

# **HOLY RUS': THE REBIRTH OF ORTHODOXY IN THE NEW RUSSIA**

(JOHN P. BURGESS)

December 3, 2024

Americans don't understand the Russians. Americans don't even try to understand the Russians, for the most part. I don't understand the Russians, even if I should, given that my father was a professor of Russian history. But comprehending the Russians is crucial to our future, because contrary to the pronouncements of morons, Russia is not merely "a gas station with nukes," but rather a Great Power growing in power, relative power at least. Moreover, in 2024 the already-uninformed median American view of Russia is hugely distorted by ubiquitous anti-Russian propaganda. All that really can be done to solve this problem is to pay attention to careful, open-minded observers. And that is the service John P. Burgess provides in this book.

It is not just distance, indifference, and propaganda which make Americans understand so little about Russia. It is that Russian culture, their way of acting and thinking, is so very different from ours. So is China's, or India's, but Americans expect that, while they usually incorrectly think of Russia as European with a vaguely Eastern flair, as if it were the Czech Republic further east on the map. The truth is that Russia is *sui generis*, as are all notable cultures. For every society, a key, or perhaps the key, building block of its culture is its dominant religion, in Russia's case Eastern Orthodoxy, Russia's religion for a thousand years. *Holy Rus'* focuses on how Orthodoxy, wholly alien to most Americans, even wholly unknown to many, pervades Russian culture, providing the skeleton which gives shape to all other parts, as well as the spirit which animates those parts. (This is a different question to whether Russians are devout, a topic to which we will return.)

One problem with analyzing this book is that it is hard to get additional information if one wants to look into matters touched on in this book. Almost everything written today in English about Russia is, at best, unreliable, and at worst, total lies. Nor do I have any Russian friends I can ask. I have never even attended a Russian Orthodox service (though I am Orthodox), and only once been inside a Russian Orthodox

church. Thus, we will discuss the book largely on its own, though with reference to current events.

The author is a Protestant theologian—Calvinist, not Russian and not Orthodox, but very curious. That makes him an excellent narrator. And what he narrates is his extensive journeys through many aspects of Orthodoxy today in Russia. This is not a travelogue or a tourist memoir, however. Rather, it is the story of immersion, though assuredly not of conversion—Burgess maintains a respectful distance from his subject, and while Orthodoxy has been gaining converts worldwide, there is no sign Burgess will be one of those. Crucially, making the author's analytical task somewhat easier is that he wrote in 2016, and what he writes is therefore unaffected by having to opine on today's Russo-Ukraine War. In any case, this is not in any way a political book, except to the extent it touches on the intersection of Russian politics with Russian religion.

The core of the book is Burgess's claim, not very controversial, that Orthodoxy is absolutely essential to the Russian national identity. The central goal of Orthodoxy is the convergence of the divine with mankind. Americans, by contrast, if they have a national religion, are believers in the progress of mankind, and this is a very different aim. And if there is a thesis to this book, it is that the Russian Orthodox Church has, since the fall of Communism, offered to all takers a "cohesive religious vision," that combines both a vision of the divine and a vision of Russia, which it is anticipated can intertwine to create the ideal state, Holy Rus'. This is "a hope for what Russia is and can be." "Holy Rus' [means] a people and a nation chosen by God to be transformed by divine beauty"; an "elusive ideal of a people and place transformed by the holy."

Naturally, one can take a skeptical view of this, and many do, even (or especially) in Russia. Burgess cites one of his Russian friends, who rejects his characterization of Holy Rus' and instead responds it "just means a Church and state that work together to dominate the rest of us." Thus, Burgess is the first to admit that "I am sketching an 'ideal type,'" one which "heightens key features of a social movement in order to highlight what makes it distinctive." Any human reality always falls short of its ideal, and Russia is no exception to this rule. Still, "Holy Rus' seems to promise Russians a world different from, and a world better than, the technical efficiency and competitive rat race of what we have

come to call ‘postmodernity,’ which now governs their everyday lives as much as anywhere in the West.”

The author travelled to Russia in 2004 and 2011 for long stays, and made many shorter trips at other times, apparently with the specific purpose of immersing himself in Orthodoxy as it is lived in the Russian context. He not only reverently and regularly attended the Divine Liturgy, the central Orthodox worship service, but also visited monasteries and other characteristically Orthodox places of worship, and spent a great deal of time with priests, monks, and religious laymen and laywomen. The reader should understand that this degree of immersion is a significant commitment, not for the dilettante or the faint of heart. Merely grasping the forms and patterns of Orthodoxy has a steep learning curve (in fact, a lifelong one), and Russian services are famously lengthy and rigorous, not for the casually-interested or the lazy. Learning in this way is unlike attending a few half-hour Presbyterian services aiming to understand WASP culture. Burgess not only attended services and talked to the Orthodox, he embedded himself in Orthodoxy—for example, to the extent of keeping the very strict Lenten fast, meaning consuming no meat, fish, eggs, alcohol, or dairy for nearly fifty days (something extremely few Russians themselves do).

Burgess begins with an impressionistic view of Orthodoxy in Russian public life, mixed in with history. To understand Orthodoxy in Russia in the twenty-first century, one must begin not so much with a deep history lesson (such as the famous history lesson Vladimir Putin didactically imparted to Tucker Carlson, as useful as that is), but with the attempted destruction of Orthodoxy by Communism. By 1939, Lenin and Stalin had reduced the public presence of Orthodoxy to a few hundred churches, and just as importantly, but less obviously important to Americans, only a tiny handful of monasteries. Orthodoxy in public life was diminished to near zero, while hundreds of thousands of believers were killed because they were believers.

Decades after the destruction of the organized Russian Church, Stalin, facing defeat at the hands of Adolf Hitler, cynically partially resurrected the Church in 1942. He began with a call for a council to elect a new patriarch (that is, the head of a national Orthodox Church, co-equal with all other patriarchs). There had been no Russian patriarch since Tikhon, persecuted but not executed by the Bolsheviks, had

died in 1925. Stalin continued with re-opening many parishes and a few monasteries. In part this was because the Germans reopened parishes in areas of Russia they had conquered, and he did not want the Germans to win the approbation of Russians; in part this was to gain the support of the people for defeating the Germans in the territories yet unconquered by them. In this latter Stalin was quite successful, weaving reborn Orthodoxy into the tapestry of the Great Patriotic War. While intermittent persecution continued for the entire duration of Soviet Communism, and later patriarchs were functionally tools of the Communist state, slightly more room for individual religious belief was allowed after the war. Various unofficial Orthodox groups existed, as did multiple personal interpretations of Orthodox practice, but public profession and practice of faith was rare and debilitating for anyone with the ambition to rise above a low station. Thus, despite its partial restoration, Orthodoxy's traditional role as the backbone of Russian culture was entirely erased from Russia until 1991.

Immediately as Soviet Communism died, however, and somewhat surprisingly to many observers, Orthodoxy vigorously sprang to life again, both in individual lives and in a restructured relationship between church and state. As with all Orthodox states and their national churches, the ideal relationship between the two is "symphony," cooperation between church and state, in which the church strives both to bring the people to God, and to act in practice as a civil religion which supports the state, while the state openly and strongly supports the church in its spiritual goals. Both aim to together support the nation. Such an idea seems bizarre to modern Americans—there is no "separation of church and state" in an Orthodox country (leaving aside that our Constitution neither says nor implies any such thing, and that many American states had established churches into the nineteenth century). The explicit expectation in Orthodox nations is that church and state will actively work with and support each other in the goals most important to each, which together advance the good of the people and of the nation, temporal and eternal. Today, thirty years later, not only has Orthodoxy returned to a preeminent position in Russian public life, but there are now tens of thousands of parishes and eight hundred monasteries, which unlike most Western monasteries attract many young people, and are therefore vibrant, even electric. Kirill, the current patriarch,

has a very significant influence and public presence. The vast majority of Russians self-identify as Orthodox, and politicians, from Putin on down, publicly exhibit the forms of Orthodox belief.

In practice, however, as almost always with symphony, the balance between the Russian Church and state tilts toward the state. The besetting, perhaps inevitable, structural flaw of firmly Orthodox nations is a tendency towards caesaropapism, and only rarely, from the later Roman Empire to today, does an Orthodox nation avoid some version of this fate. The Russian state in 2024 remains much more powerful and important than the Russian Church, and the Russian Church can justly be seen as largely subservient to the state, as shown by that important Church moral goals are not often, if ever, enshrined in legislation, while the Church is expected to, and does, strongly and openly support the initiatives of the Russian state. In other words, the Church is allowed to, and to a certain extent assisted to, advance its pastoral goals, but not to significantly influence state policy. The apotheosis of this relationship, perhaps, and arguably (though it is impolitic to say), an echo of Stalin's goals, is the recently-constructed Patriarchal Cathedral of the Russian military, dedicated to the Resurrection of Christ but filled largely with celebrations of Russia's defeat of Germany in World War II. It is very impressive; supposedly, the steel alloy frame of the main dome is designed to last for 1,500 years without modification, and the fly-through drone videos of the church inspire awe. I doubt if America could build such a structure, and if it could, it would take decades. But the devout viewer suspects that Christ would not wholly approve of much of the vibe.

Burgess is not a Pollyanna about Russian Orthodoxy. Not only does he recognize these structural problems, but he is also perfectly well aware that most Russians do not actually participate in the practices of Orthodoxy, and very many believe little or none of the doctrine. Still, this widespread indifference and falling away combined with putative membership in the Church, gives the appearance, and is taken as such by the Russian Church, of Russia being fertile ground for "in-churching"—that is, turning nominal believers into devout believers. It is not at all clear this is a success; the latest data are that around ten percent of Russians attend church services with any regularity. (On the other hand, it's not entirely clear whether Orthodox participation was

that much higher before Communism. "Cultural Christianity" has its problems and drawbacks, but it is everywhere a real thing.) But as part of Russia's binding national identity, Orthodoxy remains extremely important. And if there is one thing that characterizes as a practical matter Orthodoxy, which ultimately views all times as simultaneously in existence and porous in their boundaries, it is taking the long view. No doubt the hierarchs of the Russian Church would respond, "Check back in 2124."

The simplistic view parroted by most American "experts" about Russia, that Orthodoxy is a political tool for Putin and his cronies to manipulate the masses, is thus very deceptive. The explicit aim of the Church's efforts is to "re-Christianize" Russia, and this is not in contradiction to subordination to the state. Burgess outlines at length, in several chapters, the ways that the Orthodox Church both underpins Russian national identity, and acts as the linchpin of that identity in many non-political ways—not just religious ways, but in innumerable programs affecting the day-to-day life of the people. Whatever the success of this aim (and it appears mixed at best, so far), the response of the citizenry to the acts of the Church reinforces both Russian spirituality and Russian national identity, in a virtuous circle that is alien to nearly all of Europe, and to most Americans. Nobody with power talks there or here about "re-Christianizing" those countries, though God knows we all could use it.

One key set of such Church initiatives is education. "Since the fall of Communism, the Orthodox Church has established an impressive infrastructure of schools, universities, seminaries, publishing houses, and mass media." In keeping with the position of the Church, these educational institutions are designed to inculcate both Orthodoxy (correct Orthodoxy, rather than "popular Orthodoxy" or fringe beliefs, which spread during the underground days under Communism) and right thinking about Russia, including the state. The state, however, does not return the favor—Orthodox education is not required in public schools, although recently parents can choose for their children from that option among many others, including "secular ethics," and the religious textbooks that are used are required by the state to emphasize both the importance of love of nation and the importance of pluralism. It is certainly true that education offers a lot of fertile ground for the

Church's goals—Burgess notes that “fewer than one in six believers owns a complete copy of the Bible . . . and only nine percent report being familiar with the doctrine of the Trinity.” But it is a long, uphill climb from here to Holy Rus’.

Another slate of Church initiatives is a myriad of social ministries, from orphanages to hospitals to alcohol and drug rehabilitation programs. Of course, for two thousand years social ministry has been an absolutely essential focus of all Christian churches, so this is not a new idea (and non-Orthodox Christians in Russia also offer such assistance to those in need). In these areas, however, the Church takes the lead, rather than the state, and this is increasingly true. Naturally, these programs (many of which are administered through monasteries or using monks) are calculated to bring people to Orthodoxy, through “in-churching,” as well as to help those in need, though the latter goal is the priority. I suspect that Orthodoxy, with its holistic view of man and a less legalistic view of God than both Roman Catholicism and much mainstream Protestantism, is well-suited to combining these goals. Moreover, the state benefits from this, because Orthodoxy as taught in Russia, within the template of Holy Rus’, necessarily reinforces the importance of Russian culture and Russian history to Russian identity. If a drug addict frees himself of addiction, becomes more religious, and views himself as more Russian as a result, everyone wins.

What does not result from this, quite the opposite, is any challenge by the Russian Church to dubious political or legal structures. Such challenge has always been a crucial role for any Orthodox Church, though often honored in the breach. (Saint John Chrysostom, Patriarch of Constantinople and one of the most important saints in Orthodoxy, died in exile in A.D. 407 as a direct result of his criticism of the Roman Emperor's behavior, or rather that of his wife.) As Burgess says, part of the role of the Church is to “confront rulers with the truth of their misdeed [and] warn them of Christ's judgment.” In fact, state funding and regulation of social programs often reinforces state power relative to the Church, making any such challenges even less likely.

This subordination of the Church is most obvious in the response to any Orthodox who challenge Russia's actions in the Russo-Ukraine War. For example, Burgess favorably mentions Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev), “Kirill's successor as head of the Church's Department of

External Church Relations,” a popular figure generally regarded in 2016 as the number two man in Russian Orthodoxy. (Hilarion is also a hugely prolific and influential author; I discussed his book *Christ the Conqueror of Hell* back in 2019.) Since that time, however, because he expressed inadequate support for the war, he was exiled to Hungary, and this past summer an apparently cooked-up scandal was used as the excuse to suspend him entirely from his bishopric. Kirill, by contrast, always strongly supports the Russian state (and accusations of financial scandal have also been used to keep him in line in the past). I have no idea of the truth of these “scandals,” but I do know the net result is to strengthen the state relative to the Russian Church.

In later chapters, Burgess covers the “New Martyrs,” those who gave their lives under Communism (along with “confessors,” those who suffered but were not martyred) as well as the many compromises made by the Russian Church with Communism (which have never been fully examined, but largely swept under the rug). (On the wall of my late father’s office, though he was not Orthodox, is a large calendar which includes icons of the New Martyrs and Confessors, which he bought in Russia in 1990.) He also discusses the nuts and bolts of parish life in modern Russia, drawing on his immersive experiences and the many conversations he had with men and women of no prominence, though he also discusses the important phenomenon of charismatic priests, who always play a prominent role in national religious renewals. He notes, though I cannot confirm this (but to some extent it parallels what is happening in America with the Orthodox), that “the fastest-growing cohort in the Russian Orthodox Church consists of young, well-educated, urban professionals.” (You will not see that in the American media, which mostly parades Russia-hating atheist homosexuals and termagant feminists as representative of Russian youth, and ignores that record levels of Russians, nearly ninety percent, report being satisfied with “what is happening in Russia today,” in stark contrast to America.) Still, there is a wide range of opinion among priests as to how the Russian Church should approach the future, both inside Russia and with respect to Russia’s relations with the rest of the world, and no doubt this has been exacerbated by the Russo-Ukraine War. None are “liberal” in the Western sense of word, however. These are all variations of opinion on



how to bring men to God, and how to, whether they use the term or not, achieve the elusive goal of Holy Rus'.

Burgess ends the book on a bit of a false note, suggesting that Russia needs more "democratic arrangements" and "consensus building." I am quite sure that such dubious structures and increased Western-type hyper-feminization are the last things Russia needs. Certainly there is nothing at all in Orthodoxy, or in Christianity, that suggests democracy is any better in any way than, say, authoritarianism. But I claim no special insight myself into Russia, and we in the West are purely observers to the Russian journey, which is going to continue on its own path, as America's power over the rest of the world inevitably wanes. And we should not ignore, in our admiration for a country that is trying to restore Christianity, that aside from its conflict with the American Regime (America as a nation has no reason to have any significant disagreement with Russia, any more than we did in the nineteenth century), Russia has a great many problems. The Russian birth rate is appallingly low (in part because abortion is sadly legal, rather than aggressively criminalized as it should be, despite the position of the Church) and they now openly talk about admitting large numbers of new migrants (though at least they, unlike our Regime, will choose those migrants with the interests of Russians in mind). The future may end up bright for Russia, but from today's vantage point, it does not appear particularly rosy.

I will say a few words about Russian Orthodoxy as it relates to other Orthodox Churches, especially the Greek Orthodox Church. My normal policy with respect to Orthodox matters is not to involve myself, at all, with intra-Orthodox disputes. I'd like to say this is because of my great humility, but that would be false, because sadly, I am not on familiar terms with humility. Perhaps not completely false, however, because I think opining on such matters is above my pay grade, and also inappropriate for a relatively recent convert. It is even more inappropriate for someone such as I to criticize hierarchs (i.e., bishops and other shepherds), at least publicly. No doubt a believer, especially a politically-oriented one, can find much to criticize in certain hierarchs, and it is not never that a layman should involve himself in such matters. For example, wealthy Orthodox laymen notably intervened in the hierarchical maltreatment of Saint Nectarios (whose icon stands near

to where my family sits in church, and who was persecuted by Greek bishops in the early twentieth century), and they should have done so. I am only laying out a general principle for myself, and for others similarly situated.

Nonetheless, the status of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, which involves a dispute among patriarchs, bears comment here, because it is a crucial matter for the Russians. Ukraine appears almost not at all in this book—only once, with a side comment on the rise of anti-Russian sentiment in Ukraine after that nation's initial appearance as a nation, in 1991. The Greek Patriarch, Bartholomew, in 2019 granted autocephaly (status as a national church under an existing Patriarchate) to a new splinter Ukrainian Orthodox Church, even though for a thousand years the Russian Orthodox Church was the only Orthodox church in the territories that now constitute Ukraine. Unsurprisingly, Kirill and the Russian Church thought little of this interference in their domain, and broke communion with the Greek Church. Equally unsurprisingly, the current dictator of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelenskyy (who is Jewish, or maybe atheist, but definitely not Christian), has used this as an excuse to violently proscribe, attack, and dispossess the Russian Orthodox Church in Ukraine, arresting and conscripting priests and monks while maltreating believers. Such things have happened before, but in the modern world, where attacks on Christianity and Christians are the norm, it is exceedingly unfortunate, for which Bartholomew bears the responsibility. Nor, from my perspective, was any of this necessary or desirable, especially as Ukraine's status as an independent country is both very new and very much in doubt.

And, finally, let's talk about America, which is, as I say, very different from Russia, on many axes. Our civil religion has long been Protestantism tinged with the gospel of progress (a topic expertly and often covered by Aaron Renn). That religion has died, however, and a new civil religion struggles to be born. For a while, it appeared that the Left would succeed in its efforts to replace Christianity with the worship of globohomo—American domination of the globe in pursuit of the Left goals of emancipation and egalitarianism, often using Christian language stripped of Christian belief and actual Christian practice. However, the Left's power, it appears, may have crested and be declining (although the Left never takes any rollback lying down, so we

will see), and the battlefield may be opening again. What would, what could, a new American civil religion look like? I'd be happy if it were based in Orthodoxy, and I am often heard to say that Orthodoxy is the coming thing. But by that I mean that men and women in America are likely to turn, and to some extent are turning, to Orthodoxy to meet America's existing spiritual condition, which is a blend of desert and vacuum, both for religion in general and within most other Christian denominations. Still, just as much as Orthodoxy is the essence of Russia, it is unlikely ever to be the essence of America. A change like that could only happen in an entirely different America, one that would be wholly unrecognizable to us.

Maybe America's new civil religion will be a reborn vigorous Western Christianity tinged with goals such as colonizing Mars, on our way to the Solar Imperium, a variation on what I have long called for, the High Middle Ages with rockets. Such a civil religion would certainly be very, very American, and only possible in America. A return to any brand of real Christianity, certainly, would solve the vast majority of America's decay, most of all the catastrophic decline in births and the absence of virtue as a sought-for good. And an overarching goal of glorious temporal accomplishment, the works of man under the eyes of God, is very much in keeping with the unique personality of America. I'll take that, if I can get it.