RELIGION AND CULTURE IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA: MOSCOW PROVINCE

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Executive summary

This paper analyzes the experiences of religious believers in contemporary Russia using sociological theory on legitimacy. Drawing upon archival documents and other sources, it examines the activity of Russian Orthodox believers in the city of Moscow and in Moscow province (oblast') since World War II. That activity involved both organized religious life in parish churches in the region as well as more spontaneous expressions of religious belief often connected with popular holy sites. Both types of activity attracted the attention of non-believers and government officials. Their responses played a key role in defining the basis for legitimate religious activity in contemporary Russia in three different categories: legal, moral and cultural. The paper begins by exploring the differences among the three types of legitimacy and then identifies the bases for religious legitimacy in four periods of Russian history since 1945.
Since World War II, religious believers in Russia have engaged in a constant struggle for social legitimacy in a society that has experienced repeated cultural upheavals. In the West, religious freedom is accepted as a basic and universal human right. In the Western marketplace of ideas, religion is also a commodity that can be adopted, used, changed – and even perhaps discarded – by individuals at will. Russian society in the second half of the twentieth century never fully accepted those Western views on religion. Russian religious believers experienced tolerance, repression, indifference and even admiration, but their right to believe never had a firm social foundation. They were forced to seek grounds for the legitimacy of their religious behavior; such behavior did not find acceptance in society as a whole.

This paper analyzes the experiences of religious believers in contemporary Russia using sociological theory on legitimacy. Drawing upon archival documents and other sources, it examines the activity of Russian Orthodox believers in the city of Moscow and in Moscow province (oblast') since World War II. That activity involved both organized religious life in parish churches in the region as well as more spontaneous expressions of religious belief often connected with popular holy sites. Both types of activity attracted the attention of non-believers and government officials. Their responses played a key role in defining the basis for legitimate religious activity in contemporary Russia in three different categories: legal, moral and cultural. First, this paper explains the differences among the three types of legitimacy. Then, it identifies the bases for religious legitimacy in four periods of Russian history since 1945.

**Legitimacy in institutional sociology**

The theoretical foundation of my analysis derives from a cultural systems model of religion applied to the contemporary situation in Russia. American anthropologist Clifford
Geertz has done seminal work on religion as a cultural system. He explains that religion assists in the transmission of symbols. The meaning of those symbols enables people to communicate, perpetuate, and develop an understanding of life. Geertz’s ideas are widely acknowledged by those of us who study religion in contemporary Russia; we increasingly agree that religion is a collective activity. Yet, we persist in explaining religious events in terms of the actions of individuals, great and ordinary. Thus, religion becomes isolated from broad forces in culture and loses contact with underlying social dynamics.

Institutional sociology provides a set of powerful analytical tools that can help historians explain the cultural dynamics of religion both generally and, as I argue in this paper, specifically in regard to the Russian religious experience over the last 60 years. In sociological terms, an institution is “an organized, established procedure” that makes up “the constituent rules of society.” These institutions or rules give order to a disorderly world by telling individuals and groups how their society works, “what is and is not, what can and cannot be” in the words of Stanford University sociologist Richard Scott. Taken in their entirety, a society’s rules are one of the obvious manifestations of its culture. That is, culture includes the institutional models of a society, with institutions being the cultural rules giving meaning and value to that society. Culture is ontological because it assigns value and reality to individuals – their actions, means and ends. It is also significatory in providing meaning and legitimacy to social actors and their actions. Most individuals are actors in their cultural setting; they enact the rules rather than act to write new rules. They rely on institutions to find order in a disorderly world, to understand the workings of the social world and the limits of their roles.

Recent sociological research on the nature of institutions identifies three categories of societal rules: regulative, normative and cognitive. Scott explains that institutions “consist of cognitive, normative, and regulative structures and activities that provide stability and meaning to social behavior.”

Regulative institutions are rules that constrain and regularize behavior. The process by which regulative institutions are formed and enforced has been well studied; indeed, works on Russian religious history are often predominantly based on this type of rule. Regulative institutions can be described as the official, written rules or laws of a society. These laws

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3 Ibid, 17-18.
4 The description of these three types of institutions is drawn from W. Richard Scott, Institutions and Organizations (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1995), 35-45.
5 Ibid, 33.
and rules are established and then reviewed for compliance or non-compliance. They involve elements of sanctions (rewards and punishments) aimed at influencing future behavior. Actors are assumed to have individual interests that they will protect. They use expediency and calculation based on the fear of the use of force or sanctions against them for behavior that breaks the regulations. A written law is a good example of a regulative institution, as is the rulebook that governs a sport like football.

Normative institutions are rules based on prescription, evaluation and obligation in social life. They use both values (comparative standards for assessing what is preferred or desired) and norms (definitions of both how things should be done and what methods can be used to achieve one’s ends). An example of a normative institution is the American value that “winning the game is important” tempered by the norm “you must always be a good sport.” Normative rules constrain social behavior while also enabling social action. They are dualistic by conferring “rights as well as responsibilities, privileges as well as duties, and licenses as well as mandates.”6 Normative institutions allow for automatic and selective behavior. A social actor can simply follow the rules or can select, interpret and adapt them to fit the social situation. Behavior from the perspective of normative institutions is morally governed.

Cognitive institutions are “rules that constitute the nature of reality and the frames through which meaning is made.”7 These rules form the internalized symbolic framework that aid individuals in processing the external stimuli of their social world. As Max Weber noted, social action is action to which subjective meaning is attached.8 Cognitive institutional sociology explains action as the subjective interpretation of objective conditions. Individual human actors find meaning through social interaction; that meaning is preserved in the constitutive rules of a society. Cognitive rules are not purely regulative (reward/punishment) or normative (moral conduct). They are used by socially constructed actors who have differing capacities for action and parts to play. In the football analogy, cognitive theorists are less interested in the rulebook and the norms for play. Instead, they identify how the game creates roles (quarterbacks, coaches, and referees) that interact to make the game a reality.

While some sociological research on institutions is highly specialized and, therefore, less accessible to those of us who are not experts in the field, the concept of categories of social rules offers us rich possibilities for analysis of the Russian situation today. An article in the on-line edition of The Washington Post (Sunday, September 6, 1998) after the most recent Russian economic crisis illustrates this point. In “Losing It! Our Russian Illusions, Crushed by Reality,” William E. Odom writes:

A metaphor is perhaps the best way to describe the chaos that exists in Russia today. Think of the Russian economy as a professional football league. On game day, the teams arrive at their fields to play before sell-out crowds. The players look around to discover there are no referees. Nor is the field lined off to mark the boundaries, yard lines and goal lines. To get the games under way, each team’s owner sends one of its own to officiate.

6 Ibid, 38.
7 Ibid, 40.
8 Max Weber, Economy and Society: An Interpretive Sociology (New York: Bedminster, 1968), 4. This work was originally published in 1924.
Predictably, the referees only make calls favorable to their team. At half-time, gamblers send their agents to bribe the referees. The fans, knowing that skill doesn't determine the outcome, become unruly. Needless to say, the game turns into a melee. Meanwhile, most of the gate receipts disappear mysteriously and the players end up receiving no salaries.

This is a crude approximation of the way the Russian economy operates. The state authorities are not strong enough to impose order on the game. They cannot supply honest referees or dictate rules. They may write a regulatory system for the teams and the owners, but they cannot enforce it. Nor can they prevent thefts at the box office. And they cannot extract adequate fees from the owners to pay for all the necessary regulatory functions to manage the league through a season of play. Nonetheless, Western governments continue to act as if controlling legal institutions exist and that the rules are fair.

Odom is not a sociologist but he does point out that Russia’s problems stem, in part, from the lack of accepted rules. We can even read into his account a need for all three types of institutions in Russia (regulative – the official rules of football; normative – fans’ expectations of a fair game; cognitive – the role of referees as impartial judges). Odom’s example from the economic sphere implies that the current problems in Russia stem from the lack of legitimized social institutions. We can apply that same argument to organized religious life in contemporary Russia.

The concept of legitimacy is familiar to social scientists in a variety of fields, including history, politics, economics and sociology. In general, legitimacy is seen as being in accord with accepted practices and standards and, therefore, as a crucial aspect of an organization’s ability to survive in society. Scholars in different fields, however, treat the nature of legitimacy differently. For example, some economists and political scientists view legitimacy as a kind of resource or commodity that is possessed and exchanged. Institutional sociologists, in contrast, relate legitimacy directly to their study of social rules and see legitimacy primarily as a condition rather than a resource.
Each of the three types of institutions gives a different basis for organizational legitimacy. The regulative perspective says that a legitimate organization conforms to the rules (legal or quasi-legal) established by its society. The normative view uses a less well-defined moral base for judging if an organization is legitimate. Normative rules are more internalized than regulations; incentives for following the rules include intrinsic rewards as well as external ones (e.g., honor as well as the threat of a lawsuit). Legitimacy from the cognitive perspective says that social actors must adopt “a common frame of reference or definition of the situation.” In other words, those actors must play their parts or risk being ostracized by society. As I pointed out in my study of the “Living Church” schism in the Russian Orthodox Church between 1922 and 1946, ordinary Orthodox believers branded the renovationists as heretics precisely because the would-be reformers advocated an unacceptable reinterpretation of deeply socially-imbedded rules.

Orthodox institutional legitimacy in the late Stalinist era

World War II was the catalyst for changing the status of the Russian Orthodox Church in Soviet society. In the 1930s, the Russian Orthodox Church was nearly destroyed as an organization. Stalinist laws, norms, and culture wreaked havoc on organized religious practice. Being Soviet made any public display of religious belief illegitimate in a process that was linked to the political, economic, and cultural terror in all other social spheres. The war precipitated a national crisis that changed the rules for Soviet treatment of the Orthodox Church in particular. In return for their unswerving loyalty to the nation’s defense, Orthodox believers gained some measure of legal and even moral legitimacy. This complemented the cognitive legitimacy that

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9 Scott, Institutions, 47.
the Stalinist revolution had attempted unsuccessfully to eradicate. In return, organized Orthodoxy became sovietized; it adopted strict internal regulations and incorporated the authoritarian cast of all Stalinist organizations.

During the late Stalinist era (1943-1958), Orthodox parish churches in the city and province of Moscow engaged in generally open and relatively unhindered religious activity. They found moral legitimacy from the reservoir of good will collected during the war, when believers had enthusiastically rallied to the defense of their homeland and church leaders embraced the Soviet government’s foreign policy objectives. These objectives even included a plan to form an “Orthodox Vatican” in Moscow that would advance Soviet political influence abroad and counter the perceived threat to the Soviet path by the Roman church.¹¹

Sociological theory explains the actions of the Russian Orthodox Church headed by the Moscow patriarchate as adaptation to its institutional environment for the purpose of survival. It experienced a constraining process that forced it, as one organizational unit in a society, to resemble other units that faced the same set of environmental conditions.¹² In their search for economic and social fitness, Orthodox parishioners and clergy competed for institutional legitimacy by seeking out resources, customers, and political power. The pressures of societal rules led the church to risk aversion, centralized decision-making by a collective leadership, and unswerving public loyalty to the Soviet system. In other words, the church became a typical Soviet institutionalized organization that was shaped by the rules of its environment.

In the fifteen years after 1943, the Russian Orthodox Church became the primary religious organization in the USSR and increased its legal, moral and cultural legitimacy. A landmark meeting between Soviet leader Joseph Stalin and three senior Orthodox bishops in September 1943 led to the establishment of the Council for Russian Orthodox Church Affairs (SDRPTs) under the Council of Ministers of the USSR. Headed by G. G. Karpov, an officer in the secret police, this new governmental body was given responsibility for overseeing church-state relations in the USSR. SDRPTs fulfilled that task through regional representatives, called plenipotentiaries. Archival records from the tenure of A. A. Trushin, who served as plenipotentiary for Moscow city and province for over twenty-five years, clearly show that the Orthodox church thrived in post-war Soviet society despite – or perhaps because of – the tight control over its activities by government bureaucrats.

The formation of SDRPTs gave legal legitimacy to the organized Russian Orthodox Church. For the first time since the 1917 Revolution, an organ of the Soviet government worked to oversee the application of Soviet laws on religious activity. This position stood in sharp contrast to governmental and party committees that existed to “liquidate” organized religion from 1917 to 1941. Trushin was required by SDRPTs instructions to work with local Soviet officials in responding to petitions from groups of believers requesting the re-opening of churches. He also had responsibility for registering clergy who served in churches and for ensuring that local Soviet officials did not interfere in the internal affairs of Orthodox parishes. Orthodox parishes and dioceses gained not only legal recognition but also a level of legal protection in the Soviet Union.

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13 The records of SDRPTs are held in the State Archive of the Russian Federation (GARF), f. 6991, op. 1-2.
14 Trushin’s reports and correspondence are found in the Central State Archive for Moscow Province (TsGAMO), f. 7383, op. 1-3.
15 See the instructional letters to Trushin in TsGAMO f. 7383, op. 1, d. 1.
Admittedly, the concept of law in this period was fluid and depended more on its interpretation by individual officials than an understanding of law as an absolute norm. The idea of “equal justice under the law” was foreign to Soviet society. This meant that Soviet social actors responded differently to laws dictating the separation of church and state. For some, those laws required no direct contact between believers and non-believers. For others, those same laws meant that purely voluntary interaction without administrative compulsion was acceptable. Yet others ignored the legal concept of separation entirely. Some Soviet officials gave Orthodox parishes control over cemeteries, borrowed money from church treasuries, pushed for the transfer of parish clergy, and even tried to direct churches to elect certain candidates as parish lay officials.  

Contacts beyond the official boundaries of the law went both ways. Some priests received aid from state enterprises, while others attended and spoke at Soviet administrative gatherings, such as village soviets or meetings of collective farm (kolkhoz) workers. Lay Orthodox activists used personal connections within the Soviet bureaucracy to further the goals of their parishes. For example, they secured scarce building materials for church remodeling projects and convinced local authorities to permit public religious processions. A striking feature of these cases is that, even when they were denounced in government reports, Soviet officials did not use repressive measures against believers in general or even against specific individuals accused of breaking the laws that separated church and state. 

Legal legitimacy enhanced the moral authority of the Russian Orthodox Church during these two decades. With the exception of two brief interludes in 1949 and 1954, Soviet propagandists could not engage in the type of direct attacks on religious believers as were 

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16 Trushin frequently noted all these types of behavior in his reports. A representative sample is found in TsGAMO f. 7383, op. 1, d. 20, ll. 36-63 (Report to SDRPTs for the first quarter of 1950).
allowed prior to the war and after 1959. Believers had proved their loyalty to the Soviet state through mass support of the war against the German invaders and continued to defend the ideals of Soviet communism as the Cold War escalated. Trushin reflected moral expectations for Orthodox clergy in his reports when he expressed contempt for priests who were always drunk, had extramarital affairs, or misappropriated parish funds. Frequent meetings between senior Orthodox bishops and government officials – on rare occasions even including heads of the party and the government – contributed to the church’s moral legitimacy.

While historians have tended to emphasize the suppression of true religious belief and the promotion of collaborators in the church by Soviet authorities, archival evidence does not support such conclusions. It is true that after 1948 the Soviet government steadfastly rejected believers’ petitions to reopen thousands of churches that had been closed during the terror of the late 1930s. The 14,191 Orthodox churches that did hold services in 1948 (1,300 of which were reopened with state approval between 1943 and 1948) could not officially engage in activities outside of worship services, such as religious education, charitable work, evangelization, and religious rites held in public places. Unofficially, believers and clergy did that which was forbidden. They used parish funds to help those in need. They educated children in the Orthodox faith. They held ceremonies outside church buildings, “in the open air.” When authorities from the central government learned of these activities, they ordered them to cease but did not administer any severe punishment against the offenders. These same authorities were much stricter in punishing local officials and Party members who demanded money from churches or attempted to influence the internal affairs of religious groups.

17 See TsGAMO f. 7383, op. 1, d. 29, ll. 16-18.
18 TsGAMO f. 7383, op. 1, d. 30, ll. 60-61.
These facts show that Russian Orthodoxy also saw a rise in its cognitive legitimacy during the late Stalinist era. Religious activity regulated by secular state officials was accepted as part of the cognitive status quo. Support for this conclusion comes from a comparison of the government’s acceptance of regulated Orthodox activity and its vigorous attempts to eliminate popular religious practices that were beyond the church’s control. Orthodox believers in the USSR attended church services but also visited lakes, springs, wells, and other “holy places” that had been venerated by Russians for many generations. These same believers also periodically established new holy places based on reports of miraculous healings and other instances of divine immanence. Whenever the number of people gathering at such places became large, state officials attempted to intervene. They wanted to end pilgrimages to these holy places because they viewed such activity as unenlightened and superstitious. These interventions tended to be only partially successful because, before 1959, the state refused to use sufficient force to counter those popular religious acts.

Religious activity among Orthodox believers in and near Moscow contradicts the common historical view of late Stalinism as an era of totalitarian repression. Their behavior was certainly closely watched and regulated by Soviet officials. Nonetheless, they had strong claims of legal, moral and cultural legitimacy. Parishes in and around Moscow were financially strong and spiritually vibrant. Lay activists and clergy alike had grown more confident in their identity as Orthodox believers and Soviet citizens. Hostility and alienation between supporters of the Orthodox Church and Soviet officials declined dramatically. These two decades might be seen as a “golden age” for Orthodox believers during the seventy-five years of communist rule.

19 A holy spring near the town of Zagorsk became the object of Trushin’s concern for years. See TsGAMO f. 7383, op. 1, d. 26, ll. 102-4.
Assault on Orthodox legitimacy under Nikita Khrushchev

The Soviet government’s five-year anti-religious campaign from 1959 to 1964 included a strong attack on the Russian Orthodox Church that was comparable to the terror of the late 1930s. Thousands of churches were closed, believers were harassed and clergy were intimidated. Unlike the attack on religion in the 1930s, the church under Khrushchev maintained some forms of institutional legitimacy that provided limited protection by restraining state officials. In particular, legal institutions were bent but never discarded. This meant that even Orthodox believers had legal standing under Soviet law – a factor that limited those who zealously pursued an ideological agenda for building communism in the USSR.

Nikita Khrushchev himself seemed to take little active leadership in the resurgence of anti-religious activity. Rank-and-file members of the Communist Party led the new attack on Orthodoxy and all other forms of religious belief. They responded to the call for a renewed campaign for the establishment of a true communist state by attacking those “vestiges of the past” that seemed to obstruct the path toward that goal. Religion stood at the top of the list.

Documents from the SDRPTs archives indicate that the Politburo member most actively engaged in rallying such popular sentiment was Mikhail Suslov, the man who had emerged as chief party ideologist. Except for scattered pronouncements at Party conferences and plenums, Khrushchev seemed to have little direct involvement in the new battle against religion. From both the tone and content of his reports during this period, Trushin can be said to represent a wide group of middle-level Soviet bureaucrats who zealously embraced the idea of a unified attack by the communist faithful against religion.20

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20 This argument is found in the fine new study by T. A. Chumachenko, Gosudarstvo, pravoslavnaia tserkov', veruiushchie. 1941-1961 gg (Moscow: AIRO-XX, 1999).
That attack targeted Orthodox legitimacy at every level: regulative, normative and cognitive. The regulative assault focused on the so-called “material base” of the Orthodox Church. Government officials had long been uneasy with the substantial income of parish churches (primarily from the sale of candles during church services) and clergy (primarily as fees from performing baptisms, weddings and funerals – often in the privacy of believers’ homes). The monthly income of Moscow area clergy was from three to ten times greater than that of the average worker. Parishes in Moscow purchased candles from the workshop of the Moscow Patriarchate for 15 rubles per kilogram and sold them to believers for a 2000-3000% profit.

Although parishioners knew of this arrangement and seldom complained, the Party viewed the large amounts of cash in the hands of its ideological adversaries with alarm. Parishes used the money to repair and beautify their buildings, to pay professional singers for their choirs, to buy automobiles and houses for clergy, and often to supply secret charity to widows and orphans of church workers. Government officials viewed all these activities as “expanding religion’s sphere of influence,” especially among children and young people.

To halt religious “expansion,” the party-state forced parishes to adopt strict measures for limiting parish and clergy incomes. The legal principle of separation of church and state crumbled completely. All clergy were put on fixed salaries. Parishes were ordered to implement a receipt system to prevent secret payments to clergy for performing baptisms, weddings and funerals. The government imposed a large tax on candles (200 rubles per kilogram, paid by the patriarchal candle factory itself) and forbade parishes from raising the price of candles. The Peace Fund was established for the expressed purpose of draining excess funds from parish and diocesan treasuries. The government confiscated automobiles and excess buildings (homes, guard houses, etc.) that parishes had obtained without following the exact regulations. State tax
collectors began to enforce the laws requiring clergy to pay up to 82% of their salaries in income taxes. All church building repairs needed prior approval from Trushin, the regional SDRPTs plenipotentiary, who often refused such requests and steadfastly worked to uncover cases where church people purchased building materials on the black market.  

These measures halted the growth of church incomes temporarily but did not significantly reduce the flow of money into parish coffers. The government did, however, impose a greater amount of control and oversight over clergy salaries and the use of parish funds.

A second prong of the regulative attack on the church involved physically closing parishes. During this five-year period, the number of open Orthodox parishes in the USSR declined by 44% (from 13,415 in 1958 to 7,500 in 1965). The majority of the closed churches, however, were in the Ukraine and Belorussia. In Moscow province, the number of open Orthodox churches declined by 16% (from 211 in 1958 to 177 in 1965). Working with local party bosses, Trushin targeted smaller rural parishes for closure by preventing the ruling bishop from appointing clergy to them. Trushin could then close those parishes, after a few months of inactivity, with a minimum of protest from believers. Closing churches in cities proved more difficult; those parishes were stronger and had large numbers of supporters. Trushin occasionally shut down an urban church by using subterfuge. For example, he convinced Moscow city planners to follow through with their plans to demolish Preobrazhenskii Cathedral (the Church of the Transfiguration) on Preobrazhenskii Square under the pretense that it impeded the construction of a line of the Moscow subway. Urban churches generally remained open and were not threatened with closure during this time.

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21 See Trushin’s reports for 1959-1964 in TsGAMO, f. 7383, op. 1, d. 50, 53, 58, 62, 66, 71.
22 TsGAMO f. 7383, op. 1, d. 44, l. 96, and d. 71, l. 2.
23 TsGAMO f. 7383, op. 1, d. 62, l. 8.
Soviet repression of religion also had interconnected normative and cultural components. Feature stories in the Soviet press drove home the point that religious belief and practice were incompatible with modern life. Such articles condemned clergy who embezzled church funds or were caught in adulterous affairs. They praised students who left Moscow Theological Seminary and renounced religion because it was “false science.” Less public were the actions by state security organs to uncover religious behavior by members of the Party and Komsomol (Young Communist League). In one such case, the relatives of a high-ranking bishop found themselves under investigation for having too frequent contact with him. While Soviet moral standards denigrated religious conduct, guardians of Soviet culture attempted to create new civil rituals to replace Orthodox traditions. During Khrushchev’s rule, the network of wedding palaces was begun and civil rites for births, coming of age, and funerals were revived. Statistics compiled by Trushin show that these civil rites quickly gained popularity but apparently supplemented rather than replaced religious traditions. Soviet citizens accepted the new civil institutions while still observing the traditional Orthodox ceremonies.²⁴

The zeal with which local officials closed Orthodox parish churches in Moscow province led to popular opposition. Blamed for this policy and other “hare-brained schemes,” Khrushchev was removed from office in October 1964. The officials who led the attack against religion in and around Moscow were not replaced. They were also completely unrepentant of their actions. Nonetheless, they acquiesced to a new policy that forbade forced closures of parish churches and open intervention in parish affairs. Russian Orthodoxy lost some legal and moral ground but maintained its place in Soviet Russian culture.

²⁴ See TsGAMO f. 7383, op. 1, d. 57, ll. 19-20.
Orthodox legitimacy in the “era of stagnation”

Maintaining legitimacy in the Soviet Union after Khrushchev’s ouster consumed the energies of Orthodox activists and forced them to make morally questionable compromises. The advancement of Orthodoxy in Soviet Russia might have been better served by activities that religious dissidents began to demand in the late 1960s. Their demands included measures to protect the church from KGB interference, to defend freedom of conscience, and to denounce capricious repression of religious belief. Rather than embrace such demands, most Orthodox believers observed those ceremonial and ritualistic forms of their faith that were acceptable to the Soviet authorities. By so doing, believers supported the church’s official position of loyalty to the regime and thus validated its continued operation within the constraints of continued cultural hostility.25

One example of this policy was the church’s willingness to expend enormous sums of money and political capital to maintain its prestige in the eyes of foreigners. After 1965, ecclesiastical leaders repeatedly attempted to expand the size and press run of the church’s premier monthly periodical Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate, despite the fact that the government required well over half of all copies be sent abroad. Church officials also provided elaborate hospitality for international guests.26 None of these practices had any real use for Orthodox believers if measured by internal religious standards. All were extremely important for augmenting the legitimacy of Russian Orthodoxy in the Soviet environment.

Institutional legitimacy for the church during the rule of Leonid Brezhnev had hidden costs. Publicly, the church disavowed any state interference in internal ecclesiastical affairs and defended the reality of freedom of conscience. In reality, local Orthodox groups were limited, watched, and harassed by agents of state security. While frequently and scornfully commenting on the “hypocrisy” by Orthodox leaders, Western observers and Soviet dissidents ignored the fact that similar rules were part of everyday Soviet life. The inconsistencies of the rules

26 Nathaniel Davis, A Long Walk to Church: A Contemporary History of Russian Orthodoxy (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1995), 187. My own experiences as a member of official church delegations in the 1980s were similar to those of Davis.
provided the foundation for both the biting political humor and the surprise value of “revelations” concerning religious belief in that country. Many Russians were baptized into the Orthodox faith as babies even during the Stalin era; Mikhail Gorbachev is anecdotal evidence of that popular practice. Other accounts tell of people who avoided associating with religion in everyday life but attended Orthodox services while on vacation in order to maintain religious anonymity. Public denial of religious repression combined with private complaints by Orthodox leaders over the restrictions imposed by the system.

We might be tempted to accuse the Orthodox in the Soviet era of being ethically weak and of believing “the ends justifying the means.” Their actions can be seen as a purposeful bending of the rules to accommodate individual or group aims. John Meyer and Brian Rowan maintain that such patterns of behavior are a standard method for resolving the conflicts and inconsistencies that arise in all institutionalized organizations. All organizations struggle over generalized constitutive rules versus efficiency in daily activities, and society in actuality values an organization’s ability to handle the consequences of that struggle internally. Avoidance, discretion, and overlooking contradictions do not produce anarchy. Instead, they enhance confidence and legitimacy as differences are worked out “backstage.”

The scarcity of Orthodox dissidents in the late Soviet period combined with the open antipathy by believers toward those who challenged the system can be seen as evidence that this sociological interpretation applies. The majority of believers saw themselves as both Soviet and Orthodox; therefore, they could not and did not support “malcontents” who only increased the level of cognitive dissonance in this self-perception without offering methods for coping with the contradictions inherent in Soviet social institutions.

27 Meyer and Rowan, “Institutionalized Organizations,” 56-60.
Summarizing this twenty-five year period in terms of institutions and legitimacy, one can say that the Russian Orthodox Church as an organization and the majority of its adherents as individual actors emphasized regulatory aspects more than normative ones. Maintaining legal status, however precarious, took precedence over challenging the morality of Soviet social rules. The reasons behind this choice are, in retrospect, understandable and can be linked to the cultural aspect of legitimacy. Orthodox believers, both clergy and laity, for the most part sought to fit into Soviet society. Yet, they were social actors following a script that expressly denied any social meaning to religious faith while implicitly preserving a culture with inextricable roots in Orthodoxy. Reconciling that contradiction – playing one's role in the Soviet social drama – led many to act in ways that foreigners and dissidents viewed as an abandonment of traditional Orthodox behavioral norms.

New struggle for legitimacy in post-Communist Russia

The current cultural wars among Russian religious groups and even within the Orthodox Church itself reflect a new social setting for religion in Russia. The rules have changed since the collapse of the Soviet Union, and Russian institutions have been forced to adapt as the cultural environment has shifted. Scott maintains that the whole world is moving toward a single dominant universal culture based on Western ideas of progress and justice. The current religious unrest arises from the resistance of traditional Russian culture to those Western ideas.

Not surprisingly, the momentous political changes in Russia since 1991 have influenced religious practice. Soviet-era legal restrictions have evaporated, so Orthodox believers can openly engage in activities that were formerly forbidden and therefore conducted in private. The church has regained thousands of buildings across Russia – buildings that were taken away by
the Soviet government. Repairing and restoring those buildings is a great financial burden for the organized church and individual believers. Some money for repairs and restoration is coming from “New Russians” with shady reputations and unique conditions on their contributions. Religion has become public once again in post-communist Russia, but Orthodox attitudes remain largely Soviet. Believers are suspicious of outsiders, while clergy question the intentions of foreigners who express an interest in Orthodox affairs. The church emphasizes its martyrdom under Communism and feels threatened by researchers who note the cooperation between church and state from 1945 to 1991. Still, Orthodoxy has the ability to rally millions of Russians to religious celebrations and events.

Other religious groups are alarmed by the growing influence of the Russian Orthodox Church headed by the Moscow Patriarchate and are questioning that church’s legitimacy. Old Believer communities are fighting in the arena of legal institutions by opposing the 1997 law on procedures for registering congregations. In October 1997, the leading Old Believer council adopted a resolution of profound regret over the law, saying that it complicates relations both between church and state and among religious confessions. Writing in Nezavisimaia gazeta – religiia on May 20, 1998, A. Iu. Riabtsev accuses the Russian government of having followed “a revolutionary path” by adopting the law over the objections of Old Believers – objections, he notes that were completely ignored by the government and the media.29 The heart of his argument is that Russian legislators did not follow the example of other countries where “legislation on religious cults . . . has been produced over a long period of time, with great efforts to take into account often mutually exclusive interests, and been passed by inserting many

29 Riabtsev's article (“God posli zakona”) and its translation into English can be found at the very useful Internet site maintained by Professor Paul Steeves of Stetson University (http://www.stetson.edu/~psteeves). Translations in this paper of articles from the contemporary Russian press draw in part from postings on this Web site.
amendments into existing laws and other legal acts.” Instead, the Duma took a revolutionary
tack by completely abandoning the 1990 law in favor of the innovative 1997 one.

In support of his argument, Riabtsev gives specific Old Believer objections to the new
law. First, he says, “it expresses the interests of the Moscow patriarchate and, in our opinion, not
even the whole Russian Orthodox Church but only its present leadership.” By categorizing
religious groups, the law serves mainly to protect the rights of the hierarchy connected with the
patriarchate. As a result, “the Moscow patriarchate has finally been transformed from a religious
organization into a religio-political organization, that is, it has virtually returned to the
prerevolutionary situation of the Most Holy Synod.” This stands in contrast with the Old
Believer position of keeping their church separate from politics. His argument on this point is
not based on “democracy” and “human rights”:

Because of the sinfulness and imperfection of this world any state is forced to take
actions that are incompatible with Christianity. If in doing so it portrays itself as a
bulwark of Orthodoxy, then the volume of lies, sanctimony, and hypocrisy in
politics with grow apace, but the power of the state and its authority will be
undermined. Precisely so a church that is close to the state and is forced to bless
and justify its nefarious actions will lose much in the eyes of its adherents.

Riabtsev then attacks the law’s provisions that say, “No one . . . may be forced . . . not to
participate in worship services, or other religious rituals and ceremonies, or in the activity of
religious associations.” He sees this as a legal prohibition against excluding “anyone from a
religious organization by any means whatever” or establishing special rules of conduct in
worship. In effect, he claims, “a legal basis has been created for ecumenical prayers, for no one,
even the infidel, may be prohibited from praying along with the Orthodox in Orthodox churches,
by whatever means the infidel may want, so long as the means not offend too strongly against
public order.”
The article concludes on a thankful note, stating that Old Believers did not at least lose their property rights under the law. “Legislators refused to put into the law a provision that the property transferred to religious associations be certified as to its confessional provenance. Old Believer icons, bells, and other liturgical objects henceforth would have been transferred to the Russian Orthodox Church exclusively were it not for good people in the criminal justice system, ministry of culture, and customs who recently have begun to cooperate actively with the Old Believer metropolia.” Still, the Moscow patriarchate in March tried to take possession of 563 liturgical items from the state, seventy-one of which were retrieved by Old Believers at the last minute.

Old Believers, then, object to the growing legal legitimacy of the patriarchal church. They argue that new laws set up legal structures that give that church a dominant position and permit state interference in the internal affairs of religious organizations. For Old Believers, legitimacy is based primarily on whether an organization is legally established by and acts in accord with the relevant laws and regulations of the Russian state. Normative and cognitive elements are also present when Riabtsev makes negative comments on personal morality and ecumenical relations. The main argument, however, rests on the regulatory elements in the new law. Old Believers in contemporary Russia show little if any interest in uniting with the Moscow patriarchate; maintaining a legal foundation for a separate ecclesiastical structure is naturally important for their institutional legitimacy.

Other Orthodox groups challenge the Moscow patriarchate by using normative arguments. The split between the patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad (RPTsZ) arose in the 1920s when Orthodox émigrés who had fled during the revolution and civil war set up their own ecclesiastical administration. The émigré community felt that the Orthodox
hierarchy in Russia went too far in accommodating Soviet power, in particular after the 1927 statement of loyalty issued by Metropolitan Sergii (Starogorodskii), deputy *locum tenens* to the patriarchal throne. RPTsZ influence in Russia is now exerted through a network of parishes not under patriarchal jurisdiction. Some of these have formed a new ecclesiastical structure called the Russian Orthodox Free Church.

These Orthodox believers highlight the moral lapses of the Moscow patriarchate that led to ecclesiastical schism. An open letter by RPTsZ Bishop Evtikhii states the issues clearly. He blames the Russian Orthodox Church for the split due to its acceptance of Soviet norms as seen in the 1927 declaration of loyalty, its participation in the ecumenical movement, and its refusal to recognize certain victims of Soviet repression, including Nicholas II and his family, as “the Holy New Martyrs of Russia.” The most damning charge, however, is the following:

The overwhelming number of present hierarchs of the Moscow patriarchate were ordained to the rank of bishop only with the permission, and often upon the direct order of the KGB and the Ministry of Religious and Atheist Affairs under the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, that is, at the discretion of profoundly civilian and godless powers, which places such bishops outside of the Church, and the Moscow Patriarchate itself in a very questionable canonical position. Great effort is required to find even some foundation upon which to consider the MP even nominally possessing Grace, even if only for the sake of the many lay church people ignorant of the fact that the bishops lead them away from the Grace of God.

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According to Bishop Evtikhii, patriarchal church leaders further show their lack of grace by accumulating wealth and engaging in commerce. The last charge apparently refers to news reports on the church’s involvement in the importing and sale of foreign tobacco products.

Ironically, normative legitimacy provided the first opening for Orthodox Church renewal at the end of Soviet period. In the late 1980s Mikhail Gorbachev labeled believers as potential sources for “ethics and morals, a domain where universal norms and actions are so helpful in our common cause.”31 Church leaders supported the politics of a new moral order in Russia while believers worked for the return and renovation of parish church buildings that had been confiscated during the Soviet waves of anti-religious activity. As an institutional organization, Russian Orthodoxy links the restoration of major “cultural monuments” with the moral revitalization of the country. Therefore, the patriarchate supported the rebuilding of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow, the new Kazan Cathedral in Red Square, and the refurbished Cathedral of St. Sophia in Novgorod. In the summer of 1995, Archbishop Lev of Novgorod and Pskov told the author of this paper that “enemies of the church” threatened his diocese’s hold on St. Sophia’s and wished to preserve it as merely a museum. From his perspective, this should not happen because St. Sophia’s could be the center for the moral regeneration of the whole province.

A significant aspect, then, of the debate between the patriarchal and émigré churches revolves around the basis of normative legitimacy. Neither side is looking at “mere” legal requirements. Instead, they disagree on moral standards for Orthodox clergy. The relative disinterest in the behavior of laity by both sides reflects a shared organizational perspective in

which priests and bishops are understood to have a professional duty to supply moral guidance. The patriarchal church sees itself as the foundation for Russia’s moral renewal. Orthodox émigrés reject this claim but do not accept the view of Old Believers that religious toleration should be the legal norm. Instead, the RPTsZ says the Russian Orthodox Church under patriarchal leadership is morally corrupt and, therefore, does not deserve preferential treatment as the representative of true Orthodoxy.32

Disagreements between the patriarchal church and other Orthodox organizations are relatively civil when compared with those within the Russian Orthodox Church. Internally, some are calling on the church to modernize while others seek a recovery of the path the church was pursuing before the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. Ordinary believers seek a greater voice in Orthodox decision-making processes and demand greater accountability of church leaders to society as a whole. Some Orthodox want their church to take more risks and have a greater public presence, in imitation of Western and Eastern religious groups evident on every street corner. Others desire changes in liturgical practice, such as the use of vernacular Russian in services and in a new translation of the Bible. Parish priests are feuding with new monastics over the role of each in giving advice to those seeking spiritual guidance.33 A relative few advocate careful study of Orthodox leaders’ activities during the Soviet era.

Russian Orthodox Church leaders have accepted the challenge to restructure society. They struggle to find an institutional basis for this process that will allow the church to retain societal support. They seek to rebuild Russian culture by purging it of Soviet elements and rejecting the encroaching rules of the West. They do not trust either the reformed communists or

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new Russian democrats. The former are seen as closet enemies who will strike against the
church covertly, as in the still unsolved murder of Fr. Alexander Men’. The latter are associated
with the religious cultural imperialism of Western evangelicals, especially Americans, who have
invaded the country. Representative of this group is Gleb Yakunin, a politician and defrocked
priest who labels the current Moscow patriarchate “more a cast-off of the communist
government of the former Soviet Union than a continuation of the church that existed in Russia
before the 1917 revolution.”

Dissatisfaction with the patriarchal church, despite the dramatic and positive change of its
fortunes in the post-Soviet era, indicates a profound conflict at the foundations of Russia’s
cultural life. That conflict includes a deep concern over the organization’s cognitive legitimacy,
i.e., over the search for “a common frame or reference or definition of the situation . . . that
comes from cognitive consistency.” The patriarchal church wants its cultural leadership in
Russian society to be taken for granted and for Russian social roles to be constructed within the
framework of Orthodox cultural rules. Opposition to these desires arises outside the patriarchal
church, from religious and non-religious groups that offer a different basis for the social
construction of reality. Opposition also is found within the church, from Orthodox believers
whose interpretation of their social roles differs from the script embraced by the mainstream
Orthodox population.

Metropolitan Kirill, head of the Department of External Church Relations of the Moscow
patriarchate, reasons along these lines in an article that appeared in Trud on May 16, 1998. He
indicates that the pressing question after the end of Soviet religious repression is whether the
Russian church will “be able to formulate its own proper response to the needs of the time and

35 Scott, Institutions and Organizations, 47.
society, a response which people of the postcommunist period expect from a Christian society?”

Kirill’s response to that question is: “Great efforts were required to integrate the church into the life of contemporary society and to establish mutual understanding and dialogue with it and to work out the proper social, charitable, and educational programs and move on to their implementation.” The metropolitan then adds that this is not a political matter:

In today’s Russia it is not appropriate to talk about any privileged, and certainly not about a state position of Orthodoxy. The church is not aspiring to the prerogatives of state power, because this would contradict not only its own position but the constitution of the country. Besides, the church itself has renounced any kind of participation in the political process and in power . . . [I]f the church contracts a political marriage with some regime it faces the likelihood of soon becoming a widow.

We are profoundly convinced that the church can preserve its own identity and fidelity to its original intention only when it exists outside of political aspirations and interests without being seduced by any regime or movement that is alien to itself.

Kirill then pushes to the heart of his argument for the re-establishment of Orthodoxy as the center of Russian culture by pointing out that “approximately 80 percent of the population of the country is baptized in the Orthodox faith. Regardless of how often they attend church or how active they are as parishioners, these people are Orthodox by definition.” He recalls Orthodoxy’s role in the formation of the Russian state a millennium ago and writes that “[Orthodoxy’s] vital forces pervade the greatest products of the national culture, and in its bosom were formed the national ideal and even the language which we now speak.” Finally, the bishop notes:

Sometimes we are asked how it could happen that the Orthodox faith remained whole under the conditions of totalitarian control of the individual and society in the Soviet Union and the spreading of state atheism from generation to generation by force . . . This is our answer. When the church was deprived of the possibility of preaching, the main vehicle of its values and ideals remained the Russian culture – literature, music, architecture, and painting. Because all of our cultural heritage is profoundly penetrated with the ideals of Christianity and the ideals of the Orthodox church. And the bolsheviks were fully aware of this. That is why they fought not only with the church but also with the culture. It was no accident
that they bombed churches and monasteries and destroyed icons. These were not acts of spontaneous vandalism nor some mindless “kulturkampf,” but a struggle with Orthodoxy which was embedded in the national cultural heritage.

In the minds of supporters of the patriarchal church, institutional legitimacy will come from the adoption of a common framework for understanding Orthodoxy’s place in the renaissance and continued development of Russian culture. Rejecting charges that their church has become too closely tied to the state, they define the situation in terms of a need for Russia to regain its cultural roots. They act as champions for recovering the social script that was lost in the Soviet attempt to rewrite the rules for Russian society. The degree to which their framework and situational definition are accepted by Russian society as a whole will determine the level of cognitive legitimacy the patriarchal church will have in post-communist Russian culture.

For over fifty years, Russian Orthodox believers have struggled to regain, maintain or enhance the legitimacy of their church in Russian society. Shifting political currents brought social and cultural changes that frequently weakened the position of religious organizations. Russian believers responded by pursuing courses of action to counteract intolerance directed against them. In the face of oppression, they generally did not withdraw, even when confronted by militant Soviet atheism. Instead, they sought strategies for action that reflected traditional institutions of their church and society’s rules for good citizenship. Despite the conflict that often existed between these two sets of institutional expectations, supporters of the Russian Orthodox Church displayed a remarkable ability at reconciling the conflicts. Through that reconciliation, believers strengthened their church’s claims for regulative, normative and cognitive legitimacy.