox belonging. In this sense, ‘Church’ was a fluid notion. Furthermore, negative ‘Church’ experiences also varied widely. The source and long-term consequences of Rozanov’s sense of alienation, for instance, differed from that of a fourteen-year-old girl’s, who felt her sacred sensibilities so violated by a ‘bad confessional experience’ that she abandoned her desire to embark on a monastic life and eventually became an atheist. (‘Avtobiografii’, 157–8).

Despite Orthodoxy’s protean Church culture and the variety of ‘Church experience’, countless lay people were invested in the ‘life’ of their temple. Contrary to church-related state legislation, which had little to say about lay believers’ roles in managing Church affairs, state legislation on rural governance empowered Russia’s peasant majority to participate in this management via village assemblies. State law, for instance, charged village assemblies with the financial support of parish clergy, the construction and maintenance of their church building, and the oversight of charitable work. Consequently, although legally the parish community and the village community were two separate entities, in lived reality, the latter administrative unit played a critical role in the management of the former ecclesial one (Shevzov 2004, 80–93).

p. 44 In terms of the fate of the Orthodox Church (as an institution and body of faithful) in revolutionary Russia, such seemingly minor details had significant consequences. First, from the perspective of the majority of Russia's officially Orthodox population, the village assembly provided a legally established context in which to discuss church-related matters. Second, such an arrangement challenges the persistent impulse to identify 'the Church' and its governance exclusively with clergy. Although the village assembly discussed church-related matters, according to law, the parish priest could not attend these assemblies unless invited. Therefore, church-related discussions often took place in his absence, and decisions became subject to the local moral economy. The blurred boundaries between village and parish administration, therefore, resulted in priests routinely complaining long before 1905 or 1917 that 'the people' considered church property *theirs* to oversee, often protesting when clergy infringed upon their perceived *right* to do so (Shevzov 2004, 84–5).

Local parish priests, therefore, were frequently left navigating a complex network of relationships within and between villages in order to negotiate positions of authority (and financial stability for their families). Whereas members of the urban intelligentsia, such as Rozanov, may have felt as outsiders with respect to 'the Church', ironically, in the case of rural parish communities, it was not uncommon for clergy to experience an analogous emotion.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly with respect to the notion of 'Church', the legal ascription of the 'Russian people' to Orthodoxy from birth made it virtually impossible to distinguish between self-identified, committed Orthodox believers, non-Orthodox believers, non-confessional believers, agnostics, atheists, and the indifferent. As a result, some saw 'the Church' in Russia more as a 'mob' than a community (Sokolov 1906). The management of rural church affairs often found Orthodox believers positioned between the parish clergy on the one hand, and their fellow villagers on the other—villagers who, while Orthodox by state ascription, did not necessarily share the same sacred sensibilities.

In terms of Orthodoxy's uncoupling from the state, then, 1905 marked a modest though significant turning point. On 17 April 1905, Nicholas II issued his decree 'On Strengthening the Principles of Religious Toleration'. Although limited in scope, the decree legalized conversion from Orthodoxy to other Christian confessions. As a result, the decree initiated the arduous processes of differentiating religious from ethnic identity, and distinguishing self-identified committed Orthodox believers from 'the Russian people' at large, in effect ratifying the long-existing reality of religious diversity among Russia's state-ascribed Orthodox population.

p. 45 Although threatening to shrink the size of the institutional Church's membership through conscientious attrition, the April decree and the subsequent 1905 October Manifesto counterintuitively generated potential for more Orthodox cohesiveness as a result of such a potential exodus. Indeed, prior to 1905, committed Orthodox believers would be difficult to identify (although scholars often look to the problematic source of state-imposed annual confession records in attempts to do so). Most Orthodox hierarchs and clergy at that time, however, failed to see the liberating aspects of the 1905 legislation (i.e. a smaller, but committed, known 'flock'). Concerned more with the quantity than the quality of their flock, church hierarchs remained focused on the relatively disadvantaged position in which the Manifesto left the institutional Church. They objected to the Church remaining legally bound to the state, lacking the legal freedom necessary to engage creatively with the growing marketplace of religious ideas.

With mounting pressures around confessional politics, Nicholas II granted the Holy Synod permission to begin deliberations for a future Church Council. In 1906, a Preconciliar Commission consisting of forty-nine participants—most of whom represented Russia's theological academy-trained 'church intelligentsia'—convened to draft a vision for institutional reforms, and to articulate the theological and canonical principles that would best ensure the integrity of Orthodoxy in a modern age. United in their appeals to the Khomiakovian notion of *sobornost'* (see Chapter 8 in this *Handbook*)—which by this time had become normative in official Orthodox discourse—the Commission's participants nevertheless remained divided



over the term's meaning and implications for the institutional ordering of Church life (Shevzov 2004, 35–45; 2013). Based on a vision of human relationality transfigured by the power of the Holy Spirit—with no difference between 'the scholar and the unlearned, the cleric and the lay person, men and women, king and subject' in matters of faith (Khomiakov 1907, 91)—the idea of *sobornost'* revitalized the existential significance of 'Church', making the 'communal' integral to the ancient Orthodox understanding of the personal path of *theosis* (Shevzov 2004, 31–2).

To a large extent, the notion of *sobornost'* prompted thinking about 'Church' in the critical decades before 1917, helping to elucidate the wide range of coexisting views regarding the definition of Church. For many clergy and laity at the time, *sobornost'* offered a means to embrace modern democratic ideals in an Orthodox key; for others it implied limitation of episcopal authority. Insofar as it suggested an institutional administrative structure that included laity, the notion of *sobornost'* left many clergy and laity guarded during the revolutionary years. They feared that those who remained Orthodox 'by ascription only' might become active in church affairs and decide to control matters in inimical ways (*Zhurnaly*, 1:47, 50; 3:73–4).

Despite the Preconciliar Commission's historic work, Nicholas II's failure to convoke an All-Russia Church Council left Church reforms on hold. Instead, the debates continued mostly in the public domain. In the final decade before 1917, impassioned discussions about 'Church' took place in the secular and religious press and found their way into the discourse of rural believers.

## February 1917: The Push for Orthodox Self-Determination

p. 46 The abdication of Nicholas II on 2 March 1917, and the subsequent dissolution of the Romanov dynasty, caught many of Russia's Orthodox Christians off guard. In the span of days, Russian Orthodoxy and monarchy had become untethered. Orthodoxy's two-hundred-year legal 'primary' status was rendered not merely meaningless, but an increased liability. Reflecting deep disenchantment with the imperial regime, the members of the Holy Synod issued no public call for support of the monarchy.<sup>2</sup> On March 6, 1917—four days after Nicholas II's abdication—the Holy Synod sent a brief directive to clergy to conduct a special prayer service for the 'calming of passions'. Henceforth, prayers for the Provisional Government officially replaced those for the Tsar during liturgical services.

The rapidly changing socio-political environment provided little support for a Church standing 'before the totally unknown' (*VTsOV*, no. 2, 1917). For the next five months, while attempting to come to a consensus regarding the sacred principles underlying Church order, Orthodox Christians faced a barrage of unprecedented challenges, many of which were aggravated by, or fallouts from, the fading imperial past.

First, Orthodox Christians had to negotiate with two coexisting centres of political power: (a) a self-appointed, democratically oriented Provisional Government, which, while not ideologically inimical towards Orthodoxy, advocated moving gradually towards separation of church and state; and (b) the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, whose largely Marxist-informed worldviews were hostile towards the Orthodox Church as both a religion and an emblem of the tsarist regime. The dual power of the Provisional Government and Petrograd Soviet only exacerbated Orthodox Christianity's own internal turmoil.

Second, although presumably free from imperial state interference, the Holy Synod nevertheless saw little change in the state's relations towards the Church under the Provisional Government. The government's liaison with the Synod, V. N. Lvov (1872–1930)—a self-identified Orthodox believer with liberal leanings—assumed the functions of an 'old style' chief procurator. With seemingly little trust in the Holy Synod to steer the institutional Church in the 'proper' direction in the new political waters, Lvov repeatedly made unilateral decisions, defending his actions as removing 'the pernicious sources of gangrene in the Church'



(referring primarily to Rasputin-related episcopal appointments) (*VTsOV*, no. 63, 1917, 2). He agreed to relinquish authority as the Church's 'overseer' only to an elected Church body—namely, the anticipated Church Council.

p. 47 Third, while members of the Holy Synod continued to push for independence from state interference, rural parish communities drew on decades of lived experience, with many parishioners adopting the notion of *sobornost'* to articulate their democratically informed visions of Orthodoxy's institutional future. During the spring of 1917, clergy and laity convened in assemblies in most dioceses (Leontiev 1997; Kail 2013; Evtuhov 2014). Delegates prepared for elections to the upcoming Council and instituted the election of parish priests and, in some cases, diocesan bishops. Such rapid changes resulted in at least some eyewitnesses noting that they 'had never seen such disorder ... even their former ... supposedly drunken village assemblies were better' (Leontiev 1997).

The culmination of these diocesan assemblies was a ten-day meeting in June 1917 of an All-Russia Assembly of Clergy and Laity. Drawing some 1268 participants, it was unique for its general lack of episcopal oversight. The assembly supported the downfall of the tsarist regime, and honoured all those who had 'selflessly suffered and died in the struggle for the rights of the people' during the February uprisings. Delegates favoured a future state (preferably democratic) that embraced 'popular rule, full freedom of religion, and independence of the Church from state interference'. Yet, despite the Church's recent negative experience with Petrine-inspired imperial rule, key delegates, including S. N. Bulgakov (1871–1944) and E. N. Trubetskoi (1863–1920), resisted the idea of a *full* separation of church and state. They imagined a democratic state in which the Church would retain its autonomy from the state, yet in terms of state support, Orthodoxy would enjoy the status of 'first among confessional equals' (*VTsOV*, no. 53, 1917).

Delegates were also reluctant to support a secular educational system in which students would have no access to religious instruction. In discussing the existing views on the issue, an editorial in the liberal central church publication, *Tserkovno-obshchestvennyi vestnik*, maintained that the majority of the population (mostly peasants) had not yet had adequate time to process the implications of a 'non-religious state'.<sup>3</sup> As a compromise, an anonymous author suggested that each school offer students religious instruction according to their confessional identities; if students had a 'non-confessional status', they would be exempt from such instruction (*VTsOV*, no. 62, 1917, 1).

Fourth, despite the lack of consensus within society on the issue, the Provisional Government remained committed to a gradual separation of church from state (Odintsov and Red'kina 2016). The new laws—'On the Abolition of Confessional and National Restrictions' (March 1917) and 'On the Freedom of Conscience' (July 1917)—were steps in this direction, formally bringing Orthodoxy's 'primary' status as a state religion to an end, and introducing a progressive 'non-confessional' legal category.

Although citizens designated 'Orthodox' by ascription were now technically free to choose any confessional identity—or none at all—they did not necessarily do so. Many retained their one-time state-ascribed Orthodox status, if only out of habit, despite the fact they may have long ceased to be, or never had been, committed believers. Histories of Orthodoxy in Russia during this period often fail to recognize this factor, hence indiscriminately interpreting all church-related activism in the period between February and October 1917 as necessarily involving Orthodox *believers*.

p. 48 Yet, because of the difficulty of distinguishing between committed self-defined Orthodox believers and nominal state-ascribed Orthodox Russians whose religious identities lay outside the parameters of Orthodoxy as they understood it, generalizations regarding 'popular' or 'lay' actions vis-à-vis 'the Church' during this period—'when everyone became a revolutionary' (Buldakov 2017, 9)—often misrepresent the complexities of what was taking place at the grass roots. Lack of clarification around the self-designated religious identities of lay actors, or around the context in which church-related decisions took place, often

results in the conflation of a diverse array of tensions between laity and clergy under a single undifferentiated (and undefined) term: 'anti-clericalism'. Were these conflicts related to discussions at village assemblies, or were they the result of discussions by committed believers who saw their actions not as revolutionary seizures of power, but as affirmations of their long-perceived 'rightful' roles as members of the ecclesial body? Were the clergy who were driven from their parishes locally respected priests, or ones who had a history of morally questionable behaviour?

Furthermore, it is tempting to view intra-Orthodox conflicts during this period exclusively as politically motivated class struggles for power: laity against clergy, rural against urban clergy, married against monastic clergy, lower ranks of clergy against parish priests, and everyone against the bishops (Rogoznyi 2008; Freeze 2012). Lived Orthodoxy, however, was much more complex. Philosophical and political groupings often cut across lines of church-defined 'ranks'. Consequently, such terms as 'religious revolution' or 'church revolution' may often say more about the views of the person(s) who used them at the time, than about the genuine nature of the conflict(s) in question.

Finally, Russia's Orthodox believers had to reckon with the Petrograd Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies and its local affiliates. Consisting of Marxist-informed radicalized workers and disillusioned soldiers fatigued by a failing war effort, local soviets were as a rule openly hostile towards representatives of the institutional Church. Their roles in the arrest of the bishop of Voronezh Tikhon (Nikanorov, 1855–1920), for instance, and the aggression surrounding the requisition of the St. Sergius-Trinity Lavra's printing press in May 1917 only add to the difficulties associated with parsing out the diverse intentions, experiences, and emotions underlying the misleading and homogenizing term 'anti-clericalism'.

Not all Orthodox believers met open aggression towards the Church with a spirit of victimhood. The short period between February and October offered clergy and Orthodox intelligentsia the opportunity to reflect on personal and collective culpability in the face of public animosity, particularly from workers and soldiers. In his April 1917 address to a meeting of clergy and laity in Kiev, professor of philosophy at Kiev Theological Academy, P. P. Kudriavtsev (1868–1940), for instance, emphasized the responsibility that clergy and Orthodox intelligentsia bore for widespread workers' hostility towards the institutional Church. Workers' deep resentment, he noted, had real historical roots that could be traced to the silence of many clergy and educated laity in the face of the tsarist regime's abuse of power and social injustice. Any sincere attempts by clergy and Orthodox intelligentsia to forge ties with the working class at this point, he argued, could only realistically be met with cynicism and the justified question: 'Where were you then? You are [now] too late' (VTsOV, no. 15, 1917).

## The Bolshevik Coup and the Beginnings of Spiritual Colonization

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On 15 August 1917, some 564 Orthodox Christians, mostly laymen, convened in the long-anticipated Church Council, the first to meet in over 250 years, and the first to include elected laity. Its goal: to reform the Orthodox Church as an independent, self-governing body, with active lay participation, thus ensuring its viability in the modern age. This Council has since been described as 'not only the most representative, but the freest and most democratic' in the history of the Orthodox Church up until that time (Shkarovskii 2010, 71). Its proceedings remain a rich source of modern Orthodox thinking on a wide range of issues.

The Council's work took place under extraordinary circumstances. Members faced regular threats of violence, even before October 1917; afterwards, reports of the ransacking of churches and the execution of priests and hierarchs became routine. Consequently, some Council members began to view discussion of reforms as purely theoretical. 'It is difficult to discuss monastery organization ... during these difficult times', commented one bishop in July 1918. 'Virtually everywhere monasteries have been destroyed, monastics forcibly evicted, and property plundered ... Can we really speak about the type of damper we

should place in a stove, when the stove no longer exists, and the entire house is being destroyed?’ (*Deianiia* 9:229). The historical context, therefore, raises questions about whether the Council’s members ever intended their decisions to be long-term or definitive (Valliere 1978).

From the perspective of Russia’s diverse religious communities, the Bolshevik coup marked an enduring, rather than transient historical divide, ultimately resulting in ‘true forgetting’ and ‘structural amnesia’ (Algazi 2014). As ‘people of a new worldview’ and the self-designated ‘avant-garde of humanity’ (Lunacharsky in *RiTs*, 1, 1919, 13–17), Bolsheviks embarked on what Svetlana Alexievich has referred to as Communism’s ‘insane plan’—‘to remake the “old breed of man,” Ancient Adam’ (Alexievich 2016, 3). In doing so, the Bolsheviks went beyond the Eurocentric process known as ‘secularization’—and, in terms of religion, instead ushered in a qualitatively new chapter in Russia’s history of ‘internal colonization’ (Etkind 2011).

p. 50 As a totalitarian enterprise, the Bolshevik project centred around what Lenin (1870–1924) deemed a ‘struggle with religion—the alphabet (*azbuka*) of all materialism’ (Lenin 1968, 418). Comprised of an ethnically diverse group of people, the Bolsheviks oversaw an essentially colonizing enterprise of its own sort, dividing ethnic groups and nationalities *internally* along ‘religious’ lines. Indeed, beginning with Russians, the Bolshevik project sought forcibly to sever ethnic and cultural identities from their ‘traditional religious bonds and histories’—an effort that subsequently with respect to other nationalities was termed *korenizatsiia* (Martin 2001; Guseva 2013). In this sense, the Soviet project was not an ethnic ‘Russian’ project (Alexievich 2016, 3), and the ‘Soviet state’ was not synonymous with the ‘Russian state’. The Soviet project was trans-ethnic, viewing citizens not only in terms of class, but also according to epistemological frames of reference that distinguished peoples of ontologically transcendent religious faiths from New (atheist) Soviet peoples (however ‘atheist’ may have been understood at the time). Despite common ethnic, racial, or class ties, the ideal New Soviet Person shared virtually no common frame of reference regarding ‘ultimate questions’ with peoples of ontologically transcendent religious faiths. Early Bolshevik efforts on the religious front, then, might be seen as a form of ‘spiritual colonialization’—with all the cultural implications this term implies—which deemed a Bolshevik way of seeing, knowing, and being as superior to that of the native ‘religious Other’.

While members of the Church Council worked to make Orthodoxy institutionally more inclusive, Bolsheviks actively sought to undermine institutional Orthodox unity. Given that the majority of Russia’s Orthodox population was ethnically Russian, by default ethnic Russians initially also constituted the bulk of the ‘human material’ to be ‘remade’ (Kostelovskaia 1924, 2). As one state newspaper logically stated, ‘in a country where monasteries, relics, and icons can be found at every step, and where under the old regime people could not be born, wed, or die without an Orthodox priest, it would be absurd for a [Communist] publication to begin writing about the Buddhist religion, the Tibetan Dali-Lama, the Muslims’ Qur’an, or the Jewish Talmud’ (*RiTs*, 3, 1919).

Historians have often interpreted early Bolshevik violence against the Orthodox Church and its believers as primarily politically motivated (Peris 1998, 19; Smolkin 2018, 12). Given the nature of the Bolsheviks’ all-embracing sociocultural engineering project, however, such a distinction between politics and religion is misleading. Administrative and ‘politically motivated’ policies aimed at the destruction of sacred material culture were essentially inseparable from Bolshevik efforts to eradicate and redirect what David Morgan has referred to as believers’ ‘felt life’ of religion—namely, those experiences, sensibilities, and memories that contribute to making religions ‘powerful communities of feeling’ (Morgan 2009).

The cover of the first issue of the radical journal *Bezbozhnik u stanka* (*The Godless [Person] at the Workbench*) (Figure 3.1),<sup>4</sup> published in January 1923, illustrates well the Bolsheviks’ characteristic mix of destructive and constructive legal, social, economic, cultural, and psychological measures—however poorly coordinated—aimed at believers’ sacred sensibilities and the institutions supporting them. Broadly speaking, these

measures involved two integral though distinct sets of strategies. The first set (as represented in the bottom right hand corner of Figure 3.1) sought the destruction of religious institutional and material culture. It included state decrees and local initiatives that targeted the disestablishment, closure or repurposing of places of worship; the denigration, repression or 'liquidation' of religious leaders; and the nationalization, p. 51 confiscation, destruction, and museumification of sacred objects—all of which reinforced the image ↵

of 'religion' and its adherents as the native 'Other'.<sup>5</sup> The second set of strategies (as indicated by the muscular worker's ascent on a ladder, with a sledge hammer in hand, intent on annihilating 'the gods') sought to re-form believers into 'new people' by means of deliberate and violent intrusion into their epistemological worlds and interior, spiritual landscapes through a variety of 're-educational' means, including systematic discrimination and often fierce public shaming. p. 52 ↵

**Figure 3.1**



*The Godless [Person]*, no. 1, 2nd ed., 4 January, 1924. Artist, Dmitrii Moor. Text above image: 'We have disposed of the earthly monarchs; we are now attending to the heavenly ones.' Text below image: 'Lord, bless!'

Initially convinced that the Bolshevik regime would not survive, members of the All-Russia Church Council continued their deliberations, remaining seemingly oblivious to the new regime's decrees. The Bolsheviks' violent attempt to appropriate Petrograd's renowned Alexander Nevsky monastery in January 1918, which resulted in a massive church procession *qua* protest involving more than 300,000 believers, finally jarred members of the Council into 'reality' (Kashevarov 2005, 102–12). As Council member and religious philosopher E. N. Trubetskoi noted with regard to the events in Petrograd, 'this is not an isolated hostile action against the Church, but the implementation of an entire plan of complete eradication of the very possibility for the Church's existence ... This is an open war with the Church that we did not initiate' (*Deianiia* 6:10–11).

Confrontations between Bolsheviks and Orthodox believers in a type of spiritual warfare escalated following the regime's January 1918 promulgation of the 'Decree on the Separation of Church and State and of School and Church' (Shevzov, forthcoming).<sup>6</sup> Drafted with the help of a disenchanting St. Petersburg priest, M. V. Galkin (1885–1948), the Decree's stated aim was to liberate people from their 'ideational servility', indicating that Bolsheviks understood the Decree's central provision—'freedom of conscience'—as freedom from religion (Firsov 2014, 48; Luchshev 2016, 45). As E. N. Trubetskoi noted at the time, the Decree legalized 'open persecution not only of the Orthodox Church, but of all religious communities' (*Deianiiia* 6: 71). The Decree's provisions—such as denying all religious communities the status of legal entities; nationalizing church property and possessions; and enabling the state to restrict religious rituals, and religious educational institutions—were consistent with a spiritual colonizing mission focused on 'unforming' and 'reforming' existing communities of faith as part of the colonizers' own ideological project (Lomba 2015, 22).

The Decree's implementation during the first year was highly uneven. Nevertheless, church and state officials were flooded with believers' reports and complaints, which left abundant testimony to the ruthless violence that frequently accompanied its realization. Accounts such as the one from Kostroma in March 1918, recounting the gruesome torture and execution of two priests, a deacon, and seventeen lay people in a provincial town for their 'counter-revolutionary resistance' in attempting to protect church property, became horrifyingly routine (Krivosheeva 2012, 309–11).

p. 53 Such violence only compounded the mass terror Lenin initiated in September 1918 against 'class enemies'—clergy, former gentry, aristocrats, and educated elites, many of whom were observant believers—who were to be 'isolated in concentration camps' or executed. The 1918 Constitution also included monastics and clerics from all religious traditions among the legally 'disenfranchised' (*lishentsy*)—the Soviet subaltern—who, as outcasts, subsequently lost access to education, employment, and medical care.

The contradictions between the alleged legal right to 'freedom of conscience' under the 1918 Decree, and the moral injury and physical violence associated with this and a host of other early Bolshevik antireligious decrees, was facilitated by the harsh realities of a single-party state. In contrast to assertions that the Soviet state (as distinct from the Party) sought to create a system of governance in which 'the presence of religious institutions would be confined to a silent, privatized sphere' (Husband 2000, 48; Wanner 2012, 1; Smolkin 2018, 12), Bolshevik leaders at the time—including Lenin and A. Lunacharsky (1875–1933)—maintained that, from the Party's perspective, religion was not a 'private affair'. Such a notion, in Lunacharsky's estimation, was a 'heresy' (Lunacharsky in *RiTs*, 1, 1919, 13–17). Consequently, given that the Party and the state for all practical purposes were inseparable, distinctions between state policies, constitutional affirmations and Party mandates were a moot point—as many Party members well recognized at the time.

The second set of strategies to forge the 'new person' involved more personal re-education efforts. Such ideological 'antireligious work', however, was often no less violent in spirit (indicated by the activist's sledgehammer in Figure 3.1). Though lacking coherency and a unified approach, by 1920 these efforts had spawned a widespread 'cottage industry' that saw the production of pamphlets, books, posters, as well as public lectures and disputations—particularly in urban areas.

Highly varied in style, two competing approaches characterized this early anti-religious re-educational work. Focusing on clergy, laity, rituals, and beliefs, the first approach was agitational, drawing on satire to elicit 'unlaughter' that affirmed social difference, fostered exclusion, and demeaned a person's sense of self (Smith 2009). Early antireligious activists bred a view of believers as inferior—sickly, uneducated, and servile. The 'new person' in contrast, was depicted as strong, self-reliant, and successful. Re-education efforts communicated that, to belong to the new order, a believer would be forced to abandon, or at least sufficiently accommodate, his or her old ways of thinking to the new 'right way' of seeing and being.

In terms of Orthodox Christianity, agitational-type materials capitalized in particular on the prerevolutionary Petrine-inspired legal identification of 'Church' exclusively with clergy. Bolshevik association of clergy with 'Capital' and 'the bourgeoisie' gave this reductionist identification new life. Rampant and often vicious satire aimed at clergy no doubt abetted the indiscriminate violence against them between 1917 and 1924.

p. 54

A second, more intellectual approach to re-education efforts focused on 'shattering the religious worldview' (Krasikov in *RiTs*, 1, 1919, 1)—defined as 'superstitious' and 'unscientific'—and replacing it with a 'scientific-materialistic' one. In addition to the promotion of the natural sciences, these re-education efforts also involved the translation ↴ of select European authors who, from a Bolshevik perspective, reflected a 'scientific' approach to religion. These included works such as those by British social anthropologist J. G. Frazer (1854–1941) and Arthur Drews (1865–1935), whose book *The Christ Myth* denied the existence of Jesus. For less-educated readers, Bolshevik anti-theist activists published works such as 'Faith and Reason, Holy Water and the Microscope, Prayer and Weather' (1919, in Luchshev 2016, 78).

Perhaps the most dramatic example of Bolshevik 're-education' efforts was the forced expulsion and exile of some of Russia's most influential thinkers (Kogan 1993; Finkle 2007). Between 1922 and 1923, the Bolshevik state intelligence service (GPU) expelled some two hundred intellectuals—astronomers, agronomists, engineers, historians, lawyers, sociologists, writers, and above all philosophers—and their families. Diverse in their political leanings, as well as confessional and non-confessional identities, these men and women, according to Lenin, shared one trait: they were 'diplomaed clerical lackeys' with a 'bourgeois worldview' that was essentially 'philosophically reactionary' (Glavatskii 2002, 109–12). The first group of them was deported on the so-called 'philosophy steamer' that set out from Petrograd for Berlin in September 1922. Their expulsion and those that followed represented yet another effort to expunge centuries of Russia's 'intangible cultural heritage'.

Focused on 'crushing' the institutional Orthodox Church as a perceived 'counter-revolutionary threat', by December 1924—a year after Lenin's death—members of the Communist Party's Central Committee declared the efforts a success (RGASPI, I. 38). In turn, they noted the need to intensify their work among 'sectarians' and Muslims in particular. Initial Bolshevik assurances to peoples of the former 'foreign faiths' that their beliefs, customs, national, and cultural institutions were free and inviolable, proved short-lived (Martin 2001; Coleman 2005; Khalid 2006; Shternshis 2006; Guseva 2013). Since the Bolshevik Party ultimately did not discriminate among religions, and viewed each of them as a manifestation of a single, dangerous phenomenon (see Figure 3.2) (*RiTs*, 3, 1919), it was only a matter of time before all religious traditions faced analogous challenges and fates. Indeed, many strategies initially used to weaken the Orthodox Church—such as the creation of a parallel, state-supported institutional organization ('The Living Church')—would eventually be tapped for antireligious work among other traditions as well (Savin 2012). Nevertheless, as a member of the Politburo M. I. Kalinin (1875–1946) noted in 1924, while the destruction of clergy and religious institutions was relatively 'simple', the task of eradicating peoples' religious worldviews 'could take decades, if not centuries' (RGASPI, 49).



Figure 3.2



A broadside: *Revolution and the Church*, no. 3 (1919). Artist, Dmitrii Moor. Text above image: 'Deceivers of All Nations Unite!' Text below image: 'One cleric (pop) chants worse, one chants better. But their chant is one and the same.'

October 1917 thus marked the beginnings of a shared—though internally variegated—history of Russia's observant religious believers across traditions. An inclusive, comparative account of observant believers' lived experiences in their newly shared 'world'—the unexpected alliances that formed (Zugger 2001, 161; Firsov 2002b), the various means of survival, the impact of inevitable hybridization processes, and the resulting relationships between faith communities and their respective transnational counterparts—is a story that remains to be told.



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## Notes

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- 1 As a 'semantic black hole' (de Vries 2008, 8), 'religion' continues to be a contested term. For the purposes of this chapter, 'religion' refers to a metaphysically and dialogically oriented worldview, embracing both the 'immanent' and perceived 'transcendent' realms, in which prayer figures as 'one of its central phenomena' (Mauss 2003, 21). This definition

presupposes an understanding of religion as both a *sui generis* phenomenon, as well as a humanly constructed one. As such, it includes the ‘world religions’ (Buddhism, Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc.), the numerous indigenous religious traditions, as well as the non-confessional religious worldviews that found their homes in imperial Russia. It does not, however, include the ‘scientific-materialism’ that informed the official Bolshevik worldview (Luehrmann 2015).

- 2 The institutional Church’s lack of public support for the monarchy has led some historians to find the institutional Church largely responsible for the monarchy’s downfall (Babkin 2011).
- 3 The history of the church publication *Tserkovno-obshchestvennyi vestnik* (*Church-Societal Herald*) in 1917 reflects the ecclesial turmoil during this fateful year. The *Herald*’s editorial oversight changed three times during the course of that single year.
- 4 The first issue of this journal was published on 4 January 1923 with the title *Bezbozhnik* (‘The Godless Person’). After the journal’s second issue, its name was changed to *Bezbozhnik u stanka* in order to distinguish it from a newspaper by the same title—*Bezbozhnik*—which began to be published virtually simultaneously, with its first issue appearing on 21 December 1922.
- 5 Between 1917 and 1921 alone, the number of museums in Russia grew exponentially. Much of the content of these museums consisted of confiscated church-related objects. For the role of museums in colonializing projects, see Stocking (1985, 3–7).
- 6 For discussions of this decree, see Husband (2000, 47–51), Kravetskii (2008), Firsov (2014, 13–96), Miliakova (2016, 5–26), and Sovetov (2016).