

## Introduction

### Religion, Culture, and Conflict in the “Other” Christendom\*

*Christopher Marsh and Daniel Payne*

On the road out of Stepanakert up the mountainside to Shushi there sits an Azeri tank with a cross painted on its turret. This tank was seized by Karabakh forces and used in the battle to take Shushi back from the Azeris, who had seized it earlier in the Azerbaijan–Karabakh war. This tank now stands as a lone monument to that battle, a battle which turned out to be pivotal in Karabakh’s fight for independence. In Shushi itself, which is still horribly war-torn, the central church still stands almost completely unscathed. The Azeri forces had used the church to store the missiles they would lob down upon Stepanakert there, knowing that they would be safe, because the Karabakhtsi would not bomb one of their own churches—even though their military intelligence had determined that the missiles were stored there. The church was “almost” completely unscathed, because there are two very visible areas where the church had been shot at—the face of Christ in a relief on the church and a cross in another relief—which had apparently been used for target practice by the Azeri soldiers who had guarded the missiles in the church. How can one see such desecration of the most holy Christian symbols and walk away thinking religion is irrelevant in such a conflict, as some scholars have argued?

When one of the authors recounted these observations at a lecture in Yerevan in fall 2006,<sup>1</sup> a member of the audience—who happened to be Armenia’s Minister of Nationalities Affairs, refuted the allegation that there was any religious symbolism involved, and that it was simply a good target for target practice. While not many members of the audience seemed to agree with that explanation, there were many less-obviously Christian symbols on that church that had not been used for target practice, and that were perhaps even better targets if one wished to improve one’s shooting skills. We begin this special issue of *Nationalities Papers* with these observations because they symbolize the central issues at the heart of religion, culture, and conflict in the former Soviet Union, where the situation is riddled with conflict but not everywhere a conflict. These conflicts have a religious dimension but they are not truly religious either. Finally, the story also symbolizes the controversial nature of the topic itself, and the reluctance to further enflame such tensions that still rest just below the surface in many parts of the post-communist world.

Facts such as these leave observers wondering what role—if any—religion, culture, and ethnicity play in conflicts throughout the post-communist world, and it was with

the intent of initiating an interdisciplinary investigation into the topic that this was chosen as the theme of a conference on “Religion, Culture, and Conflict in the Former Soviet Union and Beyond.” Co-sponsored by the Institute on Culture, Religion, and World Affairs at Boston University and by the J.M. Dawson Institute of Church–State Studies at Baylor University, a group of distinguished scholars from around the world assembled at the Institute of Multidisciplinary Social Research of the Russian Academy of Sciences in May of 2006, where the drafts of the papers collected here were first delivered.

### **Summary of Contents**

Almost all of the articles in this special issue deal either directly or indirectly with the role of religion in contemporary post-communist society. The contribution by Christopher Marsh, which begins the issue, discusses the often-overlooked role of religion in the study of post-Soviet “ethnic” conflicts. By delving into the theological convictions that may rest beneath the surface of such conflicts, Marsh explains through a constructivist perspective how the “other” can become demonized and therefore why conflicts that involve members of different religious groups tend to be more violent than those that involve members of different ethnic groups, but who share a common religious tradition.

In their respective articles, Daniel Payne and Philip Walters each discuss issues related directly to religion and Church structures. Again, conflict is also a recurring theme, though in both cases this conflict is other than war. These “conflicts” are non-violent, and are the center of earthly battles over jurisdictional control of a particular nation or people. In his research, Payne demonstrates that at the center of ecclesiastical conflict in the Orthodox world, the primary issue is the problem of ethno-phyletism as it has shaped the understanding of “canonical territory” which is used to justify ecclesiastical claims upon a particular area. Chiefly, the struggle has been between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Church of Constantinople, as each patriarch vies for preeminence in the Orthodox world today. However, other Orthodox Churches are also at fault for conflating nationalism with ecclesiology. Walters, too, cites the problem of ethno-phyletism in the Russian Orthodox Church’s understanding of its political and social role in contemporary Russian society. He argues that the Russian Church has two possible choices for its future direction: either it can choose to turn outward and to fulfill its role in the new Europe, providing a moral voice to a secular world, or it can turn inward, serving as a national identity marker for the new Russia and its allegiance with the post-atheist state. Walters argues that Russian ecclesiastical leaders demonstrate the ambivalent position of the Church, focusing outward in regards to its own ecclesiastical holdings outside of Russia, while still supporting Russian nationalism in its domestic policies.

The third set of articles in this volume relates to the theme of tolerance and intolerance in Russia's diverse social fabric, where cross-cutting lines of demarcation between "us" and "them" run along religious, ethnic, and linguistic lines, resulting in a society strewn with cleavages. This section begins with a quantitative analysis of tolerance among Russians of different ethnic and religious backgrounds. In their contribution, the husband and wife team of Vyacheslav Karpov and Elena Lisovskaya shows that religious freedom and pluralism in Russia are facing a hostile climate of widespread interfaith intolerance. Using data from a 2005 survey, they find that the highest levels of Orthodox–Muslim intolerance are found among the Orthodox in non-Muslim regions, and among both groups in the Caucasus. Both the Orthodox and Muslims are even more intolerant of the Jews and Western Churches. The least tolerated activities by all Russians include religious education and public preaching. They suggest that tensions in these important areas can lead to the escalation of interfaith conflicts with international ramifications.

In his contribution to this volume, Emil Pain goes beyond simply analyzing attitudes of tolerance and intolerance toward others and presents a truly fascinating piece of research on the impact of xenophobia and extremism in Russia today. Pain connects these phenomena with the rise of such things as Russian nationalism, the skinhead movement, and interethnic strife that plague many of Russia's cities, including St. Petersburg and Voronezh. In this way, Pain connects such seemingly random incidents of violence as the beating of African exchange students in Voronezh to the publication of anti-Semitic literature in Russia back to post-Soviet society's struggle to come to grips with modernity. Such a connection seems irrefutable from the extensive documentation that Pain offers, but it may leave the reader pessimistic over Russian society's ability to overcome such obstacles. Pain himself, however, concludes that given time and the proper involvement by liberal and moderate members of society, Russia may yet evolve into a peaceful and democratic society.

If the first two sections focused in one way or another on Russia's dominant religious and cultural traditions, the theme that runs through the last pair of contributions relates to the country's largest minority cultural and religious group, that of Russia's Muslims and their involvement within the larger Orthodox/Slavic cultural milieu. Incidentally, we found this theme so interesting and worthy of deeper research that we chose it as the theme of a subsequent conference on "Islam and Orthodoxy: Confrontation or Cohabitation," held in March 2007, at the Institute for Human Sciences in Vienna, Austria.

Shale Horowitz's paper relies on quantitative research on the role played by Islam, as distinct from ethnic and national identity, and constructs detailed hypotheses on Islam and ethnic conflict. He examines the main types of influence on ethnic conflict and discusses how Islam might function distinctively in each area. His resulting hypotheses are illustrated with examples from the post-communist world. He finds that secular-national territorial and self-determination disputes, exacerbated by

histories of intense conflict, were more important sources of ethnic conflict than Islamic political ideology per se. Under the secular authoritarian regimes in Central Asia, however, weak secular nationalist and civic ideologies and movements, combined with rising international Islamist influence and involvement, make Islamic political ideology and Islamism more significant risk factors for future ethnic conflict.

In moving from the theoretical to the empirical, James Warhola and Alex Lehning address questions of Russia's identity, security, and quest for political order from the perspective of religious tolerance and civility among communal groups. They explore the roles that the major religious institutions and ideas in Russia play in making difficult but inevitable decisions about where to establish a balance between citizens' rights and fending off bona fide threats to the common good from religious and political extremists. Warhola and Lehning conclude that until the concept of citizenship evolves more fully in Russia, wherein both the citizenry and the state assume the capacity to responsibly and knowledgeably obey and rule, the monoculturalism that seems to be developing under the Putin administration will remain problematic.

#### NOTES

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1. Christopher Marsh, "Nationalism, Religion, and *Realpolitik*," invited lecture delivered at the Caucasus Research Resource Center, Yerevan State University, Yerevan, Armenia, 20 October 2006.