

The Traditional and the Non-Traditional in the Religious Life of the Russian Federation

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses a new concept of ‘traditional religions’ and other notions related to ‘tradition.’ How is public opinion being shaped, and how is decision-making and state policy towards the Russian Orthodox Church and Islam being influenced by these concepts? Since 1991, religions (in particular, the Russian Orthodox Church and Islam) have enjoyed a revival; and the Russian administration, under Yeltsin and especially under Putin, has taken a number of steps to incorporate religious establishments into the political framework of the state. We will examine these changes through the example of laws on religious liberty, and by analysing public discourse. On the one hand, the religious revival includes a number of so-called “non-traditional” religions that clearly fall under this policy. In the case of Islam, this is especially important with respect to changing Russian policies towards so-called “Wahhabism” and “religious extremism”. On the other hand, official discourse centered around “traditionality” is borrowed by the representatives of different denominations to a degree determined by public status. This phenomenon is worth studying as an incorporation of an official category into religious discourse.

Keywords: Russia, Orthodoxy, Islam, tradition, religious politics.

1. Introduction

Throughout the last 15 years, the concept of “traditional religions” has become ever more widely used. One can find it in official documents, spokesmen’s speeches and religious leaders’ statements. At the same time, the exact definition of “traditional religions” still poses problems for researchers of religious studies. Moreover, this new category is of concern to human rights advocates, since it is difficult to apply it to the Russian legislative system. Hence, it is of interest to observe the origins of this notion, how it is used in religious and secular discourse and what processes it evidences.

2. “Traditional religions” in legislation and public discourse

The four confessions which later received the label “traditional” were first fixed in the federal law “On freedom of conscience and religious associations” adopted in 1997. The law’s preamble contains two clauses which change the spirit of the predecessor law “On religious freedom” adopted in 1990:

The Federal Assembly of the Russian Federation:
 ...acknowledging the special role of Orthodox Christianity in the history of Russia, and in the establishment and development of its spirituality and culture,
 ...respecting Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and other religions, that comprise the inalienable part of the heritage of the Russian people,
 ...adopts the present law. (О свободе совести..., 1997)

Here we can see that Russian Orthodoxy has been given a special status among other confessions, while Christianity (in general, without specification), Islam, Buddhism and Judaism are also singled out. In addition, there is reference to something called “other religions,” but the sense of this phrase is never specified – neither in the preamble, nor in the text of the law.

In spite of the fact that the noted religions are cited in the federal law, their status remains unclear. On the one hand, the law’s preamble does not have legal significance and cannot be used in court. On the other hand, the term “traditional religions” is not used in the law or in the preamble. It is worth adding that the difference between and among religions is not mentioned in the text of the law.

The contradictions mentioned appear to be the result of the confrontation of dramatically different points of view within the law development commission. According to Mikhail Odintsov, head of the Department for the Defence of Religious Freedom and Human Rights Ombudsman of the Russian Federation, the last law represents a sort of touchstone in the field of religious freedom.

On the one hand, the law takes into consideration the principle of secularism and the general statements about religious freedom as defined in the Constitution of the Russian Federation. Cf.:

1. The Russian Federation is a secular state. No religion shall be established as state or obligatory.

2. Religious associations shall be separated from the state and shall be equal before the law. (Конституция..., 1993: Статья 14)

Everyone shall be guaranteed the freedom of conscience, the freedom of religion, including the right to profess individually or together with others any religion or to profess no religion at all, to freely choose, possess and disseminate religious and other views and act according to them. (Конституция, 1993: Статья 28)

Hence, the Constitution takes into account the opinions of that part of Russian society which is interested in the defence of the principle of secularism in its most pronounced form. This type of secularism is close to the French conception of *laïcité* and especially to the American model, which inspired the authors of the first Constitution of the Russian Federation.

At the same time, the law’s preamble, as well as the clause referring to religious associations that have existed on the territory of the Russian Federation for more than 15 years, reflect the concerns of another part of Russian society that is anxious about the active dissemination of new religious movements in the first half of the 1990s in the country. Alongside this process, one can observe the growing influence of the Russian Orthodox Church during the first decade after the collapse of the Soviet Union. These processes definitely played their role in the development of the law. According to lawyer Anatolii Pchelintsev, a member of the working group on the law of 1997, the preamble was added after the personal intervention of Patriarch Alexii II. The text of the letter of the Council of Bishops of the Orthodox Church, written in February 1997 to State Duma Chairman Gennadii Seleznev, is typical:

Particularly pitiful is that the present federal law “On The Freedom of Religion” and the draft amendments to the law fail to acknowledge the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church over the

course of a millenium has shaped the historic, spiritual and moral face of the Russian people and that the overwhelming majority of believers belong to this organisation (Одинцов, 1997: 172).

Meanwhile, from around the end of the 1990s, the concept of “traditional religions,” which is not legally defined, but was inspired by the preamble of the law of 1997, came into common use. First of all, it has been used in Russian political discourse about religion. However, the content of this concept has not been specified in any official document. For example, on 12 February 2012, the then-Prime Minister of the Russian Federation Vladimir Putin held a meeting “with Patriarch Kirill and leaders of traditional religious communities in Russia.” In addition to the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, the meeting was attended by representatives of the Council of Muftis, the Muslim Coordination Centre for the North Caucasus, the Buddhist Traditional Sangha, the Armenian Apostolic Church, the Russian Old Believers Church, the Catholic Bishops Conference, the Federation of Jewish Communities of Russia, the Russian Association of Islamic Consent, the Spiritual Board of Muslims, the Russian Union of Evangelical Faith Christians and the Church of Seventh Day Adventists. But it remains unclear whether this list of religious organisations, whose representatives participated in the meeting, is equivalent to the list of “traditional religions” referred to by Prime Minister Vladimir Putin (Стенограмма встречи, 2012).

A separate path of development for the new concept is the school course “Basics of religious cultures and secular ethics”, introduced into the school curriculum in 2012. The course consists of six modules of the student’s choice. Four of them are dedicated to “traditional” religions, the other two concern so-called “secular ethics” and “history of religions”. The choice of modules differs markedly by region, but on average in March 2010, 60% of students chose “secular ethics” or “history of religions”. However, while the class is divided into groups depending on the students’ choices and on their religious affiliations, it is difficult to assume the achievement of the stated objectives of the course – namely, the development of tolerance. In addition, the first and the last lessons of each module are dedicated to the theme of patriotism (named, for instance, “Russia is our Homeland”), indicating the use of the course on religion as an ideological tool (Kovalskaya, 2013: 45-59).

3. Borrowing of the term by religious organisations

3.1. The *traditsionnost* as a core component of legitimacy

In the end, the concept of “traditional religions” was adopted also by the representatives of religions. We should mention that there is an obvious difference in the use of this expression, depending on the status of the religious organisation.

Thus, members of the dominant religions, such as Christianity or Islam, freely operate with this concept, referring to the preamble to the Law on Freedom of Conscience. Moreover, since the dominant position of the Russian Orthodox Church is not in question, the representatives of the Orthodox Church do not focus on the inclusion of Orthodoxy among the traditional religions of Russia, because there is no particular need for this. The word “traditional” is increasingly used by the representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church in relation to other areas, particularly in reference to the concept of “traditional values” (Патриарх Кирилл,

2011). We should add here that the notions of *traditsionnye tsennosti* ‘traditional values’ and *istinnye tsennosti* ‘true values’ employed by representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church and many public figures are worth studying as well. This creates a kind of semantic field, at the centre of which is the concept of “tradition”. This attention to traditions is similar to the activity of some members of the “United Russia” and “Fair Russia” political parties, which insist in particular on the preservation of “traditional family values” (Мизулина, 2013). The church is, therefore, one of the channels of state ideology of the last 10-15 years, which has a moderately conservative character.

The image of a “traditional” religion is forged in Russian Orthodox Church discourse by the use of indirect methods, with no explicit reference to a “traditional religion.” For example, an important place in the texts and statements of representatives of the Orthodox Church is taken by the concept of *Rus* and the symbols associated with the state of Kievan Rus (Обращение дискуссионного клуба Всемирного русского народного собора..., 2013). At the same time, the Orthodox Church focuses on its relationship to a certain ethnic group – the “Russian people” (*russkii narod*) – which is the bearer of tradition, as well as of “Russian civilization” (*rossiiskaia tsivilizatsiia*). In particular, on the website the World Russian People’s Council headed by Patriarch Kirill, it is stated that “*Russia was the only civilization in the world to stand up to western colonial expansion*” (Обращение дискуссионного клуба..., 2013). Note that the name of the organisation has no ties with the Orthodox Church and focuses on the ethnic component, which, in the Russian Orthodox Church’s judgment, is inextricably linked to the religious one.

Denominations that do not have such a large congregation, in contrast, insist on the fact that they are “traditional religions” or at least use references to something “traditional.” To demonstrate this phenomenon, it is worth analysing the presentations of various religious organisations at a conference on church-state relations and expertise in religion, held in 2006 in St. Petersburg, with the support of the State Museum of History of Religion. Director of the Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church Pastor Alexander mentioned that since (Мусиенко, Кучинский, 2006: 40-41):

... [the] window to Europe was opened with the active assistance of ... our Lutheran ancestors, ... the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Russia rightly calls itself a traditional denomination.

The priest of the Armenian Apostolic Church Sarkis (A.R. Chopuryan) describes in detail the history of the relationship between the Russian state and the Armenian communities starting from the XVIII century, and argues that “the State ... declares the priority of traditional religions, maintains relationships with traditional religions” (Мусиенко, Кучинский, 2006: 47-49). Mufti Ponchaev worried about the activities of “*sectarian and missionary organisations*” and proposed that officials “*discuss the status of traditional religions*” (Мусиенко, Кучинский, 2006: 63). Thus, the concept of “traditional religions” is an essential element when it comes to legitimising a particular religion. At the same time, a key role in the definition of *traditionality* is played by the time factor, emphasising the long history of relations – a principle that is widely used in branding strategies.

In contrast, denominations which do not have sufficient weight to refer to any “tradition” usually insist on the principle of equality of religions before the law. Thus, the Social Doctrine

of the Church of the Seventh-day Adventist says (Основы социального учения..., 2013):

...the earthly authorities have no right to adopt laws... that give priority to any religious confession. Thus, no conference shall seek to adopt legislation that provides it with indubitable priority over others.

It should be noted that the discourse of the Russian Orthodox Church in the early 1990s was also quite democratic. The Appeal of the Council of Bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church of April 4, 1992 states, *“We firmly stand for the right of every individual to religious self-determination and for the equality of all religions before the law and do not seek to limit anyone’s religious choices”* [Архиерейский Собор 1992]. This position of the Orthodox Church in 1992 is markedly different from the current one, which is explained in the Basic Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church: *“The Russian Orthodox Church has the right to expect that the government will take into account the number of followers of religious associations and religious organisations when building relations, as well as their role in shaping the historical, cultural and spiritual aspect of the nation and their civic stand”* (Основы социальной концепции..., 2000). Thus, we can assume that the democracy level of denomination discourse is inversely proportional to its political weight.

3.2. Traditional Islam and religious extremism

As for Islam, the notion of traditionality is applied to it in a special way. This is because in the Russian context it concerns only certain Muslim movements, and not Islam in general. That is why the term “traditional Islam” is often heard, as are disputes about its definition. For example, in the Volga Region traditional Islam is treated as the “Hanafi mazhab of the Sunni Islam”.

At the same time, it should be noted that the concept of “right” or “good” Islam, which is now called “traditional” Islam, changed appreciably during the XX century. Thus, in the first years after the Revolution of 1917, the Soviet government promoted the reformist Islamic movements of fundamentalist type, whose leaders called for a return to “pure” Islam, “according to the Koran,” and to reject local rites in favour of the “international” Islam that was in tune with the communist ideology of the time. In doctrinal terms, these currents are very close to the modern adherents of Salafism in Islam. However, their teachings do not find any support in contemporary Muftiates, nor among representatives of the state. In the first decade after the October Revolution, meanwhile, it was possible to see Jadid movement activities in the cities. Jadid represented Tatar Muslim intellectuals, who called for the modernisation of Islam – which would require giving up some of its canons that were problematic in the “progressive society” (Исхаков, 2013). After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the concept of “Euro-Islam” developed by the director of the Institute of History of Tatarstan Rafael Khakimov has spread in secular circles, with the support of the President of the Republic of Tatarstan. Tolerant and open to modernity, this conception developed the ideas of Tatar Jadids to almost full exemption from compliance with any rituals (Хакимов, 2003). Nevertheless, it should be noted that this concept has received a lot of criticism from the Tatar clergy. In contrast, the last mufti of Tatarstan Camille Samigullin elected in March

2013 advocates kadimist traditions, a conservative trend in Tatar Islam, usually opposed to Jadids. Thus, the current “traditional Islam” is located to the “right” of Islam, and its main criterion is loyalty to the secular administration.

We can observe a similar situation in the Caucasus, where the Naqshbandi Sufi tariqa has been promoted as “traditional Islam” for the past few years. However, as noted by the historian Shamil Shikhaliev, Sufism was not perceived at all as being “traditional” in the period of the Russian Empire, but rather as a dangerous movement (Шихалиев, 2013). In contrast, Jadids had the support of the pre-revolutionary government. In the 1920s, the Soviet leadership involved Jadids and Sufis in the achievement of its aims, particularly in the reform of the educational system. From 1928, Sufis who protested against collectivisation were repressed. In the late 1930s, when a sufficient number of Soviet personnel had been formed, Jadids were also subjected to repression, in spite of the fact that they supported the Soviet policy in the field of education. Since World War II, there has been a partial legalisation of Islam in the Caucasus, but Sufi practices were still unwelcome. Since the post-Soviet period, Sufism – or rather, its mahmudiyya branch, to which Said Afandi Chirkeisk belonged – has been treated as a “traditional” movement.

In contrast, those forms of Islam that differ from the “official” kind are called “non-traditional.” They encounter great difficulties in dealing with the authorities because the expression “non-traditional Islam” has entered the same semantic field as “religious extremism” and “terrorism.” This is particularly true of those trends in Islam that are “imported” and are automatically considered as hostile. At the same time, all these trends, despite their significant doctrinal differences, are often grouped under the common term “Wahhabism,” which is used in the media as a synonym for “religious extremism” and “terrorism.” Incidentally, it is curious to observe the increasing role of a new sociological group of experts in shaping the image of “non-traditional” Islam as the enemy of public safety. For instance, Roman Silant’ev, who often appears in the media as an expert on Islam, writes in his encyclopedia “Islam in Contemporary Russia” (Силантьев, 2008: 129):

In Russia, the Wahhabis are normally understood as followers of Salafism, i.e. “Saf” or Clear Islam, Hanbalism, Habashism, Tablihimism, Nursism, “Islamic Jamaaats,” so-called non-Mazhab Sunnism, military Shiism, as well as the Hizb-ut-Tahrir party and its large number of clones.

As the text above shows, the term “Wahhabi” is applied to completely different trends that are united only by the fact that they are hostile to the Russian state according to the expert’s opinion. No less vague a definition of “Wahhabism” is given in “The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Muslims”:

The Russian Council of Muftis condemns all forms of terrorism and extremism, including those of so-called Wahhabism, that contain the following principles:

- 1) Denial of Islam’s founding traditions, i.e. denial of four historically-developed Mazhabs or Shiism.
- 2) Teachings that proclaim exceptionism and the right to declare traditional believers who disagree with their interpretation of Sharia law “non-Muslims” (including the followers of one of the four traditional Mazhabs or Shiism).
- 3) Entrusting oneself with a right to voluntarily infringe on rights or kill beyond the scope of necessary self-defence of Kafirs, including traditional Muslims, who have not joined the respective organisation (Основные положения социальной программы..., 2001).

As we can see, “Wahhabis” are defined as movements that deny mazhabs’ claim to be exceptional and “infringe on other people’s rights”. Another important feature of “non-traditional Islam” is the dissemination of “foreign influence.” To fight against this, the muftiates try to unify Muslim education. For example, the Spiritual Board of Muslims of Tatarstan is developing common programmes for Tatarstan madrassas. This is evidenced by a characteristic statement by the head of the Volga Centre of Regional and Ethno-religious Studies of the Russian Institute of Strategic Initiatives (RISI) Rais Suleimanov, who regularly appears in the media as an expert on Islam (Мусульманское образование в Татарстане..., 2013): “Tatarstan needs that in order to get rid of the non-traditional movements. It would be much safer if we have one approved (school) manual”.

Non-traditional Islam, therefore, is equivalent to extremism. The same idea, but from within the Muslim community, is formulated by Deputy Mufti Rustam Batrov (Мусульманское образование в Татарстане..., 2013):

Our call is for orientation towards traditional Islam, and its deep theological comprehension. Extremist movements appear because they are unfamiliar with the age-old theological tradition. And now, among other measures, we plan to teach religion-related subjects using not just any old books, but rather classical manuals. Now, as always, the Tatar madrassahs are not preparing extremists – and we plan to tighten our control over this even more.

As a result, the concept of “traditionality” in Islam directly applies to those movements that show their loyalty to the existing government and a willingness to be unified under state control, and that appear in the broadcasting media to be in accord with state ideology. These currents are fixed in the collective memory, in particular through museum exhibitions. For example, the deputy director of the Museum of the History of Religion in St. Petersburg, Catherine Teriukova, notes that the museum works only with one branch of Islam – namely, the “Tatar Muslims.”

4. “Traditional Religions”: why and for what?

Diffusion of the concept of “traditional religions” is part of a larger process – designing “tradition” as a core value of modern Russian ideology. In this case, the content of this “tradition,” or these “traditions,” is provided by the given ideal of patriotism, loyalty to the state and demographically effective model of family. “Traditional” religions are engaged by the state as one of channels to broadcast pertinent information. This idea can be illustrated by a statement of the priest Sarkis, which explicitly articulates the function of the church (Мусиенко, Кучинский, 2006: 51): “The Church does not only save souls, but also helps the state to fill the ranks of fully-fledged members of society.”

That is why one can hardly talk about the “clericalism” of Russian society, as is often done in the publications of liberal historians and human-rights activists. For instance, the political scientist Kathy Rousselet (2013: 17) points out that, in the post-Soviet practices of the Russian Orthodox Church, the ritual part predominates over the doctrinal. As for the presence of the church in administrative, educational and social spheres, this is most often accompanied by the transfer of information on certain topics and does not necessarily indicate an increase in the influence of the church itself. On the contrary, Rousselet proposes

the hypothesis of a continuity between the communist ideology and the discourse of the Russian Orthodox Church, which both occupy a niche in an officially recognised system of values. The same function is performed by “traditional Islam,” which plays the role of an alternative to “religious extremism” and aims to unify current trends in Islam and facilitate state control over religious practice.

At the same time, the rejection of new religious movements and intolerance towards religious diversity demonstrate a commitment to the unification of religious life in general, the search for a unified religious form. As noted by Marlene Laruelle (2008: 280):

This tradition of thinking about the relationship between the individual and the group provokes in part the widespread feeling that division (political, ideological, cultural) endangers the community, breaks the national unity instead of solidifying it ... the social contract currently in force in Russia is not built on the idea that the confrontation of opinions and interests is natural, but on the effort that everyone makes in favour of a consensus that validates the unity of the nation.

5. Conclusion

Thus, the diffusion of a new category of “traditional religions” can be explained, on the one hand, by the efforts of the state towards the unification and uniformisation of religious life in order to simplify control over religious organisations. It is partly due to an attempt to solve the problem of religious extremism. Another reason is the use of administrative and social resources of various denominations that have a long history of relations with the secular authorities. This approach turns out to be legitimate in the eyes of that part of Russian society that perceives the conflict of interests of different social groups as a split in society, but also because of the search for social forms of consolidating society. Apparently, this is also the reason for the replacement of ethnic identity with a confessional one, as per the “Orthodox because Russian” pattern. On the other hand, religious groups that have the right to be called “traditional” take it as a privilege that provides more rights and opportunities, so that they actively borrow the official lexicon.

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