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RUSSIA: Orthodox becoming first among equals

By Geraldine Fagan, Forum 18 (<https://www.forum18.org>)

Without any change in the law or Constitution to provide for them, the steady increase in concordat-style agreements between the Russian Orthodox Church and various organs of state at federal and local level has given the Orthodox Church increased power, Forum 18 News Service reports after a wide-ranging survey. These agreements give the Church special access to institutions such as prisons, the police, the FSB, the army, schools and hospitals, and emphasise Orthodoxy as the legitimate ideology of Russian state tradition. It is open to question whether they violate Russia's international human rights commitments, but in practice these mini-concordats can render illegitimate the social activity of other religious organisations in the state sphere, thus leading to discrimination on religious grounds.

"In today's Russia, the principle of secularity [of the state] and associated constitutional principles have been sacrificed for the sake of sacralisation of power, including the clericalisation of organs of state government," believes Sergei Buryanov of the Moscow-based Institute of Freedom of Conscience.

Russia's 1993 Constitution proclaims the country a secular state without any compulsory or state religion, where religious organisations are separate from the state and equal before the law. The 1997 federal law on religion further stipulates that religious organisations may not carry out the functions of state institutions or accompany the activities of government organs with public religious ceremonies, while state personnel do not have the right to use their official positions "for the formation of one or other type of attitude towards religion".

Without any change in the law or Constitution to provide for them, however, there has been a steady increase over the past seven years in concordat-style agreements between the Russian Orthodox Church and various organs of state. These give the Church special access to the institutions concerned and emphasise Orthodoxy as the legitimate ideology of Russian state tradition. It is open to question whether these agreements violate Russia's international human rights commitments, since the latter do not concern the secularity of the state. In practice, however, these mini-concordats can serve to render illegitimate the social activity of other religious organisations in the state sphere, thus leading to discrimination on religious grounds.

PRISONS

On 30 August 1996 the Moscow Patriarchate concluded a co-operation agreement with the Ministry of Internal Affairs, for the most part concerned with arrangements within prisons. It stipulates that prison governors must provide "favourable conditions" for Russian Orthodox clergy to conduct religious talks and church services. At the request of dioceses or deaneries, governors are to organise the production by prisoners of materials used in restoring and building churches, as well as other religious items.

The agreement also covers the police force. Russian Orthodox clergy are to give lecture courses to trainee officers on the role of religion in Russian state history, with the aim of "inculcating patriotism and morality, respect for national traditions and customs... and an understanding of the inhumane nature of the doctrines of totalitarian and destructive sects." The construction is also to be considered of an Orthodox chapel alongside the Ministry of Internal Affairs building in Moscow, which "might serve to educate personnel within Internal Affairs departments and police officers".

A chapel situated on publicly accessible territory belonging to the Ministry's Moscow headquarters was duly consecrated in 2000. Within Russia's prisons, however, the Church's hegemony appears to be less assured. In February 2000 the national religious affairs newspaper NG-Religii reported how a charity foundation representative bringing a donation of books to a regional prison was asked by its governor whether he was Orthodox, "for we were overcome with Protestants and Catholics," who were now forbidden from coming "within cannon range" of the prison. In February 2003, by contrast, the St Petersburg-based "Union of Christians" Protestant association triumphantly reported that a thousand inmates in the northern capital's women's prison were now subject to Christian radio programmes piped into their cells for up to five hours a day.

Another branch of the internal security organs, even the FSB (the former KGB) is now open about its special relationship with the Moscow Patriarchate. In March 2003 Vertograd news agency reported the presentation by Bishop Yevlogi (Smirnov) of Vladimir and Suzdal of a church award to the head of Vladimir regional FSB department, partially for "assistance in returning to the Russian

Orthodox Church property which was in the hands of schismatic religious formations". In March 2002 Kommersant national newspaper reported the opening ceremony of the FSB's own institutional church near its Lubyanka headquarters, during which the head of the FSB, Nikolai Patrushev, presented Patriarch Aleksii II with an icon and the parish priest of the renovated church with the keys to the building.

ARMY

On 4 April 1997 the Moscow Patriarchate concluded a co-operation agreement with the Ministry of Defence. Under the rubric of patriotic education of servicemen, both signatories vow "to work together to revive the Orthodox traditions of the Russian army and navy". Commanders of the armed forces are urged to invite Orthodox clergy to participate in military rituals and celebrations, as well as to co-operate with Orthodox dioceses in inculcating conscripts with "the proper attitude" towards military service. The agreement also makes provision for the re-instatement of churches in military garrisons.

On 31 October 2002 Izvestiya national newspaper reported that the Ministry of Defence call-up commission in the region of Orel included a Russian Orthodox priest, whose role was "to expose scoundrels who refuse military service by hiding behind faith". Since the priest had appeared on the commission, according to one local military commissar, "there has not been a single case in which a conscript had refused to serve". While the Moscow Patriarchate does not make public the total number of Orthodox churches and chapels currently operating within military installations and prisons, one Orthodox source estimated to Forum 18 on 16 May that there were around 100 in Moscow city and region. In May 1999 the English-language Moscow Times reported that one of the first, consecrated at a closed nuclear base outside the Russian capital in April 1998, is partly dedicated to St Barbara because "it was on 17 December, her saint's day, that the militant atheist and church persecutor Nikita Khrushchev signed a decree in 1960 founding this branch of the armed forces".

In an interview with Forum 18 in Kalmykia this April, local Muslim leader Nasirullaev Asadullah spoke of plans to build a mosque in a local prison where there was already an Orthodox church and a Buddhist temple. On 16 May Council of Muftis press secretary Farid Asadullin told Forum 18 that there were "very much fewer" than 100 mosques within Russia's military installations and prisons. While Muslim communities in Arkhangelsk, Vologda, Tver and Mordovia regions work with local law enforcement agencies in the spheres of prevention and rehabilitation, he said, there was as yet no formal co-operation agreement between the Council of Muftis and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, or any other federal ministry. "If a precedent is created with the Russian Orthodox Church, then, as Russia's second confession, we believe that we should be able to work with those of Muslim faith," he remarked.

EDUCATION

On 2 August 1999 the Moscow Patriarchate concluded a co-operation agreement with the Ministry of Education. The document obliges both signatories to work together in educating the young generation "in the spirit of high moral values" by sharing information and experience, "preparing amendments to the norms of current legislation," organising the introduction into schools of tuition of the foundations of Orthodox culture and preparing state standards in theology and religious studies.

On 5 December 2001 the Moscow edition of Argumenty i Fakty newspaper cited assistant education minister Yuri Kovrizhnykh as stating that close co-operation between church and state was the best way to save the young generation from "totalitarian sects and religious fanaticism". In practice, Kovrizhnykh reportedly declared, this would mean "opening Orthodox kindergartens, schools, gymnasiums, Christian-sports and Christian-patriotic clubs under the auspices of the local authorities".

Article 4 of the 1997 law on religion, however, stipulates that the state "is to secure the secular character of education and of state and municipal educational institutions". The publication in October 2002 by the Ministry of Education of a model syllabus for a new school subject - "Orthodox Culture" – provoked as yet unresolved concern over whether the course would be taught from a secular standpoint on an optional basis. In a December 1999 letter, according to several Moscow sources, Patriarch Aleksii wrote that, should bishops encounter difficulties in getting a course called "The Foundations of Orthodox Belief" introduced into state schools, they should call it "The Foundations of Orthodox Culture".

At the local level, promotion of Orthodoxy in state education appears in practice to rely more upon joint initiatives by clergy and state representatives than – as is prescribed by the law – parents or pupils. In Samara region, the local authorities have embarked upon an educational experiment – local Archbishop Sergi (Poletkin) consecrated the first Orthodox church to be attached to a state secondary school there on 7 January 2003. The first intrusion by the Orthodox Church into their for the most part secular everyday lives, such initiatives can encounter hostility from local people. On 19 April 2002 Izvestiya reported that 70 per cent of parents of pupils at a state comprehensive school in Novomoskovsk, Tula region, had rejected plans by a local archimandrite and the municipal authorities to turn it into an Orthodox lycee, even when renovation and computer equipment were also proposed. In an interview on the "Tem Vremenem" ("Meanwhile") discussion programme on national television on 28 April 2003, academic Dmitri Oreshkin referred indignantly to slogans at a recent demonstration outside the Ministry of Education in favour of the introduction of Orthodoxy into state schools. "Orthodox! You are in your own country! I'm not prepared to be Orthodox – does that mean I am not in my own country?"

HEALTH

On 5 March 2003 the Moscow Patriarchate concluded a co-operation agreement with the Ministry of Health. The signatory parties vow to work together to create conditions in hospitals for the performance of Orthodox rites, to formulate draft legislation on the ethics of biomedicine and other medical issues, to plan and implement programmes aimed at educating the population in health issues, to familiarise medical students with the Russian Orthodox Church's social policy on health, and to assist those who "have suffered from the non-traditional forms of influence of modern cults". Here too there is some indication of resistance. On 8 April 2002 Moskovsky Komsomolets national newspaper reported that the Moscow city authorities had agreed to turn over part of a children's clinic housing X-ray and allergies units to create an Orthodox hospital church, to the vehement protest of the young patients' parents.

TRANSPORT

The Moscow Patriarchate also has a joint project with the Ministry of Railways, in accordance with which Orthodox chapels are to be created at each of Moscow's mainline stations. On 16 April 2002 the Chapel of St Matrona was opened at Kursk station, while the Chapel of St Mitrofan of Voronezh has been functioning at Paveletsky station since August 2001. On 18 August 2001 Patriarch Aleksii II consecrated a chapel at Moscow's Domodedovo airport. There are apparently no plans to provide interfaith facilities in the manner of chaplaincies at other international airports, however. "We take a negative view of the idea of affording the opportunity of holding prayer services at stations and airports to passengers professing other faiths," Fr Valentin Temakov, assistant editor of the Moscow Patriarchate's publishing department and co-ordinator of the railway chapels project, told Izvestiya. "Orthodoxy is the state-forming religion and it is inappropriate to talk about some kind of democracy and equality of confessions in this context."

FOREIGN AFFAIRS

While the Moscow Patriarchate has not yet concluded a co-operation agreement with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Patriarch Aleksii and Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad reportedly discussed co-operation with Foreign Minister Igor Ivanov and other high-ranking officials on 6 March 2003, during the first visit by a Russian patriarch to the Ministry in its 200-year history. According to a Foreign Ministry communique issued the same day, Ivanov pointed to Russian diplomacy's historical support for the Russian Orthodox missions to America and the Far East, as well as its traditional defence of the interests of Orthodox peoples. Today, such co-operation strengthens Russia's "inner spiritual strength" and "raises her moral authority on the world stage," declared Ivanov, while close contact between the diplomatic service and the Russian Orthodox Church "helps us to deepen our understanding of global developments".

REGIONS

Just as the 1997 law on the religion was bolstered by dozens of similar legal acts on the local level, so the Moscow Patriarchate's federal agreements with state organs are supported by similar regional arrangements. A co-operation agreement concluded on 15 September 2001 between the state administration of Belgorod region and the local Orthodox diocese, for example, obliges the state authorities to facilitate the study of "Russian language, Russian history, Russian culture and Orthodoxy" in state schools. In early 2003 Smolensk regional administration concluded a similar agreement with the local Orthodox diocese covering educational, social and cultural activity. In November 2001 the Orthodox diocese of Moscow concluded co-operation agreements with Moscow region's education and sentence administration departments.

In the regions, support for the Orthodox Church as an arm of state ideology is sometimes overt. In December 2002 Izvestiya reported that governor of Saratov region Dmitri Ayatskov had announced to the local press that he had lodged a proposal to finance "our Orthodox religion" with government money. According to the newspaper, Ayatskov and then local Orthodox archbishop Aleksandr (Timofeyev) went on to explain that this was partly aimed at fighting against the dissemination of "alien religions," while a local official dealing with social affairs declared that the 19 religious confessions registered in the region had divided the people into 19 groups and thus provoked a "hidden civil war". On 12 March 2003 RTR state news agency reported that Ayatskov had ordered all meat dishes to be taken off the menu at the regional government cafeteria for the duration of Orthodox Lent.

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