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Slight of hand: Soviet anti-religious practices continued in a post-communist Russia

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Slight of hand: Soviet anti-religious practices continued in a post-communist Russia

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SLEIGHT OF HAND:
SOVIET ANTI-RELIGIOUS PRACTICES
CONTINUED IN A POST-COMMUNIST RUSSIA

By

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A Senior Thesis Submitted to the

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The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was notorious for deceiving its opponents at home and abroad by acting opposite of its rhetoric and written policies. Openly, Soviet leaders declared their socialist society as superior to anything capitalism produced, but secretly they concealed the imminent failure of their own system from the outside world and their own people. When it comes to equitable written policy versus subversive practices, Soviet state leaders' political sleight of hand characterized them as the master magicians of the twentieth century. With the collapse of the USSR in 1991, neither the bureaucracy nor its bureaucrats changed their policies and practices overnight, especially regarding the topic of religious freedom. In fact, they hardly changed their practices at all since the fall of Communism. The post-Soviet state effectively feigned a dramatic change through the adjustment of religious policy to manipulate foreign and domestic influences. This paper surveys Russian religious policy, its application, its implementation, and its enforcement from the 1988 celebration of the Millennium of Christianity in Rus, through the passing of the 1990 Law of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic on Freedom of Worship Act (FOWA), during the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and concluding with an analysis of the 1997 Law of Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations (FCRA). The post-Soviet Russian state utilized the same tactics as did the late USSR in religious policies: selective application, implementation, and/or reinforcement of the *de jure* religious tolerance policies, which established the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) as a *de facto* state-church institution above any other religious group in the post-Soviet and modern Russian state while also effectively keeping the church subordinate to the state apparatus.

Historiography: Establishing a New Historical Context on Religious Policy

The historiography surveyed included secondary sources focused predominantly on 1988-1991, including scholarly articles, peer-reviewed journals, and researched publications of historians John Anderson, Emily Baran, David Barry, Alicja Curanović, Wallace L. Daniel, Yves Hamant, Vyacheslav Karpov, Alar Kilp, Anatolii Levitin-Krasnov, Elena Lisovskaya, Christopher Marsh, Jerry G. Pankhurst, Sabrina P. Ramet, Walter Sawatsky, Victoria Smolkin, Myroslaw Tataryn, Katya Tolstaya, Philip Walters, and a master's dissertation by Barry Childers, plus published documents of the former Soviet Union, the Russian Federation, the U.S. State Department and Department of Justice, the FBI, and the International Council of Christian Churches. Regarding the specific subject of religion in the USSR and post-USSR, traditional historiography primarily traced the workings of the ROC to gauge what level of religious tolerance existed in both the former Soviet Union and post-Communist Russia, which was a flawed historical approach to the subject at hand. This omitted numerous accounts of religious oppression initiated by the Russian government in tandem with leaders of the ROC against 'New Religious Movements (NRMs),' non-Russian Orthodox denominations of Christianity, westernized religious movements transplanted to Russia after the fall of the Soviet Union, and the "traditional religions" identified in the 1997 FCRA.¹

Many Soviet-era historians viewed the Russian Orthodox religious system's restoration after the fall of Communism as the triumph of religious freedom in post-

¹ Emily B. Baran, Ph.D., "Negotiating the Limits of Religious Pluralism in Post-Soviet Russia: The Anti-Cult Movement in the Russian Orthodox Church, 1990-2004," *The Russian Review* 65, no. 4 (October 2006): 641-42, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3877259>.

Communist Russia when in actuality it became a *de facto* re-linking and subsequent subordination of the church to the new Russian state (referred to as “desecularization” by Karpov).² Russia did not achieve increased freedom of religion after the fall of Communism and continued to favor the state first, then the ROC second, above any other religious leader, group, movement, association, or institution. To begin understanding this staged celebration of newfound religious tolerance performed by the transitioning Russian government, historians first must reconsider the motivations and actions of Soviet leaders involving religious policy, then analyze the previous historiography written about them in light of that. Before addressing the 1988-1991 transition, a context of Soviet leadership’s construction, application, implementation, and enforcement of religious policies must be clarified. In his 2012 Master of Arts dissertation at Florida State University, Barry Childers argues that “...two considerations were constant in religious policies: the vacillating temperaments and goals of each leader and the need to protect the power and image of the state.”³ This is a more effective approach to Soviet leadership’s ideological motivation in Soviet historiography than previous attempts at clarification.

Historical Conceptualization and Framing Understanding

First, a few terms worth defining and providing brief historical context for include the following: 1) *de jure*, 2) *de facto*, 3) *Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)*, 4) the *1990 Law of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic on Freedom of Worship Act*

² Vyacheslav Karpov, “The Social Dynamics of Russia’s Desecularization: a Comparative and Theoretical Perspective,” *Religion, State and Society* 41, no. 3 (2013): 247, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2013.821805>.

³ Barry Childers, “The Plurality of Soviet Religious ‘Policy’” (MA diss., Florida State University, 2012), 105.

(FOWA), 5) the 1997 *Law of Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations (FCRA)*, and 6) *New Religious Movements (NRMs)*. *De jure* is a term used in U.S. law and based on Latin, literally meaning “by law,” which identifies the legal recognition of something in written law.⁴ It is the official policy. *De facto* also is a term used in U.S. law and based on Latin, literally meaning “in fact,” which identifies the practical reality of a situation, whether the law recognizes it or not.⁵ It is the actual experience. The *Russian Orthodox Church (ROC)* (Russian: *Русская православная церковь*) is a specific branch of the Eastern Orthodox Church that centralized in Moscow, Russia and holds religious and cultural preponderance of professed Christianity in the former Soviet Union and the modern Russian Federation.⁶ For decades after the formation of the Soviet Union, government, police, and military officials persecuted leaders and members of the ROC with a systematic methodology of censorship, propaganda, indoctrination, restrictive licensing, direct disruption of religious rituals and services, seizure and denial of private property, arrest, interrogation, incarceration and forced labor in the *Gulag* prison system, exile to Siberia, starvation, human experimentation, rape, torture, and execution, while also using these same practices against the rest of the Russian population who were suspected of holding a professed religious belief system or who were caught practicing

⁴ *Foreign Relations and Intercourse, U.S. Code 22 (2006) § 611 (e)*, accessed March 30, 2021, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/22/611> [FIGURE 1].

⁵ *ibid.*

⁶ Katya Tolstaya, *Orthodox Paradoxes: Heterogeneities and Complexities in Contemporary Russian Orthodoxy*, Brill’s Series in Church History 66 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 1-3, accessed March 30, 2021, <http://search.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.emich.edu/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e000xna&AN=783322&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

any other religion.⁷ The prior cases of persecution by the Soviet state against the ROC does not negate its rampant oppression of any religious belief contrary to those held by the ROC leadership and its wielding of state authority to limit the religious practices of non-Orthodox persons from the transitional years (1988-1991) and beyond (1991-present). No organization is above criticism, even if it suffered under similar circumstances in the past, and the blame for religious persecution after the collapse of the Soviet Union should be put predominantly upon the Russian government and the ROC leadership. The *1990 Law of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic on Freedom of Worship Act (FOWA)* is the religious freedom policy instituted under General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev of the Soviet Union on October 25, 1990.⁸ This was the law that many religious organizations that previously had been forced underground appealed to for increased religious liberty and expression, both personally and corporately, emphasizing a return to private practice at home without fear of repercussions from the state and better access to the public sector, yet these appeals quickly were resisted by government leaders of the Russian Federation, leaders of the ROC, and the majority of the nominal and devout Russian Orthodox population, who viewed non-Orthodoxy as a

⁷ Victoria Smolkin, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History Of Soviet Atheism* (Princeton: University Press, 2018), 138-47; “Lenin approved terror, Soviet writes,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 8, 1988, general edition, 36. Detroit Free Press (1923-1999) database [FIGURE 2].

⁸ RSFSR House of Soviet, Law of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic on Freedom of Worship, signed by President Mikhail Gorbachev 1 October 1990, Chairman R.I. Khasbulatov, Moscow, Soviet Union: 25 October 1990; Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religion: Text of Law of the USSR: ‘On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organisations’,” *Journal of Church and State* 33, no. 1 (1991): 192, accessed March 30, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23917191>.

political, social, and cultural threat to the post-Soviet state.⁹ The *1997 Law of Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations (FCRA)* is a redefinition of the original 1990 FOWA's religious freedom policy and instituted under President Boris Yeltsin of the Russian Federation on September 26, 1997.¹⁰ This redefining led to increased levels of religious restriction and oppression of all religious groups with the exception of those loyal to and under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate (*Москóвский напуархám*).¹¹ Lastly, *New Religious Movements (NRMs)* is a term to describe “smaller, less traditional, new religious movements” that surged in the Russian Federation after the collapse of the Soviet Union.¹² Specific examples of NRMs include the following but are not limited to these: the Jehovah's Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons/LDS), the Church of Scientology, the Hare Krishnas, and the Unification Church. This term is not used to describe the four “traditional religions” designated in the 1997 FCRA (Russian Orthodoxy, Judaism, Buddhism, and Islam), nor Roman Catholic, Protestant, or Baptist denominations of Christianity.

⁹ Baran, *The Russian Review*, 639-45.

¹⁰ Federation Council of Russia, Law of Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations [*Закон О свободе совести и о религиозных объединениях*], signed by President Boris Yeltsin on 26 September 1997, published in *Rossiskaia Gazieta*, Moscow, Russian Federation: 1 October 1997; accessed for reference March 26, 2021, <http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/?docbody=&nd=102049359> (Russian) and <https://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=ru&u=http://pravo.gov.ru/proxy/ips/%3Fdocbody%3D%26nd%3D102049359&prev=search&pto=aue> (English).

¹¹ Baran, *The Russian Review*, 640-43.

¹² *ibid.*, 641.

The focus of this paper and research is to address the historical continuity of the policy, practices, and people that crossed over from the final years of the Soviet Union and how these continued to affect the religious practices of the population in the modern Russian Federation. The driving question during research, “To what extent did the Russian people achieve religious liberty during the transition from the Soviet Union to the Russian Federation, specifically during the time period of 1988 to 1991?” led to primary and secondary sources that demonstrate a surprisingly small degree of religious liberty was actually obtained by the Russian Federation after the fall of the Soviet Union. The conclusion is this transition not only had insignificant impact on the *de jure* religious reforms that already had taken place before the collapse of the Soviet Union but also regressed against the progress previously made otherwise. General Secretary Mikhail Gorbachev and his administration had been relaxing its religious persecution practices and anti-religious policies under *glasnost* (English translation: “openness”; Russian: гласность) for several years before the collapse. While this does not excuse or negate the open, direct persecution of past Soviet leaders, this does demonstrate that the religious freedom policies that crossed into the modern Russian Federation were actually passed in 1990 before the Soviet Union officially collapsed in 1991. The response of the newly formed Russian government and ROC leadership demonstrates that religious freedom leaped backwards from the time between the 1990 FOWA passed under the Soviet Union until the 1997 FCRA’s redefining of the law. The answer to this research question is most exemplified in the 1997 FCRA because the policy change demonstrates that the Russian people reversed their movement toward religious freedom and still lacked the levels of

religious freedom that exist in other countries in the Global North, meaning *de jure* religious freedom was hardly *de facto* in the Soviet Union or the Russian Federation.

In the United States, there exists over two hundred thirty years of jurisprudence on and public exercise of religious rights guaranteed in the First Amendment. This specifically is enshrined in two clauses of the First Amendment of the United States Constitution known as the *Establishment Clause* (“Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion...”) and the *Free Exercise Clause* (...“or prohibiting the free exercise thereof...”).¹³ Whereas the Soviet and Russian governments did not significantly embrace these concepts during *glasnost* (1985) nor when *de jure* religious liberty arrived under the 1990 FOWA. Prior to Gorbachev’s *glasnost* policy, the Soviet Union focused mostly on prohibiting the free exercise of all religion, yet the modern Russian state focused on using an established religion and church, the ROC, to undermine the free exercise of all other religions while regulating the established one. This modern approach allowed for the government to use state resources and policy to limit religious influence and combine state control with the religious, cultural, and financial influence of the ROC. It also should be noted that the Constitution of the Russian Federation enshrines *de jure* religious liberty despite the *de facto* reality of a ROC religious establishment favored and provided preferential treatment by the state.¹⁴

¹³ Department of Justice, Notice, “Federal Law Protections for Religious Liberty,” *Federal Register* 82, no. 165 (May 4, 2017): 49668, <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2017/10/26/2017-23269/federal-law-protections-for-religious-liberty>.

¹⁴ Russian Federation, Sixteenth year, “Constitution of the Russian Federation of December 25, 1993, as amended on December 30, 2008,” *Rossiyskaya Gazeta*, Federal Issue no. 0 (4831), January 21, 2009, <https://rg.ru/2009/01/21/konstitucia-dok.html> (Russian) and

Before the fall of the Soviet Union, Russian Orthodoxy struggled to survive from being eaten by the state apparatus and cultural secularization rather than actively undermining foreign religious and political institutions like it did after the collapse. The ROC could not assert itself effectively over its own people like it had in centuries past. The collapse of the Soviet Union allowed for the ROC to fill the vacuum left by scientific atheism among former party members and convert them to religio-political “church” membership based upon nominal Orthodox nationalism. The Russian Federation since has transformed into a *de facto* Orthodox church-state that seeks to undermine western liberal democracies in the name of tradition and nationalism in order to obtain international political advantage and reacquire former Soviet satellites lost during the dissolution of the Soviet Union.

Orthodox Church leaders throughout the Soviet Union maintained a level of competition among themselves and a deep-rooted mistrust of the Soviet government, but their actions fluctuated among reluctant cooperation to passive compromise.¹⁵ Very few Patriarchs took a strong, direct stance to opposing Soviet policy, practices, and persecutions, yet priests who held regional or local influence offered stronger resistance, which also led to fragmentation within the Orthodox system.¹⁶ Overall, the Orthodox Church survived by struggling through the Soviet era and reasserting its dominance of the Russian people’s soul as the new, post-Communist Russian Federation formed.

<https://translate.google.com/translate?hl=en&sl=ru&u=https://rg.ru/2009/01/21/konstituci-a-dok.html&prev=search&pto=aue> (English).

¹⁵ Anatolii Levitin-Krasnov, “The Russian Orthodox Renovationist Movement and its Russian Historiography During the Soviet Period,” in *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, ed. Sabrina Petra Ramet (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), 341-45.

¹⁶ *ibid.*, 379-81.

In *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, editor Sabrina Petra Ramet compiled a series of essays about "... religious policy and policy makers in the USSR."¹⁷ Over the first seventy years of the Soviet Union, the Communist Party appointed leaders and implemented hostile policies against religion, forming specific organizations such as the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church (CAROC), the Council for the Affairs of Religious Cults (CARC), and the Council for Religious Affairs (CRA), that sought to suppress and eradicate religion from the Soviet citizen's mind, which greatly reduced the number of Orthodox Christian establishments, priests, and parishioners; barred the Ukrainian Greek Catholics from operating; purged regions of "sectarian" (Protestant) believers and corralled their leadership under one bloated organization—the All Union Council of Evangelical Christians–Baptists; prevented Islamic groups from fully isolating themselves into religio-ethnic states; and discouraged, hindered, arrested, jailed, and persecuted members of other sects or spirituality.¹⁸

In the 1970s and 1980s, religious leaders and activists openly challenged the state, demanding reforms, release of prisoners jailed or exiled for their faith, and relaxation of the strict and oppressive policies.¹⁹ This resulted in Gorbachev promoting *perestroika* (meaning, "restructuring"), which not only modified the Soviet economic and political

¹⁷ Sabrina P. Ramet, "Preface," in *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, ed. Sabrina Petra Ramet (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), xvii.

¹⁸ Philip Walters, "A Survey of Soviet Religious Policy," in *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, ed. Sabrina Petra Ramet (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), 3-7, 8-16, 17-19, 20-28.

¹⁹ Sabrina P., Ramet, "Religious Policy in the Era of Gorbachev," in *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, ed. Sabrina Petra Ramet (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), 47-8.

system but also allowed believers to appeal to the new policies formed under it and seek better assistance from international religious groups.²⁰ Gorbachev also sought to improve his relationship with the Pope, reinstating the embattled Ukrainian Catholic Church in 1989.²¹ If the spiritual end of atheistic Communism in the Soviet Union occurred during the ‘Christian Millennium of Rus’ in 1988, the political end, especially the anti-religious policies, perished with the failed coup against Gorbachev’s Union Treaty.²²

Once the Soviet Union collapsed, the new Russian Federation tended toward the hindrance, reduction, and elimination of all religious institutions besides the Russian Orthodox Church, which they saw as most beneficial to the national political cause, while also manipulating Russian Orthodox Patriarchs to be subordinate and loyal to the newly forming Russian state, presenting to the world the appearance of a “reformed Russia” with freedom of conscience when in actuality it was built from the same anti-religious skeleton of the former Soviet system.²³ The ultimate goal is to make the Russian Orthodox Church the primary religious influence on the Russian people that fosters a nationalistic bureaucracy and oligarchy. This new, nationalistic Russian Orthodox

²⁰ *ibid.*, 48-9; Walter Sawatsky, “Protestantism in the USSR,” in *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, ed. Sabrina Petra Ramet (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), 335-45.

²¹ Myroslaw Tataryn, “The Re-emergence of the Ukrainian (Greek) Catholic Church in the USSR,” in *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, ed. Sabrina Petra Ramet (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), 313-14.

²² Sabrina P. Ramet, “Epilogue: Religion after the Collapse,” in *Religious Policy in the Soviet Union*, ed. Sabrina Petra Ramet (Cambridge: University Press, 1993), 350-3.

²³ John Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (Cambridge: University Press, 1994), 215-222.

Federation then could serve as the active agent against liberal democracy in international relations.

Finally, it is of utmost importance to address a pair of non-starters (also referred to in law, specifically to ideas that have little chance of succeeding) that should not be assumed when approaching this subject: 1) Targeting or judging all leaders and members of the Russian Orthodox Church or belief system as against principles, policies, and practices of religious freedom because of the actions of Russian Orthodox Church leaders at an isolated point in time. 2) That evidence of less open and direct persecution in the modern Russian state (1991CE - present) than throughout the era of the Soviet Union (1917 CE -1991 CE) negates any reality that there remained significant religious oppression after its collapse. There still are members of the ROC or its belief system who support genuine principles, policies, and practices of religious freedom, including those with leadership roles in the ROC. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, leaders of the ROC, the Russian government, and a large percentage of the Russian and Orthodox populations also formed considerable resistance movements against a “westernized” mindset and approach to religious freedom. This has definitely led to legitimate accounts of religious oppression and hostility, especially against minorized religious groups, other non-Russian Orthodox denominations of Christianity, and even members of the “four traditional” religious groups according to the 1997 FCRA.²⁴ Nevertheless, the ROC has been filled with contradictory opinions and actions, which further demonstrates that a position of anti-religious freedom should not be assumed about any individual who is part of the ROC or Orthodox religion.

²⁴ Baran, *The Russian Review*, 641-52.

Stacking the Deck: Selective Practices not Conforming to Written Policy or Ideology

Soviet leaders did not uphold the greater ideals of “Leninist-socialism” to eradicate religion through their own policies but rather individually acted for or against religion in varying degrees to favor their personal agendas and the state in general.²⁵ There is not a mystical purity in adherence to Leninist-socialism practiced by the USSR leaders, like prior historians had suggested, but rather a pragmatic approach to staying in power.²⁶ This includes manipulating or suppressing religion(s) to achieve personal political agendas. Childers summarizes general ideologies and actions toward religion from Lenin to Gorbachev, “Lenin wanted to spread his beliefs; Stalin wanted to destroy all who believed in religion, but his desire to save his nation trumped it; Khrushchev wanted to expand Soviet influence into the Middle East and finalize state control over religion so it could be utilized to advance state goals; Brezhnev wanted to create the new Soviet man, attempting to win over believers to this ideal through relaxed persecution; and Gorbachev wanted to reduce persecution so that larger political and economic reforms could prosper.”²⁷ All of these departed from Marx and Lenin’s pure Communist ideology of expunging religion from the consciousness of the people in varied degrees, for varied motivations, and with varied effectiveness.

Regarding the advancement of the state’s control and public image, Soviet leaders chose to ignore official anti-religious ideology, instead conforming previous policies in selective favor of religion(s) for expediency’s sake or for manipulating religious leaders

²⁵ Childers, “The Plurality of Soviet Religious ‘Policy’,” 105.

²⁶ *ibid.*, 1-5.

²⁷ *ibid.*, 105.

to advance the state's agenda.²⁸ Again, instead of expunging religious leaders from society entirely, Childers explains how these Soviet leaders targeted and manipulated certain religious leaders for their own advantage, "Lenin oppressed the clergy to consolidate the state's power over individuals in Soviet society, Stalin forced religious officials to proclaim internationally that complete religious freedom existed within the Soviet Union, Khrushchev used religious officials to spread Soviet influence, Brezhnev used clergy to improve the Soviet image in the Middle East, and Gorbachev provided concessions to religion to improve the Soviets' image internationally... This shows the importance of practical goals over the ideal of full-blown communism as emphasized in Soviet ideology."²⁹ The leaders of the Soviet Union were not ideologically pure to the tenets of Communism; at best, they were pragmatic opportunists, and at worst, they were ineffective hypocrites.

With this less rigid context applied as a better lens regarding the Soviet leaders' differing positions on religious policy, its implementation, and its enforcement, it is more clear that the general trend of religious policy across the decades of the USSR shifted to using religion and religious leaders as a form of manipulating the population rather than viewing religion as Marx's "opiate of the masses" that required a complete removal from Communist society. None of the Soviet leaders could agree on a universal approach to religion, among other ideological variations, which caused disillusionment among the entire population and against the system itself. By June 1988, western reports of Soviet

²⁸ *ibid.*, 105-6.

²⁹ *ibid.*

journalists criticizing Lenin's use of terror began to surface.³⁰ The fact that journalists in a Communist nation, and of all places the Soviet Union, were criticizing Lenin was astounding to the West. It became clear to both the Western and Communist Blocs that long-term goals of Communism, especially surrounding a totally secular state, seemed unattainable. While some observing in the West felt religious liberation rising within the crumbling Soviet state, a catalyst reaction occurred before any recognized, one that ultimately would link the emerging Russian state's agenda with the ROC.

The Card Everyone is Supposed to See: Staging a Coming "Golden Age of Religion"

In June 1988, the Soviet state officially shifted its anti-religious policies by celebrating one thousand years of Christianity in Russia, marking that event as the diminishing point of atheism until the collapse of the Soviet Union.³¹ Atheists already had been drifting from scientific knowledge as a primary conversion means to the implementation of social scientists who sought to develop atheistic relationships, build communities, and establish a new morality system.³² Nevertheless, many Soviet citizens still were attending churches, baptizing their children, celebrating holidays, keeping religious icons in their homes, and having religious weddings and funerals, even if they themselves were professed atheists.³³ Too many Soviets had grown indifferent toward religion, and even if they themselves did not believe in God, they did not take issue with

³⁰ "Lenin approved terror, Soviet writes," *Detroit Free Press*, 36.

³¹ Smolkin, *A Sacred Space Is Never Empty: A History Of Soviet Atheism*, 228, 38-42, 46.

³² *ibid.*, 143-47.

³³ *ibid.*, 157-62.

keeping traditions, especially if it kept the peace at home. As the state sought to make its people loyal, militant atheists by confronting household hypocrisies, the younger generation began to crave religious experiences more than previous ones, partly because it opposed the state policies restricting them.³⁴ This led Soviet authorities gradually to relax their promotion of scientific atheism and suppression of all religions and instead begin favoring one religion (Russian Orthodoxy) above the rest on a *de facto* basis while simultaneously claiming religious tolerance for all religions on a *de jure* basis.

Throughout the Soviet decades, the authorities had discovered through personal experience that religion served them better as a supportive ally rather than a stubborn opponent, and that they could succeed in more situations by double-speaking for or against religion, depending on the necessity of the immediate circumstances.

Even Western news sources reported on this newfound repentance by the Soviets, with mixed responses of course. Two major takeaways came from this Millennium celebration: the first—it was a definite event that occurred in space and time, not one fabricated in news print only or falsely reported by Communist propaganda, with perhaps an all too eager American evangelist Billy Graham and a papal delegation traveling to Moscow to witness it firsthand; the second—more ironically, most people outside the USSR still viewed this celebration as disingenuous due to the Soviet state’s refusal to denounce anti-religious actions of past Soviet leaders and the continued suppression of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church.³⁵ Nevertheless, this celebration was at the very least

³⁴ *ibid.*, 162-64.

³⁵ Yves Hamant, *The Christianization of ancient Russia; a millennium: 988-1988* (France: UNESCO, 1992), accessed March 26, 2021, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000084607>; Peter Gavrilovich, “Millennium

news worthy to Westerners. After all, the scientific atheist state of the USSR had allowed the building of a cathedral in Moscow to celebrate the Christian millennium.³⁶ Even if it seemed insincere to most Westerners, the acknowledgment of Christianity seemed like a small victory for them because the Soviet Union was bending from its rigid atheistic Communist ideology. It was a sign that “Godless Communism” was eroding under the pressure from Western democracy. However, extreme skepticism was the best phrase to describe Western opinions of Soviet religiosity, both before, during, and after the celebration of the Millennium of Christianity in Russia. The International Council of Christian Churches took out a full page advertisement in *The New York Times*, with half of the advertisement containing a 1986-1987 FBI Congressional report about the “Soviet’s Sinister Use of Religion” and the other half containing a letter from its President, Carl McIntire, which he titled, “My people are destroyed for a lack of knowledge (Hosea 4:6),” in the beginning of the same month (June 1, 1988) as the Soviet-Orthodox celebration.³⁷

The FBI report revealed some startling truths. The Soviet government not only had begun controlling ‘churches registered with the Soviet government,’ specific religious leaders in high positions of authority, and other religious organizations in its own backyard to manipulate the Russian population, but it also had begun targeting

isn’t just celebration; Russians, Soviet anger Ukrainians,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 8, 1988, general edition, 36. Detroit Free Press (1923-1999) database [FIGURE 3].

³⁶ “A cathedral for Moscow,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 13, 1988, general edition, 5. Detroit Free Press (1923-1999) database [FIGURE 4].

³⁷ International Council of Christian Churches & Carl McIntire, “Display Ad 30 -- No Title” [Advertisement], *New York Times*, June 1, 1988, A29. ProQuest Historical Newspapers, *New York Times* (1923-current file) database.

religious institutions abroad to serve as a catalyst to be combined with a worldwide media disinformation campaign, as part of its larger “active measures” program, to manipulate Western opinions specifically to cast U.S. Cold War foreign policy in a negative light while exaggerating the level of religious freedom within the Soviet Union to garner sympathy and support.³⁸ This report provides significant evidence that the Millennial celebration of Christianity in Russia was primarily a Russian disinformation campaign against the Western powers and substantially shifted their former approach to religious propaganda. Instead, religious fervor would be utilized as the new carrier of propaganda at home and abroad rather than viewed as a threat to the atheist state that needed to be suppressed wherever it manifested itself.

The FBI report also identified four major religious institutions involved in the propaganda and active measures disinformation campaign, which were being manipulated by the Soviets leading up to and during the time of the June celebration: the Moscow Patriarchate of the ROC, the Foreign Relations Department of the Moscow Patriarchate, the Special Commission for Contact with Foreign Religious Circles of the Soviet Peace Committee, and the USSR All-Union Council of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (AUCECB).³⁹ The Moscow Patriarchate and its Foreign Relations Department were the most influential and largest of any religious institutions in the Soviet Union, conveniently serving the Soviet state as the public figurehead of the Millennial celebration of Christianity in Russia, while both also were being quietly monitored and manipulated by the Council for Religious Affairs and Council of Ministers for the

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ *ibid.*

USSR.⁴⁰ The AUCECB was the most influential and largest Protestant and Baptist organization in the Soviet Union leading up to the celebration (not to be confused with the ‘unregistered Protestant and Baptist churches’ that still were persecuted by the Soviet state and driven underground at that time), which also was registered with the State Committee for Religious Affairs and manipulated by the Soviet government to capitalize on the ‘ecumenical movement’ in the West.⁴¹ Soviet leadership selected three English-fluent spokesmen from the AUCECB to represent it, Alexey Bichkov [Bychkov], Alexi [Alexei] Stoyan, and Anatoly Sokolov, and whose purpose was to convince both evangelical and fundamental Christian Westerners of the false narrative that there was ‘genuine interest in religious freedom’ from the Soviet leadership.⁴² These three AUCECB leaders would frequently visit the United States to propagate the Soviet government’s fake narrative in order to convince Protestant and Baptist groups abroad to sway public opinion against U.S. interests, effectively subordinating members of the AUCECB at home to the ecumenical leadership headed by the ROC.⁴³ The genius of this tactic was that the sympathy from Westerners turned to pressure among Soviet Protestant and Baptist Christians to conform to the Soviet government and ROC leadership’s demands. This drove every registered religious organization back in the Soviet Union to

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴² *Soviet Influence Activities: A Report on Active Measures and Propaganda, 1986-87* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Dept. of State, 1988), 83-84.

⁴³ *ibid.*

acknowledging the leadership of the Moscow Patriarchate, which also was infiltrated most heavily by Soviet government officials.

Is this your Card? Religious Tolerance for ‘All’

On 25 October 1990, the Law of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic on Freedom of Worship Act (FOWA) passed. Religious groups emerged from where they had been driven into the underground, desiring to regain access to their seized property where they previously had gathered to worship, while also ensuring that loved ones were released from the *Gulag*, and hopefully regaining a place in the public sector again. With the immediate and rapid growth of differing religious ‘sects’ brought on by the 1990 FOWA, a proportionally growing leeriness of Russian Orthodox leadership would form and initiate the anti-cult movement through an unofficial alliance between the new Russian state and the ROC.⁴⁴ With the context of former Soviet policies and practices in mind, a direct examination of the 1990 FOWA must be done carefully.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991, the Russian leaders and Russian people did not suddenly obtain perfect understanding of the intricacies of religious freedom policy and practice, especially in the context of westernized democracies like the United States. On paper, the FOWA appeared to confirm Gorbachev’s “Golden Age of Religion” propaganda, supported by his previous 1985 *glasnost* (“openness”) and *perestroika* (“restructuring”) policies, boasting an impressive expansion of religious tolerance: equality of citizens to choose a religion or be non-religious and for religious associations to form and operate, secular state government and education systems favoring neither atheist or religious associations, and a general

⁴⁴ Baran, *The Russian Review*, 642-45.

freedom of worship with penalties for infringing, and more.⁴⁵ However, the disingenuous leaders of the Russian state did not desire, nor really know how, to implement or enforce religious freedom effectively; neither did the Russian people necessarily know how to exercise their religious freedoms fully and effectively, despite many who had a sincere desire to do so. It is unreasonable to assume that a population in 1988 could conduct and establish a uniform behavior and practices of religious toleration when it had been under state-initiated religious oppression since 1917, especially since the government continued to undermine the good intentions of the population for its own political, social, and cultural advantages. The implementation and enforcement of the 1990 FOWA was mostly selective among local and regional leaders initially and eventually became the catalyst for the anti-cult movement that produced the Orthodox Church's retaliatory FCRA legislation in 1997.⁴⁶

This 1988-1991 transition was extremely fragile because the Russian people had been granted a measure of increased access to religious freedom but lacked the awareness to maintain these freedoms for the long-term. The interception of religious freedom from the ROC and Russian state proved that religious freedom, as it was understood at that time and practiced in the West, would be short-lived. The Russian state leaders did not want to relinquish too much of their power to the people without first implementing mechanisms of control centralized in a single institution. This led to controlling the growing religious fervor through one major religious institution, the ROC, that served as

⁴⁵ *ibid.*, 638, 50; RSFSR House of Soviet, Law of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic on Freedom of Worship, 25 October 1990.

⁴⁶ Baran, *The Russian Review*, 651-52, 55-56.

the top of the religious hierarchical pyramid. That way the state would not need to compete with multiple religious interests directly and independently against its own agenda. Instead, it could adhere the dominant religious interests with its own through indirect manipulation of certain religious leaders, organizations, and institutions and force them to remain dependent upon state approval to advance their own religious agenda.

What also must be acknowledged is that this apprehension to genuine religious liberty from the state leadership caused the direct establishment of the ROC as a *de facto* state-church for the Russian population in spite of its *de jure* religious policies established in the 1990 FOWA. The Russian Federation did not institutionally separate the government from the ROC according to Section I, Article 5 of the 1990 FOWA, but rather actively worked against it, targeting the religious sects it had the least control over first while simultaneously consolidating control and concentrating power over the ROC.⁴⁷ The result was that the ROC became the unofficial state church of the Russian Federation immediately following the collapse of the Soviet Union, and presented itself as a force of stability and familiarity for the Russian people, while also exercising increased authority granted from the government to overpower religious sects that threatened the membership levels of the ROC. This was sanctioned by the Russian government under the condition that the Church remained loyal and subject to the Russian government's influence.

The Russian population did not adopt both essential concepts that maintain religious freedom – free exercise *and* anti-establishment. After years of living under

⁴⁷ RSFSR House of Soviet, Law of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic on Freedom of Worship, 25 October 1990.

Soviet atheist oppression, those persecuted for their religious beliefs yearned for the time where they could freely exercise their faith. 1985 *Glasnost*, the 1988 Millennial celebration, and the 1990 FOWA appeared to offer that progressively to them. What the population failed to anticipate as a majority was the need to prevent one religion from gaining power over the rest – an establishment of a single religion. The Russian government was able to manipulate public opinion to use the unification of church and state to establish one religion over the rest. That way, the church would use its elevated status to oppress minority religions that conflicted with its interests. This also would thrust some religious groups from the public sector through a system of bureaucratic red tape such as indefinite delays to registration or unspecified building code violations. While other religious organizations, especially the regional groups of the ROC, were granted official state registration in a timely fashion, provided preferential government favor, and wide access to the general public. This concept of state registry of religious organizations was another major mechanism of control, which abused Section II, Articles 7 through 16 of the 1990 FOWA.⁴⁸ The failure of the Russian people to see the danger of establishing the ROC as its primary religious institution, even though the 1990 FOWA provided the legal grounds to allow religious freedom for all religious belief, organizations, and institutions in Russia, was what led to the backlash against genuine religious freedom in the Russian Federation.

Shuffling the Deck: Scrambling to Construct a New Orthodox Russia

While the failing Soviet state began granting more relaxed regulation on religious activities by 1990 and 1991, the Russian Orthodox Church began its retaliation against

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

westernized Christianity, world evangelism movements, and internal mission work led by foreigners. The reality was the state downplayed its religious restrictions on the Russian populations but allowed the ROC to trade places with it in this matter in exchange for increased control and loyalty of the institution. Instead of the state being the dominant oppressive force against religion, it was the ROC who would do the work on behalf of the state. Religious organizations had continued to surface from the underground and sought for legal status according to the 1990 FOWA, and the transitioning Soviet state even allowed its borders to be opened for missionaries.⁴⁹ Since WWII the Soviet state had allowed a patriarch in office and the structure of the Russian Orthodox Church to remain intact, despite its own religious dogma for scientific atheism.⁵⁰ To the ROC leaders and many of their parishioners, these western newcomers flooding into the new Russian Federation presented themselves as a major threat of taking away members from the Church. Plus, the westerners had many more decades of evangelistic experience and much higher funding to give free food, educational materials for schools, and religious materials for churches—all of which they used to combat rather than cooperate with the mission of the ROC.⁵¹ The ROC retaliated with rhetoric against these “spiritual colonizers,” thus sparking the anti-cult (sect) movement that spun into a blend of pseudo-spirituality, nationalism, and faux-patriotism.⁵² The ROC argued that it was the source of cultural and spiritual stability in Russia, based upon the religious propaganda

⁴⁹ Baran, *The Russian Review*, 639.

⁵⁰ *ibid.*

⁵¹ *ibid.*, 640.

⁵² *ibid.*, 641.

disseminated throughout the country since the 1988 celebration of the Millennium of Christianity in Rus.⁵³

In Vyacheslav Karpov, Elena Lisovskaya, and David Barry's "Ethnodoxy: How Popular Ideologies Fuse Religious and Ethnic Identities" published in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, the authors correctly concluded that "popular beliefs conflating ethnic identities with particular faiths can lead to marginalization of religiously ethnically 'other' and fuel ethnoreligious conflict even in secularized societies."⁵⁴ Their term and conceptualization of "ethnodoxy" effectively describes the phenomenon that fueled the post-Communist, anti-cult movement, which in Russia's circumstance was to marginalize non-Orthodox religions and create a conflict where the state sided with the ROC against any other religion. To accomplish these measures, the ROC had to formulate an insider/outsider mentality that could be effectively disseminated among the general population. The sooner the ROC acted upon this, in the incubation stages of the new Russian government, the more likely it would take hold among the population, within the government bureaucracy, and in written legal policy. By disseminating the idea of ethnodoxy among the "spiritual vacuum" of the immediate post-Soviet society, the ROC and the state successfully planted into the general consciousness of Russians six key characteristics that would foster joint political, religious, social, and youth action and thus form the anti-cult movement until the 1990 FOWA would be modified in 1997:

⁵³ *ibid.*, 641-42.

⁵⁴ Vyacheslav Karpov, Elena Lisovskaya, and David Barry, "Ethnodoxy: How Popular Ideologies Fuse Religious and Ethnic Identities," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 51, no. 4 (2012): 638.

“inborn faithfulness...religious superiority...exclusion of apostates...marginalization of converts...presumption of harm...and privilege and protection seeking...”⁵⁵

The first characteristic of “inborn faithfulness” operates on the incorrect assumption that one belongs to the dominant majority religion regardless of personal commitment. This led to the acceptance of ROC rhetoric claiming the Russian people being an Orthodox people despite many being only nominally Russian Orthodox or even atheist. The second characteristic of “religious superiority” blended with a struggle for ethnic dominance. Not only was the ROC concerned about outside Western usurpation of the culture but also internal usurpation by ethnic minorities like Jews and Islamic Tartars.⁵⁶ This drove the ROC to declare its belief system as distinctly Russian and superior to any other religious profession, which also delegitimized any ethnically Russian person who converted to a minority religion like Judaism or Islam.⁵⁷ The third characteristic of “exclusion of apostates” echoes the former sentiment. An individual who converts from Russian Orthodox Christianity would no longer be considered ‘ethnically Russian,’ according to the ROC, of which also this assumption would disseminate among the general Russian population. The fourth characteristic of “marginalization of converts” was the reverse situation – if an ethnic group converted to a different religion (i.e., a Tartar or a Jew converts to Christianity), then they were labeled as incapable of being truly loyal to the group even if they followed the religion more closely than ethnic Russians. The fifth characteristic of “presumption of harm” is nothing more than

⁵⁵ *ibid.*, 644.

⁵⁶ *ibid.*, 639.

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

finalizing a system of ingroup/outgroup. The ROC labeled non-Orthodox religions as “alien, hostile, and harmful to the ingroup.”⁵⁸ This finally led to the end result and goal of the ROC – justification for its sixth characteristic of “privilege and protection seeking.” Because of the external threats of religious Westerners and internal threats of ethnic religious groups, the ROC appealed to the state and general public that it had to be given special protection, privileges, and immunities above other religions. The ROC wanted Russians to be tolerant toward its religion but not any other. The ultimate goal of ethnodoxy, which was the foundation to the anti-cult movement, was to legalize and justify actions that were hostile to non-Orthodox Christians and religious minorities without alienating the general Russian population from its adherence to the concept of religious tolerance.

Where the ROC, the Russian state, and anti-cult movement specifically merged together was with an individual named Aleksandr Dvorkin. In her article “Negotiating the Limits of Religious Pluralism in Post-Soviet Russia: The Anti-Cult Movement in the Russian Orthodox Church, 1990-2004” published in *The Russian Review*, Dr. Emily B. Baran effectively covers the progression of the anti-cult movement in post-Soviet Russia led by Dvorkin. This religious, social, and political movement significantly altered public perception of religious toleration and contributed to the changing of the 1990 FOWA to the 1997 FCRA, which law effectively established four “traditional religions,” Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism, above any newer religious movements or

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

minoritized religious groups.⁵⁹ The ROC, late-Soviet, and post-Soviet leadership all focused their propaganda, beginning with the 1988 celebration of the Millennium of Christianity in Rus, with the intent of creating the phenomena that would become what scholars now define as “ethnodoxy” and the “anti-cult movement” that attracted individual actors like Dvorkin.

Aleksandr Dvorkin emigrated from the USSR to the US in 1977, lost his Russian citizenship, received post-secondary education in New York City, worked for the largest American international media broadcaster *Voice of America*, was baptized into the ROC in 1980, and returned to Russia to work for the Department of Religious Education at the Moscow Patriarchate in 1992 (he was also accused by the Russian media of being a CIA operative, but these claims are unsubstantiated).⁶⁰ The ultimate irony of Dvorkin’s forefront position in the anti-cult movement in the Russian Federation during the early 1990s was that he utilized similar tactics he had learned from observing the first modern Western anti-cult movement that occurred earlier in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s, which undermined the youth movements of the Children of God, the People’s Temple, and the Hare Krishnas.⁶¹ The anticult networks formed in the United States relied heavily upon psychologists and sociologists, who added terms like “brainwashing, mind-control, and deprogramming” to the public vocabulary and ethos, whose model

⁵⁹ Federation Council of Russia, Law of Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, 1 October 1997.

⁶⁰ Baran, *The Russian Review*, 643.

⁶¹ *ibid.*

Dvorkin also imitated.⁶² He combined the tactics he identified from Western anti-cult movements with his understanding of Russian culture, making him the ideal blend of Eastern and Western knowledge through his lived experiences in both Cold War regions. When Dvorkin returned to the Russian Federation in 1992, he was influential in the formation of a sub-group under the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate known as Saint Irenaeus of Leon Information-Consultation Center (SILIC). Dvorkin capitalized on the Jonestown tragedy and demonized New Religious Movements (NRMs) targeting the Russian youth (following the model of Western anti-cult movements) to demonstrate the dangers of religious plurality in the Russian Federation.⁶³ While Dvorkin's SILIC received criticism from some members of the Orthodox Church (such as 'Father' Oleg Steniaev) for being too secular or westernized, it doubtless appealed to secular citizens, state leaders, and ROC members who wanted to remove religious 'sects' (referred to as 'cults' among the general population and 'heretics' to the ROC) from the public sector, even going as far as accusing these minoritized religious groups of attempting to establish a totalitarian theocracy in Russia.⁶⁴ The major issue with this anti-cult movement was that it weaponized government policy to limit the spread of 'sects,' which then could be applied to more established religious institutions selectively by the Russian state.

Dvorkin followed the same model of Western psychologists and sociologists, coining the terms "totalitarian sect" and "destructive cult" to refer to minoritized, non-Orthodox religious groups and referred to their converts as "victims" of psychological

⁶² *ibid.*, 644.

⁶³ *ibid.*

⁶⁴ *ibid.*, 644-45, 47.

manipulation.⁶⁵ Other language used by the anti-cult movement to demonize these religious minorities included “cult, pseudo-religion...brainwash, manipulate, exploit...bizarre, fanatic, and violent,” while simultaneously proposing that anti-cult messages favored freedom of conscience because no “victim” willingly chose to join but rather was deceived or not given full information.⁶⁶ Dvorkin also held conferences to garner wide media attention and public support, lectured at universities, and interviewed with local and national newspapers and television and radio stations, published anti-cult literature and managed an anti-cult website.⁶⁷ This directly contributed to a rising general sentiment among Russian society that any religion that was non-Orthodox was ‘non-traditional,’ ‘foreign,’ ‘alien,’ or a ‘cult.’ SILIC first targeted the most minoritized religious groups in Russia like Scientology, the Unification Church, Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS, Mormons), Hare Krishnas (a Hindu group), and AUM Shinrikyo in order to frame new anti-cult laws that would not only oppress these minoritized religions but also limit the growth of other non-Orthodox Christian denominations (Baptists, Pentecostals, Lutherans, Presbyterians, Reformed, Anglicans, Episcopalians, and Roman Catholics), establish the ROC as the *de facto* primary religious institution above other Christian denominations and religious groups, and ultimately eliminate the presence of more westernized Christians competing with the ROC for members while simultaneously limiting the power of the other three “traditional

⁶⁵ *ibid.*, 646.

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

⁶⁷ *ibid.*, 644.

religions” (Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism).⁶⁸ Now, any religion could be targeted by the Russian state based upon anti-cult policies, and it would be supported by the majority of the population due to the wide reach of SILIC and the anti-cult movement.

The Russian population ran with what SILIC had provided them, especially members of the ROC. Priests and students formed local organizations to distribute anti-cult literature and media blitzes against NRMs.⁶⁹ Cooperative organizations like the Sect Information Consultation Center, the Committee to Save Youth from Totalitarian Sects, and the Committee to Protect the Family and the Individual formed to work with SILIC’s anti-cult agenda, which also would serve as contributing forces to the 1997 FCRA religious policy redefinition and also as the driving force behind the Moscow Trials of Jehovah’s Witnesses from 1998-2002.⁷⁰ While the ROC was critical of SILIC’s secular methodology, the leadership ultimately allowed Dvorkin to maintain his anti-cult work and keep his office in the Moscow Patriarchate.⁷¹ The ROC also capitalized on the social and state support granted to SILIC during the anti-cult movement to further its own agenda of consolidating political and social power.

What SILIC’s role did for secular members of the population, the ROC did for religious members of the population. It could remain silent on the secular anti-cult movement, yet quietly gather supporters from it, while also calling for converts from NRMs. Anti-cult literature became more intense in its demonization of NRMs, likening

⁶⁸ *ibid.*, 645.

⁶⁹ *ibid.*, 644.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*, 637, 44.

⁷¹ *ibid.*, 645.

their actions as a totalitarian threat equivalent to Stalin’s “Great Terror,” the Nazi Holocaust, or Islamic terrorism.⁷² The anti-cult forces also accused Hare Krishnas of shooting or drowning its defectors, Scientologists of running concentration camps, NRMs of turning children into “terrorist-kamikazes,” referring to leaders as “criminals” running a “mafia network,” and comparing NRMs with imagery of totalitarian dictatorships, mass purges, and concentration camps, which also relentlessly attack the ROC when it was in a vulnerable state just like former cults of the Soviet Union did during Lenin’s rise to power.⁷³ The more wild the accusations grew, the more determined the general society became to expunge Russian society of NRMs, while also sheltering youth exposure to any religious group outside the ROC. The Russian people had experimented with Western concepts of religious liberty since 1990 and by 1997 it formally shifted its policy position on the matter—Russia should maintain its Orthodox faith above all others.

The Ace on the Bottom: The 1997 Policy, a Religious Repression Redux

By 1997, an opinion poll placed only forty percent of Russians in support of equal treatment for all religions and churches, which united politicians with the ROC in condemning the 1990 FOWA.⁷⁴ The ROC, Russian Duma, and majority of the population would implement a “tyranny of the majority” against non-Russian Orthodox Christians, the non-Christian “traditional religions” of Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, other religious minorities, and NRMs after less than ten years of anti-cult measures. From June to September 1997, the FCRA law passed through the Duma with a substantial majority and

⁷² *ibid.*, 647.

⁷³ *ibid.*, 647-48.

⁷⁴ *ibid.*, 651.

finally overcame objections and multiple vetoes from President Boris Yeltsin.⁷⁵ This new law established a tiered religious registration system giving preference based upon duration of legal legitimacy and left imprecise qualifications for denying a religious body, group, or association official registration rights.⁷⁶ The 1997 FCRA primarily favored the ROC, being synonymous with anything relating to Christianity in the minds of the majority of Russian citizens and leaders, while also being careful not to appear openly unfair or oppressive to the ethnic, non-Christian “traditional religions.” In application, implementation, and enforcement, it mostly would be used to target “the cults,” to which most Russian citizens and politicians turned a blind eye. The Jehovah’s Witnesses were immediately brought to trial on criminal charges and had their registration revoked in Moscow city limits.⁷⁷ What many did not fully realize was that the ROC, the anti-cult movement, regional governmental leaders, and judges now had the *de jure* means to deny any religious body legal status and began wielding it against the non-Orthodox and non-traditional religions simply by loosely interpreting the re-adjusted 1997 policy.⁷⁸ The scope of limitation increased upon previous policies, especially the 1990 FOWA, redefining freedom of conscience, religious association, and thought.

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ *ibid.*; Federation Council of Russia, Law of Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, 1 October 1997.

⁷⁷ Baran, *The Russian Review*, 652.

⁷⁸ Daniel, Wallace L. & Christopher Marsh, “EDITORIAL: Russia’s 1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience in Context and Retrospect,” *Journal of Church and State* 49, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 5, accessed March 31, 2021, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23921698>.

The ROC not only had been fighting a theological battle against other religious organizations since the passage of the 1990 FOWA but also a growing legal battle, fueled by social fervor from the more secularized anti-cult movement, which appealed to the Russian state to reform and clarify controversies about religious freedom.⁷⁹ The Russian government in Moscow had disagreement within regarding the appeals against the 1990 FOWA from the ROC leadership, but regional courts across the Russian Federation already were ruling against religious rights of groups they found to be problematic, such as Hare Krishnas, Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Mormons/LDS).⁸⁰ When the 1997 FCRA passed, its redefinition of the 1990 FOWA provided the necessary legal means for courts to continue in this practice, ending any debate about federal law, policing, and regional court rulings from those on the appealing end. Further pressure from members of the Duma and the ROC's Patriarch Aleksii II drove President Yeltsin to sign the 1997 FCRA into law against his best wishes, which he had formally opposed on multiple occasions beforehand, publicly claimed that the proposed law violated the Russian Constitution, and even attempted to kill the legislation multiple times by vetoing it.⁸¹ For the past four years, the ROC and secular Russian nationalist groups lobbied the Russian government to act against the foreign mission movements that entered after the fall of the Soviet Union, and the NRMs that formed within the country after the passing of the 1990 FOWA, effectively forcing

⁷⁹ *ibid.*, 6.

⁸⁰ *ibid.*

⁸¹ *ibid.*, 7.

President Yeltsin to comply with the demands of the ROC and nationalists or face massive political consequences.

One major adjustment was the granting of “protected status” of the four “traditional religions” of Russian Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism while “non-traditional” religions were referred to as “sects” in the new law and as “cults” among general society and could not receive full legal protection if they had not formed and functioned in Russia for at least fifteen years.⁸² This change in legal language, cultural vocabulary, and mandatory registration duration cemented the shift away from the concepts of religious liberty as defined in the 1990 FOWA. The ROC exclusively received financial and material supports from the Russian government and was the only religion qualified to legally use “Russian” in its name under the 1997 FCRA, which even excluded the other three traditional religions and all Catholic, Protestant, and Baptist denominations of Christianity.⁸³ All religious groups besides the ROC would also have to endure a long re-registration process with the state annually and pay an annual registration fee, and any religious organization that failed to register or re-register with the state would lose its ability to own property, create schools of instruction, form seminaries, perform religious practices in public institutions, print or distribute religious literature, or invite members of the public to its religious ceremonies or services.⁸⁴ This restrictive registration process became a major snare to any religious organization, new or

⁸² Federation Council of Russia, Law of Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, 1 October 1997.

⁸³ Wallace & Marsh, *Journal of Church and State*, 8.

⁸⁴ *ibid.*, 9.

old, due to its design to protect and establish the ROC above any other religious belief system, organization, or institution.

These modifications in the 1997 FCRA also violated international human rights on religion and the religious freedoms written in the Constitution of the Russian Federation. As U.S. State Department and the international religious freedom NGO Forum 18 concluded that religious freedom had relatively balanced out after the passing of the 1997 FCRA, 2,095 religious organizations were threatened with dissolution after March 1999 due to complications the state had with their re-registration applications (980 had dissolved by 2002, with 39 of 49 mosques in Stavropol alone dissolved for arbitrary reasons).⁸⁵ This massive oversight of both the U.S. State Department and the Forum 18 on the long-term effects of the 1997 FCRA has further contributed to more recent damages to religious freedom in the Russian Federation.

A Final Analytical Caveat: ‘License’ Versus ‘Liberty’

The Russian state since 1997 perfected religious manipulation in both domestic and international politics. The Russian state utilizes three concepts, as identified in an article by Alicja Curanović, to manipulate its political structure: “...the principle of the secular state; the state-recognized category of ‘traditional’ religions [see the 1997 FCRA]; and the state-given ‘license to preach.’”⁸⁶ Firstly, the Russian Federation is able to undermine liberal democratic ideology and bypass any international objections by

⁸⁵ *ibid.*, 12-13.

⁸⁶ Jerry G. Pankhurst & Alar Kilp, “Religion, the Russian Nation and the State: Domestic and International Dimensions: an Introduction, Religion, State and Society,” *Religion, State, and Society*, 41, no. 3 (October 2013): 238, doi: [10.1080/09637494.2013.844592](https://doi.org/10.1080/09637494.2013.844592).

keeping its government secular (not the same as ‘atheist’) and its policies ‘religiously tolerant.’ Next, the convenient caveat to their ‘religious freedom’ policies is the acknowledgment of ‘traditional religions,’ which rings of George Orwell’s “All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others” rule in *Animal Farm*—with the ‘more equal animal’ being the Russian Orthodox Church above other religious institutions and organizations.⁸⁷ Lastly, granting a ‘license to preach’ is the best way to control the population’s religions and organizations because the state may revoke the license of any individual or organization that disagrees with the state based upon a religious conviction or action.

Curanović confirms that state interference “...advances the role of religion in social integration and political legitimization” rather than the “...rise of religion in society.”⁸⁸ It is better left alone by the state. ‘License’ subordinates religion to the state’s control, and it does not grant liberty to the people as a right above government sanction. ‘Liberty’ would elevate religion above the state’s responsibility or jurisdiction. ‘Permission’ is not the same as a ‘freedom’ or a ‘right.’ Instead of the population becoming more pious, religious persons are subjected to more totalitarian practices and political manipulation in the name of religious tradition. This is true both domestically and abroad. The practices are the same for controlling any population, and ROC leaders are granted political power for adhering to them.

The Double-take: The Exception Outside Breaks the Rule in Russia

⁸⁷ George Orwell, *Animal Farm* (Orlando, FL: Harcourt, Inc., 1946), 134.

⁸⁸ Pankhurst & Kilp, *Religion, State, and Society*, 238-39.

The ROC also has used its ‘religious minority’ status abroad to manipulate politics within other nation-states. There exists tens of millions of Russian-loyal, Russian speaking, Russian Orthodox people who seek to maintain this distinction as an ‘ethnic’ or ‘religious’ minority in former Soviet satellites and European Union nations.⁸⁹ European Union nations with significant Orthodox populations include Cyprus, Romania, Bulgaria, Greece, Poland, Lithuania, Latvia, Slovakia, and Slovenia.⁹⁰ In Estonia, the Lutheran majority competes against the Orthodox minority during elections, sanctioning respective candidates based upon their religion, identity, or symbology and by holding religious services during elections for political rallies.⁹¹

Russian state leaders, politicians, and church leaders cooperatively used the Russian Orthodox religion as a tool to manipulate elections and steer democracies toward Russian international interests. By defining the Russian people’s identity as ‘traditionally Orthodox,’ the ‘traditional’ population develops a national and international identity above those who differ, which is at odds with a multicultural or liberal democratic ideology. A democracy can be manipulated and even hijacked by displaced Russian loyalists, especially in unstable nations or ones with smaller populations. This is all done under the guise of ‘religious fervor’ and Russian/Orthodox ‘nationalism.’ However, most of the population is nominally religious, not practicing or devout, yet manipulated by religious leaders and politicians alike. Many who are fervent are not aware of the levels

⁸⁹ *ibid.*, 236.

⁹⁰ *ibid.*, 237.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, 236-37.

of manipulation by state leaders in cooperation with ROC leaders. In all these cases, the exception breaks the rule.

Conclusion: Orthodox 'Kingdom Building' Creates Religious Oppression like Scientific
Atheism

Practices have not changed relatively with the policies on paper. Instead of favoring the scientific atheism of the USSR alone, the modern Russian state chose one religion to exalt while suppressing those remaining; yet all 'registered' religions, associations, and organizations remain under the ultimate authority of the government to manipulate religious people specifically and society generally. This false promise of religious liberty, freedom, and tolerance is nothing more than a sleight of hand trick. The Russian Orthodox Church's obsession with building the kingdom of heaven on earth by resorting to domestic and international political and policy manipulation disguised as 'patriotism, tradition, or nationalism' is also corrupt. A church-state system always undermines the interests of the group(s) it does not favor, leads to their state-sanctioned suppression, and is grossly undemocratic.

After so many struggles by the people to break free from the former Soviet regime to form free democracies with genuine religious liberty, the former Soviet satellites are in danger of being slowly absorbed back into the Russian Federation under a religio-political oligarchy in the name of 'nationalism' and a nominal 'tradition,' and even the European Union is in danger of having its electoral processes subverted by Russian and Orthodox tampering. Of course, the ROC would have its people scattered across the globe believe this is what is best for them and what is inevitable. Some members of the church would even go as far to say it is the direct will of God. By contradicting *de jure*

policy with opposing practices, the ROC is slowly and successfully re-creating a *de facto* Russian Orthodox dominant system in the Russian Federation similar to nineteenth century Russia. However, by linking with the Russian state, the ROC ultimately is willing to subordinate itself to state control in exchange for removing excess religious competition at home and abroad. Their leaders are content to receive selective political power while remaining loyal to the autocratic agenda of the Russian Federation. As Orwell's *Animal Farm*'s ends: "The creatures outside looked from pig to man, and from man to pig, and from pig to man again; but already it was impossible to say which was which."⁹² Thus the church now obeys the secular proverbs of the state while despising its own sacred ones, and the state demonizes any who oppose the One Holy Church of the Motherland into a proverbial omen.

⁹² Orwell, *Animal Farm*, 141.

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FIGURE 1

Foreign Relations and Intercourse, U.S. Code 22 (2006) § 611 (e), accessed March 30, 2021, <https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/22/611>.

“The term “government of a foreign country” includes any person or group of persons exercising sovereign de facto or de jure political jurisdiction over any country, other than the United States, or over any part of such country, and includes any subdivision of any such group and any group or agency to which such sovereign de facto or de jure authority or functions are directly or indirectly delegated. Such term shall include any faction or body of insurgents within a country assuming to exercise governmental authority whether such faction or body of insurgents has or has not been recognized by the United States;”

FIGURE 2

“Lenin approved terror, Soviet writes,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 8, 1988, general edition, 36. Detroit Free Press (1923-1999) database.

“MOSCOW—A leading Soviet journalist, breaking a taboo, has written that Vladimir Lenin personally approved the systematic use of terror in managing the Soviet state. The journalist’s article, in the latest issue of the monthly magazine *Novy Mir*, is the first in the Soviet news media to implicate Lenin in the system of forced labor camps developed after his death by Stalin. Lenin, considered the founder of the Soviet state, is attacked only obliquely, using citations from his writing, and the author, Vasily Selyunin, says that Lenin ‘was quick to understand’ before he died that an economy based on terror would not work. But Selyunin leaves little doubt that Lenin set the stage for what followed him.”

FIGURE 3

Peter Gavrilovich, "Millennium isn't just celebration; Russians, Soviet anger Ukrainians," *Detroit Free Press*, June 8, 1988, general edition, 36. Detroit Free Press (1923-1999) database.

"The setting is full of intrigue in a country that began energetically restricting religion soon after the Bolsheviks took power and christened their nation the Soviet Union seven decades ago: a government-sponsored celebration of 1,000 years of Christianity. Billy Graham, the American Protestant evangelist who twice before preached in packed Soviet churches, arrives in Moscow today as part of the celebration. So will a papal delegation from the Roman Catholic Church. The government has begun returning some historic buildings to the Russian Orthodox Church and will sponsor events at such secular shrines as the Bolshoi ballet. But questions about who legitimately can celebrate the millennium and how closely the state controls the Russian Orthodox Church have led priests in the Soviet Union, émigrés and Soviet experts in the United States to criticize the state's involvement in the celebration and demand more freedom of religious expression in the Soviet Union. Some Soviet priests who had been jailed for dissident activities have been critical of the government and the Russian Orthodox Church recently, saying the Russian Orthodox Church needs to join the state in denouncing the repressive rule of Joseph Stalin, who engineered the decimation of that church and then helped it exist as the only tolerated faith in the Soviet Union. 'A person cannot be renewed...unless he repents,' dissident Russian Orthodox priest the Rev. Gleb Yakunin told reporters in Moscow on Tuesday. 'This is true of the church, too.' Mr. Yakunin said he and his followers had sent a message to bishops meeting this week at a General Church Council in Zagorsk, northeast of Moscow. He said the bishops were urged to condemn the 'cult of personality' and withdraw the church's past statements of

support to Stalin. Americans of Ukrainian descent, including leaders in the 45,000-member Ukrainian-American community in Detroit, are incensed over what is viewed as a Russian and Soviet intrusion on their millennium celebration. Christianity arrived in the present day Soviet Union after Ukrainian Prince Vladimir embraced the faith in exchange for the hand of the sister of the Byzantine emperor in what most historians believe was 988. In 1596, when most of the Ukraine fell under Polish rule, the Roman Catholic Church established congregations mostly in western Ukraine. About a century later, after czarist Russian domination, the head of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church capitulated to Russian church dominion, and the Russian Orthodox Church hasn't allowed an independent Ukrainian church to exist since. So when press reports about celebrations of the millennium originate in Moscow—instead of Kiev, the Ukrainian capital—and tie the event to the Russian Orthodox Church, long believed to be state-manipulated, many Ukrainians outside of the Soviet Union protest.”

FIGURE 4

“A cathedral for Moscow,” *Detroit Free Press*, June 13, 1988, general edition, 5. Detroit Free Press (1923-1999) database.

“MOSCOW—A cathedral will be built in Moscow to mark the 1,000th anniversary of Christianity in what is now the Soviet Union, and the foundation stone will be laid today, the city's mayor said Sunday. Mayor Valery Saykin made the announcement at a reception marking the millennium, the Tass news agency reported.”