

# The Russian Orthodox Church and atheism

## Introduction

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the religious tide in Russia has been quick to rise. During the Soviet era, religion – particularly Orthodox Christianity and Islam – was considered to be one of the ‘enemies of the people’. Since the late 1990s however, Russian politicians at all levels of the power structure have associated themselves either with the Orthodox, or on some occasions with the Muslim, clergy. The present state of affairs in the relations between religion and the state are well illustrated by the cordial liaison of the late Patriarch Aleksii II with President Vladimir Putin and the equally warm involvement of President Dmitry Medvedev, and his wife Svetlana Medvedeva, with the new Patriarch Kirill, who was elected in January 2009. Some have even argued that ‘today’ (in 2004) the Church and state are so extensively intertwined that one can no longer consider Russia to be a secular state (Simons 2009: 2). Polls seem to support the claim. While in 1990 only 24 per cent of Russians identified themselves as Orthodox, in the sense that they felt themselves to be Russians as well, in 2008 the number was 73 per cent (Simons 2009: 61). However, less than 10 per cent, and in Moscow perhaps only 2 per cent do actually live out their religiosity (see Hosking 2010: 130; Marsh 2011: 249).

Why did Russia turn towards religion? Is religion chosen in an attempt to legitimise power, or in order to consolidate political rule after atheist-communist failure? My guess is that the answer to both is affirmative. Moreover, whatever the personal convictions of individual Russians, including politicians, religious, mainly Orthodox Christian, rhetoric and rituals are used to make a definitive break with the communist past and to create, or re-create, a Greater Russia (see Simons 2009). In such an ideological cli-

mate, atheism has little chance of thriving, whereas there is a sort of ‘social demand’ for its critique.

In what follows I therefore focus on what the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has had to say about atheism and how her statements can be related to a break with the past and the construction of a new Russia. Or, in my opinion, actually deleting the Soviet period from the history of Russia as an error and seeing present-day Russia as a direct continuation of the pre-Soviet imperial state.

Despite speaking in the ‘name’ of the ROC, I, of course, have selected some influential, visible and well-known persons as spokesmen of the Church. I do not aim to suggest that opinion within the ROC is uniform. Rather, whilst at times the Church seems to be willing to engage in a dialogue with the ‘world’, more often she aspires to superimpose ‘spiritual’ values upon the whole of Russian society. It is mainly the latter view I try to illuminate here. I also presuppose that the view on atheism I present is what the ROC wants the people to accept as the truth of recent history; it is a view that the Church considers as morally healthy for the public (cf. Simons 2009: 11–12); and that she wants the citizens to internalise as the ‘Russian view’ of the world.

Last but not least, I also presuppose that the fervour with which the ROC castigates atheism has something to do with her attempts to increase her own influence and power. The critique of atheism aims at exorcising the mistrust which some citizens feel towards the Church due to her close links with the state during the communist period. Closely linked with that are the partly warranted accusations of corruption levelled against the ROC, both during and after the Soviet era.

## What does the ROC mean by atheism?

When speaking about atheism the ROC means both the ‘godless’ Soviet totalitarianism and the equally ‘godless’ Western way of life, often dubbed as secularism or materialism (see Simons 2009: 18–22). In the ROC’s parlance, the latter refers to liberal (or ‘relativistic’) thinking, foreign to the ‘true’ Russia. To quote a statement by Patriarch Aleksii, secularism-as-atheism is linked to ‘immoral behaviour, cruelty, drug abuse, and alcoholism’, to mention but a few examples. Moreover, the patriarch argues that these matters are defended, in the West, by an appeal to every person’s ‘freedom’ to choose whatever he or she pleases. In other words, as a part, or form, of secularism, atheism is a foreign, and harmful, way of thinking and behaving – to put it succinctly, something that weakens both the ROC and the Russian state and violates the Christian/Orthodox truth. In a poll taken in January 2008, 30 per cent of respondents shared the patriarch’s concern about the crisis in morality in Russia (Simons 2009: 68, 92, 94, quoting Patriarch Aleksii; see also Alfeyev 2006: 210).

A Westerner might suppose that, following the similarly conservative Catholic Church, the ROC would distance herself from communism, which by definition is atheistic. However, this is not the case. As recently as in July 2008, the Deputy Head of the ROC’s Department of External Church Relations, Father Vsevolod Chaplin, in an interview for the Russian News Service, stated that the Church ‘does not give estimations to political philosophy and political doctrines. [Thus, w]hen they say the Church should condemn communism as a philosophy I don’t think it is correct.’ (Simons 2009: 122.) I believe that the reason for this is pragmatic: a large number of present believers are former communists (for example, Gennadiy Zyuganov, the leader of the Russian Communist Party). Moreover, communism can be used (or abused) when criticising the West. As Father Vsevolod put it, ‘[t]he very philosophy of negating capitalism is consonant to the Christian outlook’ (Simons 2009: 123). Moreover, currently there is no real discussion of atheism in Russia, nor does the ROC evidently see any reason to instigate one (see below).



One 1929 issue of the *Bezbozhnik* (Godless Factory Worker) showing Jesus being dumped from a wheelbarrow by an industrial worker; the text suggests the Industrialization Day can be a replacement of the Christian Transfiguration Day.

Instead of condemning the Soviet state’s official ideology, atheism, the ROC has therefore condemned Soviet totalitarianism. By this the ROC refers to the Bolshevik leadership, which she meticulously distances from the ‘non-Bolshevik’, and hence non-totalitarian, Russian people (see Simons 2009: 123–125). It seems as if the ROC believes that with the dissolution of the Soviet state communism was ‘liberated’ from its atheistic heritage and could be transformed into a kind of national ‘spirit’ willing to serve the new masters; the ROC and the Greater Russia.

Some representatives of the ROC, notably Bishop Hilarion (Alfeyev), the current chairman of the Department of External Church Relations, have extended the discussion on totalitarianism beyond the Soviet period, arguing, in the manner reminiscent of some early twentieth-century Russian thinkers, such

as Berdyayev, that even on the eve of the October Revolution religiosity in Russia was in 'deep decline', evidently due to Western influences which had already been initiated in the late seventeenth century. Thus, atheism, as a component of those influences, has deeper roots than merely the Soviet period. The ROC has to turn to her early history to find what Hilarion terms the 'Russian soul'. (See Alfeyev 2006: 217–18; Alfeyev 2008.)

### Russian atheism/atheists and the ROC's reactions

In Russia, several people may waver in their religious faith, but 'confessional', organised atheism is rare, evidently due to the ideology's notorious connection with the Soviet past and the conclusion that (then) atheism did not work. Its banner bearer today is the Moscow-based Russian Atheist Union (*Rossiyskiy ateisticheskiy sojuz*, RAS),<sup>1</sup> a forum originally continuing the battle against 'clericalism' and initiated by Soviet 'scientific' atheism (see Zolotov 2001).

Recently, it seems that Russian atheists are slowly realising that, in addition to Soviet and Western-style enlightened old 'militant secularism' (see Alfeyev 2006: 216), a new, and rejuvenated, wave of atheism is stalking Europe and infiltrating Russia as well; for example, in form of translations of works by Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins. Those by Harris include 'What Is Atheism'<sup>2</sup> and 'Ten Myths and Ten Truths about Atheism'.<sup>3</sup> Russian translations of Dawkins include – to translate from the Russian title – 'Contemporary Darwinists against Religion'<sup>4</sup> and the book *The God Delusion*.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, no specific data pertaining to the translation or the time of publishing is included. Evidently Dawkins was translated around 2008 and Harris more recently.

When the RAS was established in 1999, Father Chaplin claimed it was part of a broader trend of a 'new wave of godlessness among a certain group of Russian intellectuals', advanced to bolster their crumbling power (Zolotov 2001). The ROC seems

not to have worried much about theoretical atheism based on philosophy and natural science. Recently (in April 2011) Patriarch Kirill dismissed it by referring to the 1986 nuclear catastrophe which took place in Chernobyl in terms which characterised it as a portent of the last days predicted in the Book of Revelation (Chapter 8), where it is stated that a star called Wormwood falls to earth, making water bitter (see Marsh 2011: 248; Potts 2011). Now, the Ukrainian word for wormwood is *chernobyl*, so the case was proved.

More attention has been paid to various public displays of an open critique of the Church, which contain or imply atheism. The Church's concern about them may well be due to her understanding that a tactful atheistic persuasion is usually much more successful than an outright attack. I will give some examples here.

On 14 January 2003 the Moscow-based Sakharov Museum opened an exhibition entitled *Beware of Religion!* which, according to a ROC article, aimed at drawing attention 'to the hypocritical role of religion in the contemporary world'. Among the works presented were: 'an imitation of a large icon of Christ with a road sign instead of a face; an imitation of an icon of Christ with openings for the face and hands, through which visitors were invited to place [their head and hands]; [and] a billboard with a Coca-Cola logo, a depiction of Christ and the inscription "This is My Blood"'. (Ageev 2003.) According to another source, the exhibition also presented some icons 'customised', for example, with figures of a hammer and sickle or Nazi symbols (Simons 2009: 107). I'm not sure about the artists' intentions, but I assume that they demanded freedom of expression. Promoting knowledge of the Soviet past as well as development of intellectual freedom and human rights is the main purpose of the museum.

Orthodox reaction followed quickly. Details vary, depending on the source. I follow Greg Simons, completed with a ROC-produced article (Ageev 2003).

On 18 January, six men, members of St Nikolai of Pyzhi parish in Moscow, appeared and attacked and defaced several of the works present. They were soon arrested, but charges (on hooliganism, says Ageev) against them were dropped for 'lack of evidence'. Father Aleksandr Shargunov, head of the St Nikolai of Pyzhi parish, defended his parishioners by claiming that: 'For a believer, this sacrilege [i.e., the exhibition] is equivalent to the destruction of a church, which is what happened in the near past in Russia' (Simons 2009: 107–8). Metropolitan Kirill,

1 <http://www.atheism.ru/>; <http://www.ateism.ru/ras/photos99.htm> (accessed on 7.12.2011).

2 [http://scepsis.ru/library/id\\_807.html](http://scepsis.ru/library/id_807.html) (accessed on 7.12.2011).

3 [http://www.atheism.ru/library/sam\\_2.phtml](http://www.atheism.ru/library/sam_2.phtml) (accessed on 7.12.2011).

4 Sovremennye darvinisty protiv religii, <http://www.atheism.ru/old/DovAth1.html> (accessed on 19.12.2011).

5 [http://www.atheism.ru/library/Dowkins\\_2.phtml](http://www.atheism.ru/library/Dowkins_2.phtml) (accessed on 7.12.2011).

on his part, called the exhibition a ‘direct provocation that creates tension in our society’. The museum director, Yuriy Samodurov, on the contrary, claimed that the organisers did not intend to ‘offend or hurt anyone’s feelings’, but also charged the critics of backwardness and ‘clerical bolshevism’ (Ageev 2003).

Shortly afterwards, the Duma passed a resolution condemning the organisation of the exhibition. Later, in June 2004, the Moscow Taganskaya prosecutor’s office, which had been appealed to by several concerned members of the Orthodox Church in January, supported Shargunov by arguing that the exhibition ‘insulted and humiliated the religious feelings of believers and non-believers who have an idea about the sanctity of basic Christian symbols. It [also] humiliated the national dignity of a great number of believers.’ (Ageev 2003; Simons 2009: 108–10.)

In July 2007 ten well-known scientists, among them Zhores Alferov (winner of the Nobel Prize for Physics in 2000) and Vitaly Ginzberg (who got the same prize three years later) sent President Putin an open letter expressing their concern about the ‘growing clericalisation of Russian society’. In his reply the ROC Press Secretary Vladimir Vigilyanskiy accused the critics, among other things, of forcing an ‘ideology of science’ on Russia (Simons 2009: 62–3).

I’m not sure what Father Vladimir meant by the term ‘ideology of science’. Perhaps he was insinuating the fact that Ginzberg was one of the members of the above-mentioned RAS (see Zolotov 2001). However, one point of his statement is clear. He argued that being a Russian is incompatible with an ‘ideology of science’ and, in the final analysis, with being an atheist. To be a Russian means, as it did in the nineteenth-century nationalistic rhetoric, to be a member of the Orthodox Church. It seems to me that a lot of people have somehow been convinced of this; hence the eagerness of politicians, for example, to pose themselves as believers.

However, in recent years atheism, as a worldview, has occasionally started to worry the ROC. I surmise that she considers the so-called new atheism, that is, the new extensive critique of the existence of gods, combined with the argument that a ‘godless’ management of the world is much more desirable and effective than a religious one, to constitute a much greater



According to Patriarch Kirill the Chernobyl nuclear disaster was a punishment for Soviet atheism. Photo by Andrei Mosienko, RIA Novosti.

challenge to the Church’s new pretensions to power than a mere denial of the existence of God, or other such ‘merely’ philosophical arguments. Sometimes the stance the ROC has taken is reminiscent of the so-called 1925 Tennessee Scopes Monkey Trial. For example, in June 2010, in Moscow, Bishop Hilarion gave the secular authorities a lecture calling for an end to the ‘monopoly of Darwinism’ in Russian schools and demanding that a religious explanation of creation should be taught alongside evolution theory (Humphries 2010). The idea is not foreign to Finnish public debate, either (see Puolimatka 2008).

One and a half months later, Patriarch Kirill called on members of the Church ‘to remain firm in their belief in God in the face of “aggressive atheism” and “resurgent paganism”’. The call was made on 28 July in Kiev, where Kirill gave a sermon to celebrate the new national holiday marking to the introduction of Christianity to Russia (Dibin 2010). And, as mentioned above, in April 2011, on the 25th anniversary of the Chernobyl disaster, Patriarch Kirill declared, in a liturgy celebrated in the Kiev’s Percherskaya Lavra, that the catastrophe was God’s punishment for Soviet atheism (Potts 2011).

There are evidently several reasons for these kinds of statements. However, I assume that they have less to do with Western influences, such as Dawkins’s, on Russian atheistic discussion, than with the Church’s efforts to augment her power and to suppress voices of opposition.

The Russian authorities have supported the ROC critique. When, in September 2010, the libertarian organisation *Zdravomysliye* (Common Sense) applied for permission to erect ten billboards quoting the Russian Constitution’s statement on the separ-

ation of religion and state, the Moscow city authorities denied this. No reason was given, but rumours spread that officials had found the text ‘provocative’ (Moscow rejects ad 2010).

### The ROC’s reactions to what she regards as atheism

The ROC has adopted two main tactics to combat atheism. On the one hand, she has stressed the need to listen to ‘moderate secularists’, while rejecting the ‘fanatic’ ones. This, by the way, has also claimed by some Finnish atheists (see Niemelä 2011: 72, 81). On the other hand, she has allied herself with selected conservative religious forces, both Catholic and Muslim. In both cases the ROC seems to subscribe to the nineteenth-century presupposition that the ‘normal’ condition between religion and atheism, understood as a science-based rejection of the existence of gods, is war, or in the best case, conflict.

To give a few examples; in February 2003, in the wake of the above-mentioned exhibition, the Church argued, in an article published by the Department of External Church Relations, that: ‘The Russian Church advocates the creation of a society in which the convictions of both believers and non-believers would be respected. It maintains, however, that in Russian society there should be no place for conscious, planned blasphemy that offends the feelings of believers.’ (Ageev 2003.) In my opinion, with such a statement the ROC tries to resolve a dilemma, also experienced by Muslims defending Muhammad and the Qur'an, which is caused by unlimited freedom of expression as well as attempting to find an answer to the question: when do such expressions exceed the limits of decent humanity? To paraphrase the Soviet parlance, the ROC calls this the dilemma of ‘militant atheism’ (Ageev 2003).

In 2004, around the time of the presidential elections, the then chairman of the Department of External Church Relations, Kirill, argued that ‘[w]e realise that we live in a secular society and that outside the Orthodox Church there are non-believers, as well as those who belong to other confessions of faith’ (Simons 2009: 63).

In the same manner, in the 2010 lecture mentioned above Bishop Hilarion called for a dialogue with moderate secularists – who for Hilarion seem to be those who share the ROC’s concerns about ‘valueless’ materialism – and cooperation with Catholics against what he termed ‘fanatical secularism’ (Humphries 2010). In the same year, in his discussion with the Iranian Ambassador to Russia,

Mahmoud-Reza Sajjadi, Hilarion ‘stressed the need for developing dialogue between Orthodoxy and Islam’. He said that ‘[c]ontacts between our religions are of fundamental importance since we can use each other’s great experience and oppose secularism together’ (DECR chairman 2010; see also Alfeyev 2006: 224–5.)

To quote Bishop Hilarion once again, the definitive aim of the ROC in her fight against atheism and the religiously lukewarm temperature of society in general can be stated as follows: Russia needs a spiritual rebirth, in which the ROC should play a crucial role. ‘But this can happen only after [she] has become a truly national Church: not the Church of State (whatever the state), but the Church of the nation, of the people.’ Fighting against atheism and, ultimately, perhaps against the privatisation of religion is a part of that process. However, Hilarion cautions against ‘militant Orthodoxy’ (his term) and pleads instead for educating Russians in the spirit of Orthodoxy, which, in his opinion, will finally vanquish atheism. (Alfeyev 2006: 204–5; Alfeyev 2008.) Thus, it seems, he advocates not a state-sponsored religion, but a church-centred spirituality as an antidote to any sort of interest in old or new style atheism in Russia. How, and if, it works, and how atheism will get through, remains to be seen. ■

**Teuvo Laitila**, Assistant Professor in Orthodox Church History and Comparative Religion at the University of Eastern Finland in Joensuu has taken his PhD in Cultural Anthropology (University of Helsinki). In addition he has studied Comparative Religion and Orthodox Church History. His academic interests include relations between the state and Orthodox Christianity and/or Islam relations in Eastern and Southeastern Europe, and popular religion in Orthodox Karelia (in Finland and in Russia). Email: teuvo.laitila(at)uef.fi.

### Bibliography

- Ageev, Dmitry 2003. “‘Beware of Religion!’: A Rebirth of Militant Atheism in Moscow.” *Europaica Bulletin* 9. <http://orthodoxeurope.org/page/14/14.aspx> (accessed on 7.12.2011).
- Alfeyev, Hilarion (Bishop) 2006. *Orthodox Witness Today*. Geneva: World Council of Churches.
- 2008. ‘Atheism and Orthodoxy in Modern Russia.’ <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/OrthodoxNews/message/8534> (accessed on 8.12.2011).
- DECР chairman 2010. ‘DECР Chairman Meets with Iranian Ambassador in Russia.’ <http://www.mospat.ru/en/2010/07/30/news23393/> (accessed on 7.12.2011).
- Dibin, Samuel 2010. ‘Russian Orthodox Church Facing

- "Aggressive Atheism", Says Patriarch.' <http://www.christiantoday.com/article/new.holiday.marks.russias.conversion.to.christianity/26386.htm> (accessed on 7.12.2011).
- Hosking, Geoffrey 2010. 'The Russian Orthodox Church and Secularisation.' In: Ira Katzenbach & Gareth Stedman Jones (eds.), *Religion and the Political Imagination*. 112–31. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Humphries, Conor 2010. 'Russia[:] Church Wants End to Darwin School "Monopoly".' <http://in.reuters.com/article/2010/06/09/us-russia-religion-darwin-inIN-TRE6584JX20100609> (accessed on 7.12.2011).
- Marsh, Christopher 2011. 'Religion after Atheism.' *Society* 48 (3): 247–50.
- Moscow rejects ad 2010. 'Moscow Rejects Ad Quoting Constitutional Freedom of Religion?' <http://www.theotherrussia.org/2010/10/19/moscow-rejects-ad-quoting-constitutional-freedom-of-religion/> (accessed on 7.12.2011).
- Niemelä, Jussi K. 2011. 'Uusateismi ja ideologiat' [The New Atheism and its Ideologies]. In: Jussi K. Niemelä (ed.), *Mitä uusateismi tarkoittaa?* [What Does New Atheism Mean?] 70–117. Turku: Savukeidas.
- Potts, Andy 2011. 'Chernobyl Was "Punishment for State Atheism".' *Moscow News*, 24.4.2011. <http://themoscownews.com/society/20110428/188621650.html> (accessed on 7.12.2011).
- Puolimatka, Tapio 2008. 'Evoluutioteoriaa on opettava kriittisesti avoimella tavalla' [Evolution Theory Should be Taught Critically in an Open Way]. *Helsingin Sanomat*, 15.11.2008. <http://www.hs.fi/paakirjoitus/artikkeli/Evoluutioteoriaa+on+opetettava+kriittisesti+avoimella+tavalla/113524111292> (accessed on 9.12.2011).
- Simons, Greg 2009. *The Role of the Russian Orthodox Church in Russia since 1990: Changing Dynamics of Politics and Religion*. Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press.
- Zolotov, Andrei 2001. 'Russian Intellectuals Try to Revive Atheism.' <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2001/januaryweb-only/34.ob.html> (accessed on 7.12.2011).