

Religion, state and ‘sovereign democracy’ in Putin’s Russia

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Abstract

This article explores the role of the dominant Russian Orthodox Church in the evolution of the post-communist Russian Federation. This is not a classic case where religion may have contributed to the democratisation of society because this has not been a primary goal of political elites, and the regime that has emerged might best be described as 'hybrid' with growing authoritarian tendencies. Having played little role in the ending of communism, having little historical experience of working within a democracy, suspicious of liberal-individualist visions of public life and committed to a vision of its role as the hegemonic religious institution, the promotion of democratic governance has not been a priority of church leaders. At the same time the political structures created by the Kremlin encourage a degree of conformity and support for the regime by key social actors, and in the wake of the political crisis of 2011-12 there have been further incentives for church and state to work more closely together. For the state, the church offers indirectly a constituency of political support; for the church, a more needy state has been prepared to promote at least part of its socially conservative agenda. In this context, neither is much concerned about democratic governance.

Key words: Russia, Religion, Orthodoxy, Democracy, Putin

The relationship between democracy and religion, and the question of how religion has contributed to democratisation have elicited a significant literature over recent years, with a general consensus emerging that whilst religious actors may play a role in such processes their role is not determinative of outcomes. Equally, there is no convincing suggestion that some traditions are inherently less democratic than others, though in some historical contexts religious attitudes towards democracy have veered in different directions – witness the Roman Catholic shift, from a broadly anti-democratic orientation in the century and a half after the French Revolution, to a position of critical support for democracy since 1945. In this article we focus on a particular religious tradition, Eastern Orthodoxy, in the Russian Federation after 1991. The Russian Orthodox Church made a negligible contribution to the downfall of the Soviet regime and entered the post-communist era with no experience of living under democratic conditions. More recently it has come to be seen as a key ally of President Putin, and has acted in ways that may have reinforced the perception of those who see Orthodoxy as somehow antithetical to democracy.

Following the collapse of communism, Russia embarked upon a transition whose end point was widely assumed to be liberal-democratic, but which in reality evolved towards something else. Some scholars focus on core elements of democracy which, for Mikael Wiggel, must include both electoral (popular government) and constitutional (limited government) elements, and he outlines a series of minimal conditions that a government must meet to be considered a political democracy. Though his focus is largely on Latin America, it could be said that Russia meets virtually none of the conditions he suggests, and therefore cannot be characterised as a political democracy, let alone a liberal democracy (Wiggel 2008: 230-50). Other commentators would refer to the present political arrangements as ‘hybrid’ in nature, with elements of both democracy and authoritarianism, or they might stress regimes as sitting on a spectrum with Russia shifting in a more overtly authoritarian direction since the elections of 2011-12 (Hale 2011: 33-41; Petrov, Lipman & Hale 2014: 1-26). Those in the Kremlin would reject the criticisms and argue that what has been created is a democracy that accords with Russian traditional values, a ‘sovereign democracy’,¹ though this is rarely given much substantive content and is often characterised by what it is not – a slavish imitation of Western democracy. This evolving module, which in some shape or other is to be found in a range of countries from China to Iran, the rulers claim that their authority comes from the sovereign people yet, as John Keane suggests, the people are both ‘ubiquitous and

absent' (Ahmad, 2015: 85). In this sense, what is being created is a radically minimalist version of Schumpeterian democracy, where 'the people', under some constraint, are permitted to elect to senior positions those chosen for them, but after elections are expected to be silent or serve as a supportive chorus whilst the (self)-chosen governed get on with the job.

Religion's role in this political evolution is less clear. The Russian Orthodox Church operates in a society that has been affected by the often brutal forced secularisation promoted within the Soviet Union. It functions in a society where rates of religious participation are close to those in Northern Europe yet where two thirds of the population identify themselves as Orthodox. Constitutionally Russia remains a secular state, in the sense that the 1993 constitution mandates the separation of church and state, yet the relationship of the two is closer than this formal status might suggest. Politically, it is not secular in the sense that over recent years the dominant Russian Orthodox Church has become part of the socially conservative coalition of support built by President Putin.² In this sense its role is perhaps best described as that of a dominant church,³ where the majority formally self-identify as Orthodox, its symbols and historical ties clearly identify it with the history of the Russian state, and it enjoys various forms of recognition on the part of state authorities. It claims not to want establishment, though it probably enjoys greater political influence than the established Church of England. It does not, however, conform to the notion of a 'hegemonic religion' as defined by Jocelyne Cesari, because the state does not grant it 'exclusive legal, economic, or political rights denied to other religions' (Cesari 2014: 9). Arguably it aspires to be a hegemonic religion, whilst, as we shall see, accepting a status as more than *primus inter pares*. Central to this is its understanding of a true secular state as not excluding religion from the public sphere and, more than that, of church and state acting in partnership for the good of the nation. President Putin was initially wary of this understanding, and during the debates over introducing religious education in schools during 2005-2008 stressed that church and state were separate in Russia (Anderson 2015: 169). More recently, however, he has tended to stress – echoing Samuel Huntington – that Orthodoxy is a core element of Russia's civilizational identity. This political shift is built in part on expediency, but also on an assumption that Russia has something different to offer, a revised version of a secular state that challenges what Hurd calls the dominant separationist-laicite models (Hurd 2008) or the previous anti-religious separation of the USSR. Here the sociological dominance of one tradition is given a recognised status and the ecclesiastical hierarchy some limited degree of influence within the ruling structure.

The Russian Orthodox Church and political transition (1985-2000)

Religious contributions to undermining authoritarian regimes and promoting transition to a democratic order have been well-documented. Most studies of religion and regime change in Southern Europe, Latin America, Africa or Asia focus on the ways in which religious actors offer a public critique of social injustice and human rights abuses, or provide symbolic outlets for resistance such as pilgrimages, holy places and funerals. They stress religious involvement in the institutional defence of civil society and provision of parallel outlets for debate and discussion, or their role in negotiating between government and opposition. In the case of certain Soviet bloc countries these patterns were evident, most notably in Poland, East Germany and to some extent in Czechoslovakia. In the USSR, however, the religious contribution was negligible, with the partial exception of predominantly Catholic Lithuania. In the Russian heartland Orthodox hierarchs were silent, offering no public critique of the existing system, nor playing a serious role in the defence of civil society. There were a handful of religious dissidents, some involved with political activity and attempts to defend the promises on human rights made by the Soviet constitution, but they were small in number and many were in prison at the time Gorbachev came to power. Once he started releasing prisoners of conscience at the end of 1986 they were able to play a role in the evolving civil society movements, but it would be hard to say that there was a distinctive institutional religious contribution. So, a simple answer here is to say that there was no significant religious role in the Soviet Union, despite the grand claims sometimes made for the contribution of religion to the wider collapse of communism, with special focus on the role of Pope John Paul II (Weigel 1992).

Having said that, it may be that there was a less obvious contribution to regime change at the grassroots level rooted in the fact that religion survived at all after seventy years of forced secularisation. The engagement of small groups of intellectuals, artists and others with turn of the century religious philosophy, increasing awareness of religious debates in the West, and the exploration of religious themes in published and unpublished literature during the 1960s and 1970s fed into a general disquiet with the regime that could not be easily expressed in the public sphere. Moreover, the preservation of religious ideas and customs amongst elements of

the population, often significantly distorted and loosely connected to the official teachings of the churches and sometimes lumped together under the title of ‘folk religion’, contributed to a partial undermining of system legitimacy. Measuring this impact is very difficult and varied from region to region, but it certainly contributed to the somewhat inchoate readiness for change that Gorbachev could build on.

It was only after Soviet collapse that Russian Orthodox leaders were to carve out a role for themselves in the new political order, and they did so in a context which demonstrated that transition was not a linear process with a final democratic end-point. Following Gorbachev’s departure from the Kremlin, Boris Yeltsin took control of the new Russian Federation now deprived of its wider empire. The rhetoric of the time was all about democracy and civil society, building a free market economy, and Russia taking its place as a ‘normal’ power in the international order. What was meant by democracy was less clear, as politicians with widely different views all claimed the mantle whilst perhaps failing to understand quite what it entailed. For the president and those around him, the first tasks were preventing a communist return whilst saving a collapsing economy, and over the coming years it was to become apparent that they were not too fussy about the means used. If asked to defend these means, they would suggest that without ensuring these two goals it would be impossible to build a functioning democracy.

For religious leaders, the overthrow of the old regime inevitably posed new challenges. Even had they played a role in transition, this was likely to decline with the years as new social actors emerged – political parties, pressure groups, social movements etc. They may not have liked the old regime, but they sometimes missed the sense of order and the morally conservative nature of authoritarianism and were wary of what appeared to them to be the ‘anything goes’ mentality associated with democracy and pluralism. For the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church democracy was certainly not a key priority, though they too bought into the discourse, and pledged their support. In practice, however, their immediate priorities were rebuilding churches and institutional structures mostly closed down in previous decades, finding sufficient personnel to meet the religious needs of the population, and educating a flock that mostly had only the vaguest idea of the Church’s religious doctrine, moral teaching, and worship (Anderson 1994: 137-214; Ellis 1996). Church leaders were happy to see the back of state control but less enthusiastic about the ways in which this opened up the religious market place, and early on were expressing concerns about what some called the

‘invasion of the sects’ (Witte and Bourdeaux 1999). Though they did not explicitly oppose religious freedom, as the claimed church of the majority and the ‘traditional’ religion they certainly felt that they should enjoy a special place in the new political order.

Key to the church’s understanding of the political changes of the late 1980s and 1990s was the belief that Russia should revert to its true path as an Orthodox nation, and this fitted in well with the growing nationalist inflected rejection within Russia of the idea that the country should simply follow Western models. The church’s primary interest was in a partnership between church and state, albeit one that avoided the subordination characteristic of the late Tsarist and Soviet period. Constitutionally, church and state were indeed separate, but the church leadership was able to close down investigations into their past collaborations with the Soviet state, acquire a presence at all major state occasions, and regain at last some of the property lost during the Soviet period. Interviewed in 1997 Patriarch Aleksii accepted that the church should be separate from the state, but argued that it could ‘not be separated to any extent from the people and from society’ (Interview with Patriarch Aleksii 1997). Yet in practice church-state relations were probably closer than in many European states that still have established churches, and in 2013 demands were to surface for a formal constitutional recognition of Orthodoxy’s pre-eminence. At no point did the church enjoy a monopoly as suggested by Koesel (Koesel 2014: 167), nor could it be described as ‘hegemonic’ as defined by Cesari, because it did not enjoy exclusive privileging. Rather, those religious communities that were defined as ‘traditional’ to Russia (ie. largely tied to specific ethnic groups in the Russian Federation) were expected to accept what Agadjanian has called ‘hierarchical pluralism’. This approach was ‘based on a view of Orthodoxy (that of the Russian Orthodox Church, Moscow Patriarchate) as the norm of religious life, corresponding to both the aims of the State and the expectations of the nation. All other forms of religion were then evaluated in terms of their degree of proximity to this norm, of their possibility of interacting with it, constituting a hierarchy of faiths behind which lies the hierarchy of symbolic congruence with national identity’ (Agadjanian 2000: 119-20). In this system Orthodoxy was dominant, followed in effect by Islam, Judaism, Buddhism and Christian groups tied to particular ethnic groups. Below them sat a range of groups from the sometime begrudgingly accepted Baptists to a range of groups – from neo-Pentecostals and Jehovah’s Witnesses to Hare Krishnas and Scientologists who were dismissed as ‘sects’ with no genuine claims to a place in the new Russian religious landscape (Fagan 2012).

This move towards a closer relationship with the state could be seen in a number of key developments during the 1990s and beyond, most notably in the attempts to restrict religious pluralism, critique the liberal-democratic nexus, push for a particular version of religious education in schools and claim the right to exercise moral guardianship over the wider society. Church leaders had no experience and little understanding of the demands of a democratic polity and were deeply suspicious of their implications for its own interests. In part this stemmed from their socialisation in the Soviet system, which left them like other organisations, defensive and suspicious of autonomous social action – though perhaps more so than some because of their internally hierarchical organisation and the need to cling to a conservative and traditionalist theology to survive Soviet era persecutions. Russian church leaders had no experience of functioning in a democratic order and now often felt more comfortable with the political leaders they had worked with prior to 1991. As deeply conservative men they were suspicious of the social pluralism that looked like license, and sought state support in constraining the worst excesses in both the religious and the social sphere. When it comes to assessing their contribution to democratisation one can focus on whether they prove willing to accept a degree of social and political pluralism, whether they encouraged tolerance and acceptance of difference, and how they operated in the spheres of civil and political society. At the leadership level the church has preferred to influence politics primarily by working within the corridors of power, where it has questioned the relevance of liberal democracy for Russia, seemingly rejected any notion of universal human rights, and taken a leading role in seeking to limit the rights of religious minorities and, more recently, in promoting other illiberal measures. Clearly the church was operating after 2000 in a political context where democracy in any meaningful sense was not on the political agenda, but this was reinforced by its decision taken to opt for a Kremlin supportive role rather than a ‘prophetic’ or pro-democratic orientation.

We shall return to some of these issues later, but here we focus on the question of religious pluralism. During the 1990s Orthodox hierarchs, in their first major flexing of political muscle, supported a campaign to change the relatively liberal Gorbachev era law on freedom of conscience in a way that restricted entry into the religious market-place. This culminated in a new law approved by the State Duma in 1997, the preamble to which offered a symbolic advantage to the Russian Orthodox Church whilst creating three distinct categories of religious organisations in respect of rights and recognition. Though not using the concept, it provided the basis for the later use of the concept of ‘traditional religions’

much utilised by the Orthodox Church and state officials (Fagan 2012: 121-51). Though often seen as the one major triumph of Orthodox lobbying in the 1990s, Irina Papkova quite rightly points out that it was very much a product of particular context where Church objectives coincided with an anti-Western mood amongst much of the political elite that stemmed from the perceived failure of the outside world to provide the expected degree of financial support for Russian 'reforms' and the tendency of some Western political leaders to assume that the new Russia should simply buy into their political, economic and foreign policy agendas. In the religious sphere this was also evident in the mid-1990s in an often hysterical anti-sect campaign in the Russian media with religious and secular leaders attacking 'the invasion of the sects'. Here there was a tendency to depict virtually all 'unknown' religious minorities, from Hare Krishnas to most Protestants, as created by expensively funded US and European missionary groups, even though many of these groups had been present in Russia for decades if not centuries (Papkova 2011: 74-93; Anderson 2003: 115-38). As the new century approached, interpretations of the 1997 law's out-workings varied considerably. It was probably true to say that whilst some groups experienced serious harassment and restriction, and continue to do so, the law did not take Russia back to its Soviet past.⁴ In terms of democratisation, the importance of this law was the message it sent to the wider society – difference was not to be accepted or celebrated but rather to be seen as a threat. In later years there were to be various attempts to tighten the law further, restrict evangelism, and to ban some groups under 'anti-extremist' legislation which further served to 'securitise' religious others including many Muslim groups and some Protestants and others designated as 'sects' who threatened Russian security. For its part, the Kremlin appeared to be satisfied with the changes made in 1997 and unwilling to support further legal restrictions, though largely happy to ignore the persistent harassment of groups like the Jehovah's Witnesses, some Pentecostal groups, unofficial Muslim communities and others lumped together as 'sects' or categorised as 'extremist' (Fagan 2012: 155-71).

Understanding the Russian Church's attitude to religious freedom is helped by reference to two key documents issued by the Council of Bishops in 2000: *The Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church* and *The Basic Principles of Attitudes to the Non-Orthodox*. In the first, freedom of conscience was said to be useful insofar as it helped the church to function in a secular society, but in Russia it was also further evidence of a society that had 'lost its religious goals and values and became massively apostate' (Social Concept 2000) - hardly a ringing endorsement. The latter document was blunter still, as it started from

the very basic claim that ‘the Orthodox Church is the true Church of Christ’ (1.1) and all other institutions claiming to be churches have moved away from the Orthodox, and true unification is only possible in the bosom of the ‘One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church’ (2.3). For this reason the Church cannot accept any model of inter-church relations that assumes the equality of all denominations (2.7), and by implication, neither should the state support all equally. Within the territories of the former Soviet Union it will collaborate with churches that share traditional creedal commitments and accepts the right of non-Orthodox communities to witness to their faith, but only amongst ‘population groups that traditionally belong to them’ (6.3). This over-arching claim to be the true Christian Church already creates a predisposition to be wary of religious pluralism, and this is reinforced by claims made about Russia as the church’s ‘canonical territory’ and about the right of minorities to work only amongst populations that ‘belong to them’ (Basic Principles 2000). For the leadership of the Church it is fairly clear that freedom of conscience was something that had to be qualified by the historically dominant Orthodox tradition, and that pluralism based upon equal freedom for all must inevitably be constrained.

Towards a new ‘symphonia’, 2000-2011?

When Vladimir Putin formally took over the presidency in early 2000 the scene was set for a change, as he promised to restore order and pride in a Russia that had been battered by the loss of empire, economic and social collapse, and political instability. Over the following years he evolved a system of what came to be described as ‘managed’, then ‘sovereign’ democracy which was sold as a model more suited to Russian cultural conditions, and which effectively came to mean that elections were held but that Kremlin backed parties or individuals dominated. People could vote, officially backed candidates could sometimes lose, but in a context where media freedom and public space was increasingly closed down, a degree of electoral fraud was common, and there were considerable organisational constraints on those seeking to create genuine opposition movements – leaving aside the failures of those who aspired to such a role. Formally this could be described as a ‘hybrid’ regime but one that leant increasingly in an authoritarian direction where the lack of genuine societal ‘feedback’ meant that the Kremlin was unprepared for the degree of public protest that emerged in 2011-12 (Petrov, Lipman and Hale 2014: 17-21). For many this system of top-down stabilisation had to be better than the conditions of the previous decade, and this was

certainly the position of church leaders enamoured of a leader who claimed to be an Orthodox believer and paid proper respect to religious institutions. His commitment to truly democratic values may have been questionable, but that was not of particular concern to church hierarchs. They continued to deny any aspiration to becoming a state church, but made it clear that the relationship between the state and the Russian Orthodox Church was distinctive (Interview with Metropolitan Hilarion 2010). Church spokesmen increasingly preferred to speak off this as a return to something akin to the Byzantine notion of *symphonia* where each side had distinctive but entwined roles, and Orthodox leaders sometimes saw this as offering a distinctively Russian way of being ‘secular’; others argued for a more theocratic perspective along the lines of the Old Testament judges where on occasions the religious and political leadership could effectively be provided by the same person (Social Concept 2000; Anderson 2009: 133-38 & 144-45). In a March 2011 broadcast, Patriarch Kirill suggested that it would be wrong for the church to play politics, but suggested that it could exercise influence through moral evaluations and promotion of the Christian message (Broadcast by Patriarch Kirill). For its part, the state was happy to offer symbolic recognition, as was apparent in November 2011 when the Patriarch moved back into the Kremlin, occupying the chambers used by church leaders in earlier centuries (Okorokova 2011).

There is no space here to explore more fully the twists and turns of church-state relations during this period (Know 2004; Papkova 2011; Fagan 2012), and our focus turns to Orthodox attitudes to the related questions of democracy and human rights. What is clear during this period is that democracy was not ‘the only game in town’ in the Russian Federation and that doubts about the commitment of the Russian Orthodox Church to democracy were not without foundation. Various scholars have suggested that religious traditions are multi-vocal and that all can and have adapted to democratic traditions, but it may also be that, at certain times and in certain circumstances, what I have called the ‘centre of gravity’ of particular traditions may operate in ways that support or hinder the building of democratic polities (Stepan 2000; Anderson 2004). Why traditions ‘shift’ is contested, some focusing on theological and ideological change – Vatican II in the case of Catholicism – some on the need to preserve social hegemony or market share, and others stress the importance of local contextual factors (Anderson 2007). In the Russian case the speeches and writing of key church leaders reveal a deep scepticism or even rejection of liberal understandings of democracy and accompanying claims about its roots in a universally valid conception of human rights. Instead we see what is in principle a perfectly legitimate attempt, paralleled in

some Muslim debates about democracy, to create an authentic Russian vision of democracy by both the Kremlin and the Moscow Patriarchate, though critics might question what remains of democracy in this particular conception, the substantive meaning of which has yet to be elaborated.

The church's leadership during the late 1990s and early part of the twenty first century developed a social critique that was rooted in a deep scepticism about and hostility to the liberalism they saw as characterising Western societies and which was alien to Russian culture. We cannot explore this in depth here, but simply note Metropolitan Kirill's frequently quoted 2000 argument that 'the fundamental contradiction of our epoch...is the opposition of liberal civilised standards on the one hand, and the values of national, cultural and religious identity on the other' (Patriarch Kirill 2000). For the future Patriarch and his colleagues, the liberal focus on unfettered individual freedom failed to take into account any notion of sin or of individuals as 'unique human persons' located in particular communities, nor the fact that individual behaviour should be in broad conformity with the norms and moral values of those communities (Agadjanian & Rousselet 2005). They objected to the idea that Western European norms should in some sense be depicted as universal and determinative for Russia, and this approach dovetailed nicely with evolving Kremlin ideas about 'sovereign democracy'.

As the Putin administration moved in a less democratic direction, leading church spokesmen appeared to follow suit. Fr Vsevolod Chaplin, one of the Moscow Patriarchate's leading spokesmen on public affairs, published an article in 2004 where he spoke of democracy as a form of government which 'rejects religious authority and declares the government independent from God...it is rooted in competition...The Church's ideal is the nation as a living organism, a unified body that sees disagreements as unnatural and unhealthy'. Moreover, in terms of priorities, the primary aim of the church should be less with democratic development than 'uniting its forces in service to the fatherland and the nation'(Chaplin 2004: 31-46). By 2007 he was becoming much more hostile, stating that 'Orthodox civilization stands in opposition to western democracy, whose downfall is not far off' and suggesting that 'multi-confessionality, multiparty systems, separation of powers, competition, administrative conflicts—all that the present political system takes such pride in—are symptoms of spiritual unhealthiness. The very existence of a pluralistic democracy is none other than a direct result of sin'. For Fr Chaplin, the Russian administration had moved

in the right direction by reducing the level of political squabbling and turning parliament into a place for the ‘harmonisation of interests’ (Zaitseva 2007). Similar comments were made by Metropolitan Kirill who increasingly spoke in terms of a distinctive Russian civilisation, one in which the concept of sovereign democracy was far more suitable to the country’s culture than the noisy competition and pursuit of selfish interests he saw as characteristic of democratic politics in much of Europe and North America.

Similar ambivalence can be found in the Church’s thinking on human rights, as it attempted to address the question of what was to replace a liberalism and pluralism starting from the position that the autonomous individual should be the primary focus of any rights regime. In 2006 the Church contributed to the creation of a Russian Declaration of Human Rights produced for the annual meeting of the World Council of the Russian People. Describing itself as speaking for the ‘distinct Russian civilization’ – and Kirill often appeared to use this concept as much as any narrowly religious understanding of Russia (Filatov 2012a: 14) - this document stressed the prior right of ‘internal freedom from evil and the right of moral choice’. Human rights in this conception could not be separated from morality and the document suggested that there were values no less important than human rights, including ‘faith, morality and the sanctity of holy objects and one’s homeland’. Hence there was a need to ensure that individual rights did not ‘trample upon religious or moral traditions, insult religious or national feelings’. It also spoke of the church as collaborating with the state in ‘preserving the rights of nations and ethnic groups to their individual religion’, but was somewhat evasive in setting out what this meant for the right of individuals to make their own religious choices.⁵

Interviewed in April 2006, Metropolitan Kirill suggested that the liberal conception of human rights was becoming ever more aggressive in the West and trying to present itself as universal. He argued that the Western conception of rights emerged without any reference to traditional religious views, as if rights could be discussed without reference to morality (Interview with Patriarch Kirill 2006). Addressing the United Nations Human Rights Council in March 2008, Kirill caused something of a stir when he drew out some of the implications of the Church’s stance, saying:

The human rights approach has been...used to justify the outrage against and distortion of religious symbols and teachings. The same approach is used today to impose a

certain course of introduction to various religions in schools, instead of teaching the basics of their own religion....In addition, there is a strong influence of extreme feministic views and homosexual attitudes to the formulation of rules, recommendations and programs in human rights advocacy, which are destructive for the institution of family and reproduction of population....

And he went on to attack relativistic approach to human rights, which should be implemented 'taking into account the cultural distinctive features of a particular people.' Perhaps inevitably, this led to a sub-committee of the UN Council issuing a critical minute, but the Russian Orthodox Church remained unapologetic (Blitt 2011: 406-10).

According to one church spokesperson, the original understanding of human rights lay in the Christian understanding of the nature of the human person who, while endowed with unalienable rights, operates within a moral consensus as in the case of the family where:

...the Christian understanding of marriage was adopted as obvious to everyone..... The assertion of individual human rights was linked initially with recognition of the right to religious freedom within Christianity. With time however, serious changes took place both in Europe and in the world as a whole. Moreover, a completely different situation developed when an entirely secular attitude to human rights prevailed in European (in the cultural sense) societies. Article I of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) reads: 'All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood'. There is no longer any reference to the Creator. The natural law is now built on a biological rather than religious understanding of human nature.... At the same time, the modern human rights concept, set against various ideologies of national or cultural exclusiveness, was itself built on the ideology of liberal individualism, Western European in origin but claiming universality (Bulekov 2007).

In June 2008 the Moscow Patriarchate's Bishop's Council accepted a further revised document that repeated many of these concerns whilst adding that under the pretence of human rights protection 'civilizations should not impose their lifestyle patterns on other civilizations' or 'serve the interests of certain countries'.⁶ Kristina Stoeckl suggests that this position is not necessarily about the church rejecting the possibility of a universal conception

of human rights, but about making a distinctively Orthodox contribution to the debate about rights whilst also arguing that it might be necessary to recognise that there can be multiple understandings of rights (Stoeckl 2011: 217-33). At the same time, the church's position appeared to echo the old Soviet constitution with its suggestion that rights had to be exercised in accordance with socialist – now religious – values. For Alexander Agadjanian, this document suggested that the Russian Orthodox leadership was claiming 'religious, moral and cultural hegemony', and rejecting 'not only the excesses of individualism, but altogether the very notion of the autonomous individual as the holder of inalienable rights' (Agadjanian 2010: 104-6).

Church and state in perfect harmony, 2012-2015

For much of the opening decade of the twenty first century the leadership of the Church worked hard to perfect its relationship with the first Putin administrations (2000-2008). They had no wish to be subservient but hoped that this ostensibly Orthodox president would support their aspirations for a greater role in public life. This was not always an easy relationship, in part because on specific issues church and state disagreed. Putin, repeatedly referred to Russia as a multi-confessional state, reportedly wanted Pope John Paul II to visit the country despite church opposition, and was lukewarm about Orthodox based religious education in schools. It was under Dmitry Medvedev (2008-2012) that a much altered set of religious studies course were introduced in the public schools, initiatives taken to provide military chaplains in the armed forces, and a law on the return of church property approved. The church was also wary of going too far in supporting those in power when they made larger claims, as in mid-2011 when Kremlin spin doctor Vladislav Surkov stated his belief that 'Putin was given to Russia by God and destiny in a hard hour for our one big nation'. Patriarchal spokesman Fr Vsevolod Chaplin responded that it was too soon to judge the achievements of the current authorities though he expressed the hope that Putin and Medvedev were sent for some purpose (*Interfax religii*, 12 & 19 July 2011).

This relationship was to be tested further by public protests surrounding the elections of 2011-12. Whilst the church leadership initially remained quiet, a number of priests and theologians began to speak out, using both church publications and social media to indicate their concerns about the election results. Fr Feodor Lyudogovskiy suggested that the elections

took place in an atmosphere of strong administrative pressure and claimed that there was significant evidence of ballot stuffing and manipulation of figures by electoral officials. Whilst he expressed reservations about some of the passionate debates surrounding the parliamentary elections, he suggested that the elections in general were characterised by lies and hypocrisy (Lyugovsky 2011). Other priests attacked the election process on their Facebook pages, reported on their experience of demonstrations, and gave accounts of observing electoral fraud in particular districts (Melnikov 2011). All of this caught the Moscow Patriarchate off guard and they struggled to respond. Vladimir Legoida, head of the Synodal Information Department, initially called for calm whilst asking people to report any evidence of serious electoral malpractice to the church's Department of Church-Society Relations. This position was supported by public affairs spokesman Fr Vsevolod Chaplin, who said that they would be willing to take up any proven violations with the government's electoral commission (Kishkovsky 2011).

For his part, Patriarch Kirill urged caution, and in a Christmas interview he emphasised the need to preserve a strong state whilst warning protestors not to be used by those seeking political power – in effect buying into the Kremlin position that protest was all manipulated by a tiny minority, rather than a reflection of real grievances. He reminded his listeners of the way in which the Bolsheviks had taken over the 1917 revolution to impose tyrannical rule and how the protests at the end of the 1980s had brought down the Soviet Union (BBC Online, 7 January 2012). Others were more outspoken, with Kirill's spiritual father, Skhiarchimandrite Ilii, suggesting that the protests were the work of people who wanted to provoke social unrest in Russia and 'who hate our country' (Filatov 2012b). The Moscow Patriarchate's equanimity was not helped by the controversies surrounding the Pussy Riot demonstration in the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, which only encouraged the Church to line up behind the president. By mid-February the Patriarch's earlier call for more dialogue and openness had gone as Kirill spoke of Putin as a 'miracle of God' and those around him called for an end to protests that threatened the well-being of state and society. Following the re-election of President Putin, Fr Chaplin suggested that 'the power of this personality is obvious, and the popular trust is obvious which is of a length unprecedented in the history of Russian democracy' (Moshin 2012).

Since the election controversies of 2011-12 church and state have moved closer together, for largely self-interested reasons. The leadership of both share a suspicion of autonomous

social action and organisation in their own spheres, have acted to discipline those members of the community who were too outspoken during the protests, and have promoted a more nationalistic emphasis on Russia's right to pursue its own path of development. This has also created a more propitious moment for the church leadership to seek support for its own agenda, notably in backing proposals for more restrictive abortion legislation and passage of a law banning the 'propaganda of non-traditional sexual relations'. In the wake of the Pussy Riot affair, they welcomed the passage of laws to protect the religious feelings of believers. These developments may create storms of protest abroad but the targeting of homosexuals enjoys considerable support from the Russian population, whilst the 'blasphemy law', aimed at discouraging a repeat of Pussy Riot type episodes and deterring those involved in the vandalising of religious sites and symbols during 2012, has a degree of more ambivalent public support. At the end of 2013 some legislators proposed going further and changing the text of the 1993 Constitution. Elena Mizulina, head of the Duma's Committee on Family, Women and Children, suggested an amendment to the constitutional preamble that would speak of the significance of Orthodoxy in the development of Russian history. This proposal was based on an appeal from several public organisations which stated that 'Orthodoxy is the national idea of Russia, its special civilizational code, and the essence of its spiritual sovereignty. Orthodoxy is the basis of Russian identity....And just as the governmental sovereignty of the Russian Federation is confirmed by legislation, we urge that its spiritual sovereignty be confirmed by recognising in the Russian constitution the special role of Orthodoxy', whilst stressing that this in no way infringes the rights of minorities (*Interfax religii*, 25 November 2013). This idea was supported by church leaders and, as if in recognition of the de facto rising power of the church, in January 2015 Patriarch Kirill was invited to address parliament. He used the opportunity to defend traditional values and call for legislative restriction of abortion. Defending Russia's distinctive historical tradition, he went on to argue that 'the idea of prioritizing the value of free choice and rejecting the priority of moral norms has become a slow acting bomb for Western civilization' (Radio Free Europe 2015).

Church, state and democratisation

Much of the literature on democratisation stresses religion and state in conflict, as religious groups for a range of reasons come to support the democratisation of their countries and in consequence find themselves at odds with the authoritarian state. Simultaneously there is a largely redundant, often a-historical debate as to whether certain religious traditions are inherently democratic or un-democratic. More recent studies have focus on the institutional dynamic, and the ways in which religion-state interactions can help to shape political development and push religious organisations and traditions in more or less pro-democratic directions. Jocelyne Cesari's study of Muslim democracy suggests that 'Islam is not antidemocratic per se, but certain forms of state-religion interaction are, such as regulating, restricting, or privileging religious activity' (Cesari 2014: 15). Karrie Koesel in her study of religion and authoritarianism in Russia and China argues that 'the nature of the contemporary authoritarian project... provides incentives for collaboration' rather than the religion-state conflict often associated with political transitions (Koesel 2014: 28).

The key contention of this article has been that in Russia building a recognisably democratic state, as opposed to a powerful state, has not been a key priority of those holding political power in the Kremlin. In these circumstances, the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church has proved unable and/or unwilling to promote democratisation. The roots of this reluctance lie partly in the absence of any historical experience of working within a democratic and pluralist context, on the part of a church whose senior leaders grew up and were often appointed in the Soviet era – though there is little evidence to suggest that younger bishops are any more inclined to pro-democratic attitudes. There is also a presumption of Orthodoxy as the dominant religion in Russia and an aspiration on the part of some hierarchs to a status akin to Cesari's notion of hegemonic religion. Alongside this there is an ideological-theological perspective rooted in a belief in the distinctiveness of Russian civilization, and an argument that forms of governance, democratic or otherwise, should be rooted in (presumably fixed) Russian cultural traditions, rather than the liberal individualism said to underlie European and North American conceptions of liberal democracy. Underlying this is a thinly articulated perception that pluralism might serve as a harbinger of further societal secularisation in a society still recovering from decades of enforced anti-religion. Whilst these factors help to shape the thinking of church leaders, they could still have chosen differently, and here other factors have been at play. Whereas in parts of Latin America or Africa a combination of theological change, religious competition and vested interests may have pushed major religious institutions into supporting democratisation, in Russia the

incentives nearly all work in an opposite direction, and that has much to do with the evolving relationship of church and state.

In Russia the post-communist state until very recently welcomed any support from religious institutions and found its symbols useful for purposes of general legitimation and seeking to create a new sense of Russian identity. For its part the church almost naturally saw the state as a support for its campaign to ensure religious dominance in the new Russia. What has happened since the electoral crisis of 2011-12 is that the Putin administration has felt a more active and urgent need to build constituencies of support than hitherto, as a counterweight to the younger, educated sections of the urban population some of whom were starting to question the Kremlin's right to choose leaders on its behalf. In these circumstances it has seen the Russian Orthodox Church as a natural support, and for that reason has been more open to supporting church backed preferences on abortion, gay rights, the defence of the feelings of believers, and even open to the possibility of giving the church a defined if symbolic constitutional status. In return the church leadership has become a keen advocate of church-state partnership and an even more uncritical supporter of the Putin administration. In this collaborative arrangement, democracy appears to be of little interest to either partner.

¹ Many states use a qualifier in referring to democracy, whether it be 'liberal', 'socialist', 'Islamic' or even 'basic' as in General Ayub Khan's Pakistan. The Russian model, however, differs from the latter because Ayub Khan appeared to accept that there was a core (Western) model and that Pakistan was not ready for this fully-fledged democratic system, whereas the Kremlin argues that 'sovereign democracy' is a fully democratic model appropriate to Russian conditions.

² One could also argue that the Russian Church is closer in practice to an established church than the Church of England in the English part of the UK, because despite the separation of church and state in Russia and the Anglican church's formal symbolic and representational roles, the latter has less obvious policy influence than the Russian church leadership has had in the last 5 years. This in turn reminds us of the limits of formal models of church-state relations.

³ Russian Orthodox hierarchs like to speak of Russia as a mono-confessional country with religious minorities enjoying equal rights, but in reality Russia is a multi-confessional society with a dominant religious tradition. Though around 70% of the population identify as 'Orthodox' in surveys, religious observance and practice is at a very low level, and perhaps half of those worshipping on a weekly basis are to be found in non-Orthodox places of worship. Around 10% of the population are ethnically Muslim, mostly tied to particular regions though with large communities, often of migrant workers, in the Moscow and St Petersburg regions. There are also significant communities of Buddhists, Jews, Roman Catholics, various Protestant/charismatic groups – with some sources suggest that active members of the latter outnumber the Orthodox in Siberia and the Russian Far East – and a range of Western and indigenous religious groups generally labelled as 'sects' by the media and other religious groups. All of these will have some political interactions and some of them have representation on various administrative bodies, but the Russian Orthodox Church is clearly *primus inter pares* in terms of its access to political elites at the central level and in many of the regions. It is the only religious group whose leadership has engaged extensively with the issue of democracy, albeit in a largely negative way.

⁴ Ongoing reports on religious freedom issues in Russia are well documented in the news service *Forum 18* which can be found at: <http://www.forum18.org/>; for more discussion on implementation and proposals for amending the law see Fagan, *Believing in Russia*, pp. 69-92.

⁵ This document appeared at around the same time that the Kremlin pushed through a controversial law on NGOs. The text of the former from which these quotes are taken can be found at: <http://www.sras.org/news2.phtml?m=608&print=1> (accessed 15 January 2007).

⁶ *The Russian Orthodox Church's Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom and Rights*. English and Russian versions of this document can be found at the website of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department of External Relations, the English text at: <http://www.mospat.ru/en/documents/dignity-freedom-rights/> (accessed 19th September 2008).

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