

Free fall: Religious pluralism in Russia

by [Alexei Bodrov](#) in the [July 29, 1998](#) issue

One cannot call the religious situation in contemporary Russia stable. There are divisions not only between different religions or Christian confessions, but within the Russian Orthodox Church. These intra-Orthodox divisions are even more serious and dangerous in their consequences than are interconfessional ones.

The problem is that the Russian Orthodox Church, the church of the majority in Russia, is strongly politicized. This reflects political life in Russia, where just a few years ago we had only one political party. Today there are several dozen different parties. Although this situation is not unique to Russia, we lack experience living in a pluralistic society.

What is genuinely new in contemporary Russian reality is the attempt to create a pluralistic society in which different forms of social, cultural and religious life can coexist peacefully. The term “pluralistic society” includes two opposite notions: “pluralism,” meaning difference and diversity, and “society,” meaning cooperation and unity. So when speaking about pluralistic society, we actually imply *unity in diversity*.

This is good theoretically. But how can we preserve the balance and avoid extremes? How do we avoid a unity that tries to smooth, suppress and eliminate diversity? And how do we avoid a relativism that emphasizes diversity only to spawn formlessness and nihilism? The rejection of other traditions and the fear of outside influences lead to isolation within one’s own tradition (cultural or religious), escapism into a “ghetto,” transformation into a sect. Sectarian consciousness rejects dialogue and reconciliation. This is illustrated by the recent passage of an antidemocratic law on religion--and by the growing antiecumenical mood within the Russian Orthodox Church.

The problem lies not in the coexistence of different views or traditions but in the hostility of their adherents toward each other. The same is true for different religions

or religious movements.

The root of the conflicts lies not in different theologies or dogmatics but in political, national or religious situations and in emotion, fanaticism and lack of experience and knowledge.

Unfortunately, the “wind of change” and the collapse of the communist regimes in Eastern Europe did not result in dialogue between churches. Instead, we are experiencing a lack of confidence and considerable tension in interchurch relations. (On a serious theological level, dialogue is possible. The Second Vatican Council, which proclaimed “the dialogue of love between the sister churches,” provided a good example.) The problem of intraconfessional (intra-Orthodox) dialogue is even more acute, and intra-Orthodox conflicts are more intense and painful. But until we have reconciliation inside our church, we cannot speak seriously about reconciliation between churches. The recovery of the health of each church will help to heal interchurch relations.

Unfortunately, the Russian Orthodox hierarchy was unprepared for religious freedom and the new conditions of social life. For a long time, the hierarchy was occupied with preserving the tradition and the church itself. Relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the communist state were not simple. The very existence of the church was threatened more than once during that time.

There was also a traditional gulf between church and society that existed not only during the Soviet period, but even before the Bolshevik Revolution. Only in the beginning of this century did we begin the work of building a bridge between church and society, Christianity and culture, theology and science. The famous Church Council of 1917-18 could have become “Vatican II” for the Russian Orthodox Church, but the process was interrupted.

The leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church is often criticized for failing to give spiritual guidance and for seeming to be incapable of working in new conditions of social and religious freedom--and for being passive and unprepared to solve acute social and religious problems.

Instead of cooperating with the healthy forces present in the society, the church is afraid to initiate any changes that might help to solve problems and thus to raise the authority of the church. The dread of schism and the fear of setting loose its influence are so great that church authorities tend to adopt an “ostrich” policy,

emerging with only general declarations on the necessity of developing more religious education, more cooperation with society and youth, and new church activities. Alas, these are only words.

The church lacks an adequate policy of church mission and preaching the gospel to modern believers. It must take into account the modern mentality and try to understand people's problems. It must speak with them in their own language and not offend them with persistent denunciations of their spiritual condition and devotional life. Instead, we worship in a poorly understood language with a lack of modern Russian translations of the Bible and a persistent gulf between Christianity and culture, religion and science, church and society.

It's a twofold problem: we must help churchpeople to understand (or just not to reject) the values of secular culture, science and society. And we must help secular people (the majority of the population) to understand the values of Christianity and the rich church tradition.

The Russian Orthodox Church must remember that the church is not only clergy but laity as well. I would even say that the laity are the first priority. They are churchpeople, a "royal priesthood." There is and can be no opposition between clergy and laypeople. We need competent, well-educated priests and laity, people who are free of political, national and confessional prejudices and capable of laborious, painstaking work in order to bridge the gulf between the two groups and to move Christianity from a marginal to a more central position in society.

The root of innumerable conflicts--both intra- and interconfessional ones--is ignorance. It was and is the reason for many divisions, hostilities and even open confrontations. It is very painful to see waves of hatred flow over the body that is called to be the church of reconciliation. Political disagreements and disputes about how to preach the gospel become more important than the gospel itself.

What are the reasons for our divisions, our mutual lack of understanding and our hostility? Are they concealed in deep, essential historical and theological differences, or do they lie in the fields of the psychology of religion, politics or sociology?

I think we suffer most from emotionalism. The higher the level of ignorance, the stronger our emotions, and the greater our inability to understand each other, ourselves and our own tradition.

We must emphasize enlightenment, education and the necessity of well-founded information concerning dialogue and reconciliation. A serious theological investigation of these problems and a critical reevaluation of history may reduce the level of distrust and hostility and create the base for a discussion of controversial questions.

Although some modern notions of tolerance do not coincide with the gospel approach, the practice of tolerance may give us room to maneuver and time for reflection and prayer. Reconciliation does not mean agreement, but an absence of hostility. If Christians can unite for joint service and mission in the modern world, relations with other religions can acquire the nature of “peaceful coexistence” and cooperation in solving common problems.

In recent years, Russia has seen a vast number of neophytes come to the church. Their almost total ignorance of religious issues creates new problems. Because they lack experience and information about their own traditions, these people often behave in an intolerant way toward adherents of other traditions or views. Enthusiastic neophytes incline to fundamentalism.

To improve this situation we need Russian translations of biblical, liturgical and theological texts to create a base for serious theological education. This will help to solve the problem of personnel--our acute shortage of teachers, catechists, translators, editors and other specialists.

As only a small number of clergy have a high level of theological education, the revival of theological education for clergy and the establishment of religious education for the laity is a great challenge for Christians in Russia. Conferences and theological periodicals will stimulate discussion and encourage the exchange of experience. Training people with varied experiences and strong educational backgrounds will help to bridge the gulf between church and society and to promote better understanding of those who belong to different religious, cultural or ethnic traditions.

If the religious situation in Russia is to develop in the right direction, we must have links and cooperation with universities and religious organizations abroad. The experience and knowledge gained through such co-operation and exchange will help us and our Western colleagues to better understand our respective situations.