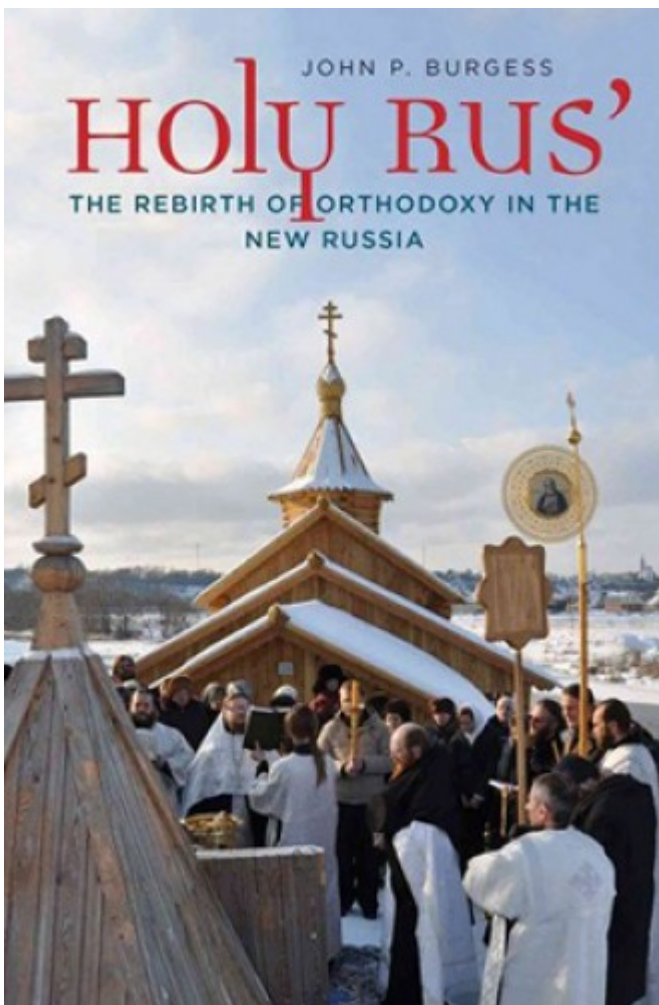


The fall and rise of Holy Russia

Since the Soviet collapse, Christianity has flourished. This poses its own challenges.

by [Philip Jenkins](#) in the [December 6, 2017](#) issue

In Review



Holy Rus'

The Rebirth of Orthodoxy in the New Russia

By John P. Burgess
Yale University Press

Exactly a century ago, Russia's Orthodox Church entered a period of persecution and suffering perhaps greater in scale and severity than was ever inflicted on any Christian body. Contrary to the mythology created by the Bolshevik tormentors, the church was no mere haven of reaction and bigotry. Russian Orthodoxy in 1917 was blessed with a vibrant spirituality and a dazzling cultural outreach, which left its mark on many of the pioneers of modern art, literature, and music worldwide. A distinctive form of social gospel activism extended church influence into working class and peasant life.

Yet within two decades, all seemed lost. Clergy and faithful laity were slaughtered in the hundreds of thousands, institutional life was all but eradicated, and church buildings were smashed or stolen. Any thought that such a nightmare could ever be reversed was confined to crazed mystics dreaming of the end times. Holy Russia, it seemed, had departed forever.

But, to coin a phrase, forever changes. Since the 1990s, the collapse of Soviet communism (and of the Soviet Union itself) has sparked a mighty revival of that church. If there was a single symbolic moment of liberation, it was the announcement in 1990 that henceforward Christmas would once more be celebrated as a national holiday. Christian life again flourishes across Russia, and churches and monasteries are being restored and reinhabited as rapidly as their predecessors were obliterated in the 1920s. Since the fall of communism, the number of parishes has grown from 7,000 to 33,000, while monasteries have swelled from 30 to over 800. We live today in one of the great historic eras of church construction and restoration.

Even more striking, these restoration efforts are powerfully backed by the Russian government, which is closely allied with the Orthodox hierarchy. For better or worse, the regime of Vladimir Putin presents itself as the faithful friend and patron of that restored church. Putin and the hierarchs compete in making the most ambitious statements of religious-nationalist ideology, the boldest vaunts of a once and future Holy Rus' that stands resolutely against Western secularism, materialism, and immorality. The Dostoevsky who in 1880 offered his legendary Christian nationalist manifesto in his Pushkin Speech would feel very much at home today.

Is such church-state coziness unsettling, and even potentially perilous? Evidently. But the context must be understood and appreciated. In 2017, as in 1910 or 1860, religious language and traditions are essential to understanding Russian attitudes toward the West, not to mention Russian behavior in such sensitive regions as the Baltics and the Middle East. In contemporary geopolitics, Christianity matters more than it has for generations.

This context gives great value to John Burgess's sensitive, scholarly and wide-ranging account. It is difficult to over-praise the quality of Burgess's research or his dedication to his project. He and his wife lived in Russia for several years, immersing themselves in local parishes and taking every possible opportunity to visit religious establishments around the country. Clearly an excellent and knowledgeable listener, he has interacted with clergy and believers from all levels. He has taken thoroughly to heart the Orthodox principle that a church is understood through its liturgies, not its libraries. This book is the antithesis of casual hit-and-run ethnography. This achievement is doubly impressive because Burgess is not himself Orthodox but rather stems from Scottish ancestry and Calvinist theology.

Burgess's core theme is the vision of Rus' that motivates Orthodox believers, "that elusive ideal of a people and place transformed by the holy, . . . a people and nation chosen by God to be transformed by divine beauty." Yet achieving that vision demands overcoming the horrible burdens of history, all the persecutions and violence. Today, moreover, the fact of success poses quite different challenges, as millions of new believers flow into the church with little idea of its basic doctrines. Those nominal believers must be thoroughly evangelized and instructed, through a process of "in-churching."

This vision of return and restoration runs through Burgess's book. The section on education is particularly strong, including as it does the varied forms of popular writing and hagiography, as well as work in fiction and film. The book's most memorable passages offer rich descriptions of particular places—great monasteries and pilgrim shrines, ordinary religious schools and working-class parishes.

Burgess is explicit about the scope of his book: he does not seek to write about everything associated with the Russian Orthodox universe. But given what we know about the concerns and obsessions of his subjects, it is odd that he pays so little attention to some critical themes. Among these omissions are matters of demography and fertility, particularly the catastrophically low birth rate among

white Orthodox Russians. In light of the growing numbers of Muslims in Russia and neighboring states, this raises the prospect of a vision regularly cited in conservative Orthodox writings: Christian Russia being swamped within a few decades. This decline could be reversed only by strongly pro-natalist policies, which would demand some reversal of women's roles in the workplace and limits on the right to abortion.

Social and religious conservatism thus run flat against contemporary Euro-American concepts of individual rights. That conflict is also acutely evident in matters of homosexuality, which Burgess scarcely mentions. Both the church and the Putin government stand united against gay rights and same-sex marriage, which Orthodox conservatives view as the stealth weapons of Western decadence against Holy Rus'. Earlier this year, Patriarch Krill compared the idea of same-sex marriage to Nazi racial laws, terming it an equivalent violation of natural law and justice. Clearly, the growing confidence of the Orthodox Church implies profound and divisive debates over fundamental values and rights, if not a full-scale culture war.

Burgess does not get into these matters, which are likely to be of great interest to Western readers. The index has no entries for (for instance) *abortion*, *feminism*, *gay*, *gay rights*, *homosexuality*, or even *sexuality*.

Ultimately, though, any book must be assessed in terms of what the author seeks to achieve, and by that criterion, *Holy Rus'* is a thorough success. The book is informative, entertaining, and often inspiring. It is a wonderful starting point for Western readers who know little about Orthodoxy. Those who already know Orthodoxy well will also gain much from the strictly contemporary reportage and analysis.