

How religious is the contemporary Russian intelligentsia? Sociological aspects of the religious situation in Russia

INNA NALETOVA (*Boston University, USA; Pastorales Forum, Austria*)

BASED ON the Enlightenment critique of religion, the theory of secularization views modernity as a process of *démystification* [*Entzauberung*] of the world, meaning by that that the modern world is no longer mysterious, guided by divine grace or human feelings, by destiny or charisma. Following Max Weber, sociologists speak of an increase of rationalization and intellectualization in modern societies and a decrease of the authority and power of traditional religions. It is the fate of modernity, argued the founder of modern sociology, to force man to choose between autonomous spheres of activity governed by different systems of values which are no longer embraced by religious beliefs. Pushed into its own separate sphere, religion cannot claim universal authority and neither can it uphold an objective moral order to guide individuals' decisions and actions. The differentiation of modern society is unavoidable. However, as the sociologist David Martin has noted, in every society this process develops within the parameters of a specific pattern of secularization and expresses itself with a different degree of distinctness.¹ The specificity of the Russian context as compared to the Western lies, to my mind, in a loose or partial differentiation. Religious values in Russia not only coexist with secular values but fuse and synthesize with them. This is particularly true in the spheres of culture, nation and state-building, but also, to some extent, as regards family relations and gender behavior, in the spheres of education and certain business and market developments, and even in the sphere of science.

Social differentiation orients modern individuals toward a specific set of values. Among the most important ones are those concerned with religious individualism, freedom of conscience, personal responsibility, and intellectual integrity, as defined within the requirements of a chosen sphere of human activity. In order to be a good worker, a good citizen, a family man, or simply a cultured person, one does not need the guidance of religious traditions. As Max

¹ David Martin, 1978, *A General Theory of Secularization*, Oxford, chs 1-2.

Weber succinctly put it, being religious means making an 'intellectual sacrifice', i.e. putting oneself in conflict with the demands of the time.²

Yet, religiosity in the contemporary world is not necessarily perceived as an obstacle to the individual's relations with secular society, and perhaps Weber held too pessimistic a view of the modern religious situation. In Russia, for example—and this has often been noted in media, literature, and academic studies—religiosity is increasingly perceived as an important quality of human life that enriches the individual's social interactions and strengthens his or her ability to cope with difficulties and problems. Religion is viewed as an important factor in making social adjustments and facilitating communication.³ Orthodox values are perceived, on the one hand, as an alternative to secular values, on the other as an essential part of Russian nation-building, art, culture, history, and, to some extent, entrepreneurship, education, medicine, recreation and hospitality. Orthodoxy is felt to be 'the right thing', something to be preserved and nurtured. The presence of religious values in secular society is generally viewed as acceptable and even desirable.

But the attitude to religion in Russia, particularly in educated circles, has not always been friendly. In the mid-nineteenth century, the Westernized intelligentsia began to perceive education as synonymous with religious indifference, even with the rejection of religion.⁴ The conflicts between Fathers and Sons as depicted by Ivan Turgenev illustrates this thesis. The tragedy of Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevskij's *The Brothers Karamazov* may be seen as a socio-psychological drama between religious tradition and the newly emerged rebellious intellectuals. Today, many Russian sociologists

² Max Weber, 1946, Science as a vocation, in: H. H. Gerth & G. W. Mills (eds), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, New York.

³ In my interviews in Russia (2002-4), the majority of my respondents stressed the fact that affiliation with the Church is conducive to creating a situation of mutual trust between people who work together. Some years ago, this phenomenon was studied in bankers by sociologist Natalia Dinello (N. Dinello, 1998, Russian rejections of money and homo economicus: the self-identifications of the pioneers of a money-economy in post-Soviet Russia, *Sociology of Religion* 59:1.45-64). In the sphere of politics there was an informative article by N. Gvozdev ('Outside view: Vladimir Putin's faith'), presented on 24 February 2004 at <<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/nabozenstvo>>, a forum for the discussion of religion and society in post-communist Europe.

⁴ Remarkable in this regard are the observations of Sergej Bulgakov, who himself turned to faith at a late stage (С. Булгаков, 1993 [1909], Геронизм и подвижничество. (Из размышлений о религиозных идеалах русской интеллигенции), in: idem, *Собрание сочинений* 2, 308).

have little doubt that religion is stronger in those parts of society where people are less schooled in a rational-scientific understanding of the world.⁵ Based on this rather obvious assumption, religion is expected to decline with the rise of individuals' social participation and education. Correspondingly, those individuals working in intellectual spheres and involved in science, technology and public leadership are expected to be less religious than the rest of society. According to Soviet statistics, this assumption was correct in the Soviet period; yet, contemporary data on religion and education call it into question.

Thus a thought-provoking observation was made by Paul Zulehner and Miklos Tomka in their study of religion in the post-communist countries in Central and Eastern Europe. The scholars noted that, in some parts of the region, religion does not decline with the rise of education. Although in general the least educated people continue to be more religious, in for example eastern Germany, the Czech Republic and Hungary, the better educated people turn out to be more religious than their less educated compatriots. This observation led the scholars to the conclusion that intellectuals are not always in the vanguard of secularization.⁶

Foreign observers often note a touch of 'irrationality' and 'inconsistency' in Russian mentality and public life. The recent revival of Orthodoxy was, to the mind of some scholars, one such 'irrational' development—an astonishing fact in the face of a century of state atheism. These scholars point out the fact that the revived Russian Church puts a strong emphasis on its traditional universalism, its messianism and other-worldliness, as well as the Byzantine ideal of 'symphonic' relations with the state, refusing to view itself as a private denomination. The Church, in other words, on the part of its believers resists the modern principle of religious autonomy and rejects modern secular values. From an outside perspective it may appear strange and inconsistent that contemporary businesspeople, teachers, artists, and scientists can be both Orthodox and 'modern'. How, in fact, do they reconcile these conflicting sets of values in their life and thinking?

⁵ See, for instance, В.И. Гараджа, 1995, *Социология религии. Учебное пособие*, Москва, 171.

⁶ M. Tomka & P. Zulehner, 1999, *Religion in den Reformländern Ost(Mittel)-Europas*, Ostfildern, 231. It is worth noting that in Poland, even in the Soviet period, religion grew considerably in all educational groups.

It has to be stressed that, after a century of religious limitations, Orthodoxy has reemerged in Russia not only in the form of the traditional beliefs and practices of the Church, but also in the form of public memories, local traditions, spiritual echoes, and minimal or quasi-religious beliefs and practices that have soaked into the public spheres to merge with culture, custom and history. The Russian intelligentsia has always been sensitive to these non-institutional forms of religiosity. 'When the Church died', wrote Aleksandr Blok, 'the street became an extension of the church.'⁷ The feeling of loss after the destruction of churches also sounds in Esenin's poetical and religious reflection on nature:

Вчера иконы выбросили с полки,
На церкви комиссар снял крест.
Теперь и богу негде помолиться.
Уж я хожу украдкой нынче в лес,
Молюсь осинам... Может, пригодится..⁸

In conjunction, the loosely institutionalized forms of religiosity and the traditional conservatism of the Russian Church contribute to the 'irrational' and 'inconsistent' flavor of Russian mentality and public life.

The history of the institutionalization of science in Russia illustrates of the fusion of external (religious) values of Russian society with internal (rationalistic) values of modernity. A new ethos of science, different from that of the West, began to emerge in Russia at the time of Peter the Great. Before the reforms of Peter, Russia had no scientific organizations and was isolated from the intellectual life

⁷ «Не знаю надолго ли, но Русской Церкви больше нет... Церковь умерла, а храм стал продолжением улицы...» The words are from Blok's unfinished 'Confession of a pagan' («Исповедь язычника»), for the publication of some fragments of which, together with a short review of the poet's ambivalent attitude to religion, see Sergej Kolesanov's article dedicated to the 85th anniversary of the publication of Blok's poem 'The Twelve' (Сергей Колесанов, 2003, Эх, эх, без креста!, *ИГ-Религия*, 19 March 2003 (internet version: http://religion.ng.ru/printed/history/2003-03-19/6_blok.html)); cf. also the fragments in Blok's *Diary* (А. Блок, 1989, *Дневник*, Москва). Remarkable is the poet's explanation of the meaning of the image of Christ in 'The Twelve'. Emerging in the midst of a snowstorm which surrounds the marching Red Army soldiers, Christ is walking in the street, among the people, holding a banner: «[Отчаявшийся должен] дойти до святости или уступить... „Христос с красногвардейцами" — едва ли можно оспорить эту истину, простую для людей, читавших Евангелие и думавших о нем. У нас вместо того они „отлучаются от церкви".» (Блок, *Дневник*, 292,270-1)

⁸ Сергей Есенин, 1961 [1924], Возвращение на Родину, in: idem, *Собрание сочинений в пяти томах 2*, 159-63, at 161 (ellipses in the original).

of Western Europe.⁹ Once imported from the West, science brought with it the ideal of a rational, skeptical and empirical view of the world. A central characteristic of this newly imported intellectual sphere was the belief that the world can be controlled by reason and scientific method. Scientists were expected to strive to avoid any impact on their activity from religion, tradition, emotions or feelings. By the end of the eighteenth century, science had become an important part of Russian society, while, at the same time, the two sets of values —traditional (religious) and imported (rationalistic) — had begun to merge.

As a result, a new psychological profile of science emerged. The ideal type of the Russian scientist was a broadly informed intellectual who was indifferent neither to the destiny of his motherland nor to the whole of human kind; he had a certain feeling of guilt and a sense of obligation to save his nation, his people, and indeed the entire world; this was accompanied by a certain otherworldliness in his spirit and a significant degree of asceticism in his style of life.¹⁰ The Russian scientist was more than a professional in his particular sphere of knowledge; he was a 'true' scientist, a devotee of science, a scientist as religious type. His professional activity was based not only on curiosity, diligence, rational thinking, and a striving for objective knowledge, but also on the Russian nobility's romantic sentiments, on their desire to serve the nation and their feeling of being important for the state. A successful scientist was respectfully called 'a man of science' and treated as a great teacher, an individual with a true personality, almost a hero or a prophet.

Alexander Herzen was one of those Russian thinkers who promoted such a romantic-existential vision of science.¹¹ For him science was an enterprise much greater than simple workmanship, it was a living entity that demanded the whole man, 'with his readiness to sacrifice everything for the prize of carrying the heavy cross of sober knowledge'.¹² Herzen characterized scientific activity with an abundance of lofty words about, for example, the unification of man and nature and the reconciliation of body and soul.¹³ Influenced by Marxism, the pursuit of science acquired somewhat

⁹ L. R. Graham, 1993, *Science in Russia and in the Soviet Union: a Short History*, Cambridge New York, 9-32.

¹⁰ There is no other intelligentsia in the world that could be as ascetic as the Russian, noted Sergej Bulgakov in his *Героизм и подвижничество* (cf. above), where he drew a psychological portrait of Russian intellectuals as embodying a Westernized and secularized, yet Orthodox spirituality.

¹¹ See Александр Герцен, 1954, *Дилетантизм в науке* and *Письма об изучении природы*, idem: *Собрание сочинений* 3, Москва.— Reading Herzen, one cannot resist comparing his vision of science with a mystical experience. 'Science', he writes, 'is like a living soul. Only by a living soul may the living truths be understood... A living soul has a sympathy for all that is alive; some clarity of vision renders its life easier.' («Наука как „живая душа“. Только живой душой понимаются живые истины... Живая душа имеет симпатию к живому, какое-то ясновидение облегчает ей жизнь.» (ibid., 19)) The 'true' scientist, for Herzen, is a harmoniously balanced and broadly educated individual who is not indifferent to Hamlet or Don Giovanni, a citizen who is ready to 'go to the masses', a 'person of life, of public council, of high human fullness' («человек жизни, общественного совета, высокой человеческой полноты») (ibid., 10-2). In Herzen's view, neither memory nor hard work is what characterizes the true scientist; he is characterized by 'a pulsating heart and strong emotions' («не память и трудолюбие, а бьющееся сердце и кипящие страсти») (ibid., 52-5).

¹² «Наука требует всего человека, без задних мыслей, с готовностью все отдать и в награду получить тяжелый крест трезвого знания» (ibid., 66); cf. «страшное [для ученого] сделаться ремесленником и утратить широкий взгляд» (ibid., 49).

¹³ Ibid., 58-9,71,124.

sectarian and revolutionary meanings at the end of the nineteenth century,¹⁴ and a few years later, in the Soviet period, there developed a vision of science as an activity endowed with ethical flavors.

The appeal of scientists to the authority of philosophy and religion rather than reason and method, and their inclination toward a broad, somewhat mystical view of the world, to the detriment of rational and practical orientation, has been noticed by many historians as a characteristic feature of the Russian scientific ethos. The predominance in Russian universities of a humanistic curriculum, instead of a narrow technical one, an emphasis on a broad rather than a narrowly professional education, the strength of Russian science in theoretical knowledge and the weakness in experimental studies have also surprised scholars looking at Russia from abroad.¹⁵ It is worth noting in this connection that the Russian *nauka* does not correspond strictly to the usual English and German equivalents. *Nauka* and *naučnoe tvorčestvo* (scientific creativity) denote the pursuit of knowledge in the widest sense—including an instruction of ethical behavior and the use of imagination—and appeal to patriotism and passion. Accordingly, science is understood as a way toward 'the Lofty, the Good, the Eternal'. As an English historian succinctly remarked, observing the atmosphere in

¹⁴ A. Vicinich, 1971, *Science in Russian Culture, 1861-1917*, Stanford, Calif.

¹⁵ There is a similarity in the scientists' emphasis on a broad education and the Orthodox ethical vision of work. Contrary to Protestant work ethics, Orthodox work ethics does not stress professionalism in business ('a calling') but the ability of a person to have several skills («быть мастером на все руки»).

Russian scientific collectivities in the mid-twentieth century, one should be able to feel the 'Russian atmosphere' and 'Russian personality'¹ in order to write of Russian science:

It would be possible to write a book about English science without more than passing reference to philosophy, culture and social life in England. But in Russia it has to have more than facts and figures.¹⁶

To understand Russian science, as he concluded, a scholar should study Tolstoj, Turgenev, Sestov, Dostoevskij, and Gogol'.

Science is a remarkable product of both Russian modernity and Russian religiosity. Its history hides many surprises, a full discussion of which is far beyond the present paper. However, this brief excursus into its history helps to open up a more nuanced perspective on the nature of the Russian intelligentsia and allows us to see the current turn of intellectuals to religion not as 'irrational' and 'inconsistent', but as grounded in a specifically Russian pattern of secularization.

Synopsis of sociological data

An image of the Russian Church as the Church of intellectuals appears counterintuitive. It contradicts the Soviet-made image of Orthodoxy as the religion of Russia's past, attractive only to marginal social groups. Yet the data show that in the early 1990s individuals with a high education accepted religion and identified themselves with Orthodoxy more quickly than did other social groups. During the first years of the religious revival the percentage of university-educated individuals among self-identified Orthodox was significantly higher than among the population in general,¹⁷ which supports the cited observation of Tomka and Zulehner that modern intellectuals do not always go in the vanguard of secularization. By the year 2000, a few years after the reappearance of the Church in public life, due to the influx of young and less-educated believers, the educational composition of the Orthodox group began to resemble the educational composition of Russia's population as a whole, thus confirming the status of Orthodoxy as the national territorial church.¹⁸

¹⁶ E. Ashby, 1947, *Scientist in Russia*, Harmondsworth, 4.

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Education	Orthodox	Percentage of the population
University	36%	25 %
Middle-professional	48%	53 %
Unfinished middle	15 %	21 %
Other	1 %	1 %

(В. Ф. Чеснокова, 2000, *Процесс воцерковления населения в современной России*, Москва, 96. Data on the year 1992, Фонд «Общественное Мнение».)

In 1995, the Independent Institute of Social and National Studies of St Petersburg reported a predominance of individuals with a university-level education among the Orthodox believers in Russia. According to these data, university-educated Orthodox constituted 46 % of the group of Orthodox. The Orthodox with middle or professional education were 43 %, and only 10 % had an education lower than middle (see Г.У. Бакланова, [1996], *Православная церковь Божьей Матери «Державная» как социально-религиозный феномен*, PhD diss. (кандидатская диссертация), Moscow State University, p. 96).

¹⁸ В. Ф. Чеснокова, 2000, *Процесс воцерковления населения России. Сравнение двух исследований. 1992 и 2000 гг.*, Москва.

A local study of religiosity among the members of the Russian Academy of Science in the year 2000 gave the following result: 89.7 percent of the individuals in the Academy identified with Orthodoxy; only 0.6 percent of them were unbelievers; the remaining 9.7 percent identified with other faiths.¹⁹

A sociological study conducted in the Kama Region by Perm' State University showed that education and religiosity increased parallel to each other. Thirty years ago, 90 percent of the believers were illiterate or had only elementary education. Today, about 70 percent of them have at least a high-school diploma. The educational composition of groups of believers and unbelievers respectively is similar to one another.²⁰

According to several independently conducted studies of youth religiosity in 2000, schoolchildren and people younger than thirty tend to be more religious than older people—who may have been more influenced by Soviet atheism. The majority of schoolchildren in these studies define themselves as believers. The vice-minister of Education, Jurij Kovrižnič, confirmed in 2000 that up to 80 percent of schoolchildren believe in God.²¹ A predominance of young people among believers was also reported in the aforementioned study in the Kama Region.

¹⁹ З. И. Пейкова, 2001, Отношение российского населения к православию, *Рождественские чтения* 2001. The author is a researcher at the Institute of Sociology, RAN.

²⁰ М. Г. Писмарк, 2000, Число убежденных верующих в Прикамье неуклонно растет, *Независимая газета* 17 May 2000.

²¹ Quoted from the research of the State Committee on Youth Affairs, *Благо-весть-Инфо* 8 May 2000.

Adherence to Russian Orthodoxy is not a phenomenon typical of provincial Russia; rather, churches are concentrated in the capitals. The data shows that Moscow and St Petersburg are more densely populated with believers than are other parts of the country.²² It should be mentioned in this connection that 59 percent of the Muscovites approve of the idea of teaching the basics of Orthodox theology and ethics (*Zakon Božij*) in public schools. In the population as a whole the percentage of people accepting such an idea is lower, viz. 45.2 percent.²³

Scholars from the Institute of Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences (RAN) do not think that beliefs in various supernatural and magical phenomenon depend on the level of education.²⁴ It is not unusual for intellectuals to develop an interest in Orthodoxy not because of personal religious experiences but from an interest in old Russian traditions, custom and culture, or from an interest in supernatural, mystical or magical phenomena. The sociologist Valentina Cesnokova, in her study of 'churchliness' (*vocerkovlën-nost'*), has pointed out that the group of believers with the weakest orientation toward the Church (with a 'zero-level of churchliness'²⁵) is also the least-educated group. With some generalization it may be said that her data suggest that it would be hard to find an educated person in Russia not, in one way or another, interested in, or touched by, traditional Russian beliefs. More than

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Place of residence:	Moscow & St Petersburg	megapolices	big cities	small cities	villages
Do not believe	28%	34%	39%	38%	38%
Orthodox	66%	53%	49%	54%	52%
Percentage of the entire population	9%	10%	21%	32%	27%

(Nation-wide poll, Фонд «Общественное Мнение», *Apri* 12000; cf. the full data at: <http://bd.fom.ru/report/cat/man/religion/too1435>)
The table shows that 66 % of the residents of Moscow and St Petersburg are Orthodox, while the corresponding number in villages is 52 % (however, village residents constitute 27 % of the population, whereas a mere 9 % live in the capitals).

²³ *Мир религии* in April 2002 (www.religio.ru); П. Мчедяев, 1998, Образование и духовность, *Независимая газета* 16 December 1998.

²⁴ The study was conducted by M. Cernys in 2000, with 2,500 respondents surveyed (А. Чернов, in: *Ведомости* 27 September 2002 (cf. the English version, 'A third of Russians believe in miracles', at: www.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews/o209c.html#16).

²⁵ Her analysis of churchliness takes into account the respondents' type of orientation toward the Church in its complexity, viz. church attendance, prayer, fasting, communion, and knowledge of the religious texts.

eighty years ago Aleksandr Blok remarked on this matter: 'I am Russian, and Russians always think of the Church; there is hardly anyone who is completely indifferent to it; some hate it; some love it; but in either case with pain.'²⁶ Education opens up a window to culture which becomes also a window to religion. Despite historical disruptions, Orthodoxy has preserved its role as the keeper of the Russian nation and culture, a fact to which no contemporary intellectual can be indifferent.

Trust in the Church is evenly expressed by different social groups. Several studies of public opinion confirm that the Church continues to be the most respected institution in Russia, after the President and the Army. Education, however, makes an impact on the certainty with which individuals state their religiosity and trust. Educated believers tend to be more hesitant between belief and disbelief, trust and distrust.²⁷

Not all religious people affiliate with religious institutions. In 1991, 56 percent of the population confirmed their religiosity but only 37 percent were affiliated with the Orthodox Church. In 2000 the data were, correspondingly, 60 and 55 percent; in 2001—65 and 59. During the last decade, the gap between church-oriented and unaffiliated believers has diminished²⁸

²⁶ «Но я — русский, а русские всегда ведь думают о церкви; мало кто совершенно равнодушен к ней; одни ее ненавидят, а другие любят; то и другое — с болью.» (Cited from: Сергей Колесанов, 'Эх, эх, без креста!' The words are from the prose fragment that has already been quoted above, fn 7.) Cf., from Blok's *Diary* on 6 August 1918, the following remarkable lines on Russia and her otherworldly spirit: «„Россию“, „Родину“, „Отечество“, не знаю что и как назвать, чтобы не стало больно и горько и стыдно перед бедными, обездоленными, темными, обиженными. Боже, в какой мы страшной зависимости от Твоего хлеба! Мы боролись с Тобой, наше „древнее благочестие“ надолго заслонило от нас промышленный путь. Твой Промысел был для нас больше нашего промысла. И вот теперь мы забыли и Твой Промысел, а своего промысла у нас по-прежнему нет, и мы зависим от колосьев, которые Ты можешь смять грозой, растоптать засухой и сжечь, грозный лик Твой, такой как на древней иконе, теперь неумолим перед нами!» (Блок, *Дневник*, 244).— During the summer of 1918 Blok wrote about a curious fear (typical of popular religiosity) of losing the cross he wore round his neck, expecting that something terrible would happen to him were he to lose it.

²⁷ See the *Omnibus IV* study from June-July 1994 of the GfK [*Gesellschaft für Konsumforschung*] RUS.

²⁸ 'Attitude of Russians toward religion', *Russian Public Poll and Opinion Research*, posted on 31 January 2000 at 'Russian Religion News', Stetson University (cf. the internet reference in fn 24 above). See also the report from the ROMIR research group: И. Цигельник, «Религия россиян», at: www.romir.ru. These data correspond to those of Česnokova referred to above.

To summarize, Orthodoxy has enjoyed a revival in Russian public life not within the marginal groups and strata but within those social circles that were the most exposed to the influence of modernity: educated people, youth, and residents of the capitals. The data show that the rise of religion and modernity are not opposed to each other and that educated individuals can manage to find ways to be both religious and modern. It is important to stress again that the intellectuals were among the first in Russia to find their way back to the Church and that, today, they constitute a significant part of Russian believers, proportionate to the educational composition of Russia's population. It is not education that drives people away from the Church, remarked one highstanding ecclesiastic in 1994, but their arrogance and pride.²⁹ 'We became too clever to believe in God,' Aleksandr Blok prophetically said after the publication of his poem 'The Twelve' —'but not strong enough to believe in ourselves.'³⁰ And later: 'In order to make choices we need to exercise our will, the foundation for which I can search only in heaven.'³¹

²⁹ Митрополит Вениамин, 1994, Веруют ли ученые?, *Православная беседа* 1994:4, quoted from: А. Киселев, Православие и наука: спор или взаимодействие?, *Духовный собеседник* 2000: 4 (24).

³⁰ «Мы стали слишком умны, чтобы верить в бога и недостаточно сильны, чтобы верить только в себя... Разве можно верить в разумность человечества после этой войны и накануне неизбежных, еще более жестоких войн?» (These words of Blok's are quoted from the recollections of Maksim Gor'kij : М. Горький, 1980, А. А. Блок, in: *Александр Блок в воспоминаниях современников*, Москва, 331.)

³¹ «Для выбора — нужно действие воли, опоры для нее я могу искать только в небе.» (Блок, *Дневник*, 230)