

# **CONFESSION IN MODERN RUSSIAN CULTURE**

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TITLE VIII PROGRAM

## **Project Information\***

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**Council Grant Number:**            **820-13g**  
**Date:**                                    **June 26<sup>th</sup>, 2007**

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\* The work leading to this report was supported in part by contract or grant funds provided by the National Council for Eurasian and East European Research, funds which were made available by the U.S. Department of State under Title VIII (The Soviet-East European Research and Training Act of 1983, as amended). The analysis and interpretations contained herein are those of the author.

## **Executive Summary**

Religion and its attendant rituals have characterized much of Russian public and private life. Of all the forms religious practice has assumed, few embody the elements of psychology, conscience, and faith more directly than the sacrament that links the individual to the divine in a rare act of choice—confession. Indeed, from the seventeenth century onwards, confession in Russia has been a staple of autobiography, a literary genre, a political tool, even transformed nearly beyond recognition in the television talk show. Legal codes, theological treatises, artistic representations, and written confessions of the past, along with present-day innovations in practice, demonstrate the unique and persistent importance of confession in modern Russian religious and political culture.

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The choice of this ritual is crucial. Fewer comparisons between the religious cultures of the Western and Orthodox Christian worlds are as instructive as those regarding confession. Nowhere, as Thomas Tentler noted, are the traits peculiar to the Latin Church's cultural development—hierarchical control, conciliar legislation, university professors' theorizing, a huge practical literature—more evident than in sacramental confession and communion.<sup>1</sup> Rome legislated the universal obligation to confess and communicate yearly by the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215. Ever after, historians have used Easter confession and communion statistics in Catholic countries as indicators of political behavior.<sup>2</sup> The conflict over whether Christ was really present in communion and over whether laity might be allowed to receive the sacrament in the form of both wine and bread stood at the center of the Reformation.

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<sup>1</sup>Thomas Tentler, "A View from the West," in Valerie Kivelson and Robert H. Greene, eds., *Orthodox Russia: Belief and Practice Under the Tsars* (Penn State U. Press, 2003), p. 271.

<sup>2</sup>Through the 1960s, for example, French districts with the highest proportion of citizens going to communion at Easter were most likely to vote conservative (Michel Vovelle, *Ideologies et mentalités* (Paris: Lib. Francois Maspero, 1982), pp. 240-244.

Russia, and the Orthodox world generally, presents a telling contrast. Mandatory confession appears astonishingly late. For hundreds of years, from the sixth to the tenth centuries, nowhere in Orthodox canon law or Byzantine secular law do we see the notion that confession is the only or the exclusive means for forgiveness of sins.<sup>3</sup> In Russia, the requirement to confess and communicate during Lent was not introduced until the Great Council of 1666.<sup>4</sup>

The contrast between East and West appears even more stark in the visual language and artifacts of confession and communion. These differences are rooted in both theology and ritual. To take the most obvious, the Orthodox Church does not have the anonymity of the Roman Catholic confessional. Rather than being separated from the priest by a barrier or from the parishioners by a booth, the penitent is often visible and audible not only to the priest, but to the others standing in line awaiting their turn. Alexei Korzhukhin's 1877 painting *Before Confession* illustrates this lack of privacy particularly neatly.<sup>5</sup> The liturgical actions surrounding communion in Orthodox Christianity, by contrast, were all but hidden from view behind the many-tiered icon screen, which seemed to grow an extra tier with every century. (Compare this to the centrally located and open altar-table in Latin Catholicism which can be seen from every side.) The Fourth Lateran Council also spurred a new Roman Catholic devotion to the Blessed Sacrament as such, which expressed itself in innovations including such feasts as Corpus Christi (absent in Orthodoxy), such liturgical actions as the lifting of the Host so high that everyone could see it, and in such liturgical objects as monstrances or communion tokens. Veiled mystery surrounding one sacrament and disconcerting openness surrounding the other are inverted in the

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<sup>3</sup> Aleksandr L. Katanskii, *Dogmaticheskoe uchenie o semi tserkovnykh tainstvakh v tvoreniakh drevneishikh otsev i pisatelei do Origena vključitel'no* (St. Petersburg: tip. F. G. Eleonskago, 1877), pp. 303-312.

<sup>4</sup> See the discussion in S. Smirnov, *Dukhovnyi otets v drevnei vostochnoi tserkvi: istoriia dukhovnichestva na vostoce* (Sergiev Posad, 1906), pp. 51-60.

<sup>5</sup> *Russia! Nine Hundred Years of Masterpieces and Master Collections*, exhibit catalogue (New York: Guggenheim Museum Foundation, 2005), pp. 184-5 (plate 103).

two liturgical traditions.<sup>6</sup> It is thus not surprising that both most art historians and cultural historians of Russia have ignored these rites, concentrating instead on more accessible (and visible) icons, religious processions, and the veneration of saints.

But this seeming neglect does not mean that confession was not vital in the eyes of either state or church authorities. It simply confirms those paradoxical features that have characterized confessional practice in modern Russia. Legislation on mandatory confession and communion, for example, only appeared in the middle of the seventeenth century and grew exponentially in the eighteenth century—the one usually associated with Peter I’s and Catherine II’s attempts at secularization. But there is some logic here. The religious schism known as Old Belief exploded only in the second half of the seventeenth century and continued to plague both church and state, with dissenters regarding the ruler as the antichrist and refusing forms of state service. One obvious way for the Orthodox authorities to smoke out suspected schismatics was to watch whether they went to confession and communion—and not such other sacraments as baptism, marriage, or burial.<sup>7</sup> Compared to those rite-of-passage moments, confession was intimate, personal, and freely chosen—or rejected. Thus confession became both legal evidence and part of one’s deepest identity.

This simultaneity of public and private that would henceforth characterize Russian religious and political culture prompted a mass of legislation. Even before the establishment of the Holy Synod, a government ukase of 1716 called for ‘every person of every rank to go to confession every year.’<sup>8</sup> Parish priests were now required to keep lists of parishioners’

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<sup>6</sup> On the other hand, the English rood-screen provides an interesting combination of the two approaches. See Eamon Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. 40, 110-113, 157-160.

<sup>7</sup> Greek Catholics, or Uniates, shared the Old Believer approach of using the Orthodox church only for rite of passage sacraments, drawing the line at confession and communion. See GARF, f. 109, III/I, op. 33 (1858), d. 153.

<sup>8</sup> *Polnoe Sobranie Postanovlenii i Rasporiazhenii po Vedomosti Pravoslavnago Ispovedaniia* (St. Petersburg, 1879-1915), t. I, #312, pt. 15, p. 367.

participation; those who shirked faced disciplinary action.<sup>9</sup> People who did not confess were required to either pay a fine or spend time doing public penance in a monastery or both.<sup>10</sup> Mayors and other civic officials could be chosen only from those who had gone to confession; anyone who could not prove he had gone was to be excluded. People who had not gone to confession could be deprived of the right to testify in court.<sup>11</sup> All in all, before the 1905 reforms that marked the beginning of separation of church and state in the Russian empire, policies concerning confession were a curious combination of shared clerical and governmental responsibility, with both sides encouraging, but neither side quite able to make someone unwilling go.

Perhaps the most emblematic aspect of this tension between church and state is that of the seal of the confessional. Orthodox canon law is unambiguous on this point. Until Peter I's Spiritual Reglament, both religious and secular laws recognized that a priest could not be called upon to reveal anything he had learned at confession. If a priest did reveal what he had heard, he had committed not only a sinful, but a criminal violation of his obligations.<sup>12</sup>

But Peter I's legislation changed this principle, requiring priests who learned of potential treason or *lèse majesté* at confession and failed to dissuade penitents from their nefarious aims to deny absolution and report the plot to relevant authorities.<sup>13</sup> Peter had a particular interest in confession as a tool of surveillance, of course: his own son's treasonous intent had surfaced precisely in his letters to his father confessor.<sup>14</sup> On the surface of it, there would seem to be little better evidence of what later critics would call caesaro-papism, or the state's intruding in the

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<sup>9</sup> See the stern instructions to the Holy Synod of Ieremiia, Bishop of Nizhnii Novgorod and Arzamas, in RGIA, f. 796, op. 137, d. 1013, ll. 1-27ob (1856).

<sup>10</sup> See the discussion in Gregory L. Freeze, "The Wages of Sin: the Decline of Public Penance in Imperial Russia," in Stephen K. Batalden, ed., *Seeking God: The Recovery of Religious Identity in Orthodox Russia, Ukraine, and Georgia* (De Kalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 1993), pp. 53-82.

<sup>11</sup> 1718 decree in *Polnoe sobranie zakonov rossiiskoi imperii* (St. Petersburg, 1830-1916), t. VI, #3854; 1745 decree in PSZ, t. XII, #9237.

<sup>12</sup> See the Patriarchal ukase of June 21, 1680, in *Razboinichnyi prikaz*, I, PSZ, t. II, #827. See also the historical survey and comments of Senator Tagantsev to Anatolii Koni in GARF, f. 564, op. 1, d. 641, l. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Pribavlenie k Dukhovnomu Reglamentu, PSZ, t. 6, #4022, May, 1722.

<sup>14</sup> RGADA, f. 6, op. 1, d. 54, ll. 1-11ob (1718).

sphere of strictly church affairs. From this key act of clerical allowing the tsars into their sacred space, so the argument goes, it is but a quick and slippery slope to the sell-out of Orthodox clergy to the communist state (with Roman Catholic clergy in communist countries a flattering contrast).<sup>15</sup>

Because of this legitimized violation of confessional secrecy, critics in Russia attacked confession primarily on political grounds (as opposed to the moral objections and sexual scandals connected to confession that intellectuals in Catholic countries derided).<sup>16</sup> The politicization of Russian confession extended into the Soviet period, in both a political and a narrowly religious sense. Igal Halfin, for example, has argued that ritualized confession borrowed from Orthodoxy became a key part of Bolshevik discourse.<sup>17</sup> But approaches to sacrament of confession itself reflected the change in regime from that of an Orthodox tsar to one of godless Bolsheviks. In the 1920s, Orthodox priests decided that, while there might possibly have been some justification for reporting treason to a divinely-anointed tsar, there was no such justification for doing the same for the communists. They could pay for this with their lives. Father Dimitrii Flerin, who was sent to Solovki in 1923 for refusing to divulge the contents of his parishioners' confessions, and who died there, is only one example.<sup>18</sup> The most recent such example of compromised confessions, and ensuing media controversy, was the Yukos affair: the priest who confessed Aleksei Pichugin, one of the defendants, was called in for questioning to see if he had learned anything relevant.<sup>19</sup>

There is only one problem with this neat model of the church as handmaiden of the state,

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<sup>15</sup> For one example of this oft-repeated argument, see Gilles Kepel, *The Revenge of God: The Resurgence of Islam, Christianity, and Judaism in the Modern World* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), pp. 47-62.

<sup>16</sup> Stephen Haliczer, *Sexuality in the Confessional: A Sacrament Profaned* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>17</sup> Igal Halfin, *From Darkness to Light: Class, Consciousness, and Salvation in Revolutionary Russia* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000).

<sup>18</sup> Dmitrii Flerin, exhibit in Solovki Museum on GULag history, viewed in July 2005.

<sup>19</sup> Semen Novoprudskii, "Khristos i Femida," *Izvestiia*, October 22, 2003, #194 (26511), p. 2.



and the state's intruding upon that most sacred of secrets as the most damning example. And that is that over the entire imperial period we can hardly find a single case when a priest actually turned someone in. The only two cases that came up soon after the Spiritual Regulation legislation are telling. After detailed canonical debates on the penalties for breaking the confessional seal, one eighteenth-century priest who had done so was executed. The other was defrocked, then had his nostrils slit, and was sent to Siberia for permanent hard labor.<sup>20</sup> In the eighteenth century, confession was considered admissible evidence only when a deathbed confession appeared to exonerate someone previously charged (although there, too, the penalties for breaking the confessional seal could deter priests).<sup>21</sup>

In the nineteenth century, the possible use of sacramental confession for legal evidence only came up in criminal cases, usually involving murder. People who claimed that they were unjustly being tried for murder asked that the priest who had confessed the person they were sure had committed the murder to testify. In every case the result was the same. The local court asked the bishop, who thought not, but turned the matter over to the Holy Synod. The Synod stuck to the letter of the law. The seal could be broken only if the matter concerned directly the security of the ruler and the country, and then and only then if the confessor had not been dissuaded from his intent (and thus the confession had not been technically complete). More to the point, the Synod noted that breaking the secrecy was inadvisable on every ground. For one thing, as a matter of legal testimony, even a priest's word was just the word of one man and equivalent to testimony given under oath. In itself, it could not decide a case one way or another. For another, once a prisoner's confession were used as evidence, future defendants might well conceal their criminal deeds at confession to the detriment and possible perdition of their souls, and the court would reach false conclusions on the basis of false testimony.<sup>22</sup> It seems safe to

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<sup>20</sup>RGIA, f. 796, op. 15, d. 144 (1734), and RGIA, f. 796, op. 23, d. 366, l. 83 (1742).

<sup>21</sup> See the 1783 case described in TsDIAK, f. 990, op. 1, d. 1661, ll. 4-12ob.

<sup>22</sup>See the cases in RGIA, f. 796, op. 131, d. 1389, ll. 1-6, and RGIA, f. 796, op. 132, d. 2155, ll. 1-4 (1849 and 1850, respectively).

say, then, that although Peter I's Spiritual Regulation compromised the seal of the confession in theory, in most cases the Russian Orthodox Church did not compromise it in practice.

Nevertheless, confession in imperial Russia remained vital as a political tool in both high-profile legal cases and in regions of religious diversity. As in the days when Late Antique Roman emperors went after Christian soldiers more than Christians from other social groups, so the Russian imperial government was most interested in their own military's possible treason, particularly given the eighteenth century's propensity for coups in which the imperial guards brought unexpected candidates to the throne. No ruler could feel entirely secure. Thus in 1752, the soldier Ivan Anikiev was sentenced for disclosing at confession his 'seditious sentiments concerning religion and the empress Elizabeth.'<sup>23</sup> Military men suspected of Old Belief, and thus political unreliability, were identified mostly by their refusal to go to confession.<sup>24</sup>

And yet this did not automatically undermine the trust soldiers might place in the sacrament. Despite knowing that what they said at confession might be used against them, even educated and high-ranking officers do not appear to have regarded the sacrament as a mere, or possibly compromised, formality. Although the government might blur the line, they themselves distinguished between a political confession and religious one. Thus, while Nicholas I showed a keen interest in the confessions and statements of the officers involved in the 1825 Decembrist rebellion, several of those officers still made a point of requesting they be allowed to confess separately to a priest so that they could go to communion at Easter. Those confessions never became part of the public record.<sup>25</sup>

Perhaps the most sensational nineteenth-century case turning on military men's confession and penance was the fallout from the duel in which Mikhail Lermontov, the celebrated poet, met his end at the hands of retired Major Martynov. The Minister of War

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<sup>23</sup> RGADA, f. 7, op.1, d. 1509 (1752), ll. 1-3.

<sup>24</sup> See a 1782 case in RGADA, f. 7, op. 2, d. 2665, ll. 1-12.

<sup>25</sup>They included, among others, Davydov, Trubetskoi, Obolenskii, and Ryleev. See the Decembrist case file in GARF, f. 48, op. 1, d. 305, ll. 119-130a.

indicated that Martynov should be incarcerated for three months and assigned public church penance. Almost immediately after Martynov's arrest, Dmitrii Bibikov, the head of the Kiev fortress where Martynov was incarcerated, went over the records and found them confusing. It was not clear just who had authorized the church penance. When Bibikov queried Jeremiah, the Metropolitan of Kiev, it emerged that the instructions had not come from any cleric, but from Nicholas I himself, who wanted to make an example of the poet's killer. But, strictly speaking, he had overstepped his bounds. Even a divinely anointed ruler, and even one as autocratic as Nicholas I, was not empowered to act like a bishop. Challenging him, on the other hand, was out of the question. Bibikov hit upon the only way of regularizing the awkward situation: he asked the Kiev Consistory to provide the canonical justification for, and proper religious authorization of, Martynov's church penance.

The Consistory obliged. On the basis of Basil the Great's 43<sup>rd</sup> canon and the 5<sup>th</sup> canon of Gregory of Nyssa, they wrote, Martynov ought to be regarded as a 'voluntary' murderer. Therefore, according to the 22<sup>nd</sup> ruling of the council of Ancyra, he should be sentenced to fifteen years of church penance under the supervision of his spiritual father-confessor.

What followed was nearly five years of petitions in which Martynov, frustrated by the restrictions on free movement placed on him as a result of the penance, lobbied to get his term of penance first reduced from fifteen years to five, then finally to four. Most important, however, are three factors. First, the initial impulse for assigning a strictly religious penance came from the emperor, not the clerical authorities. Second, faced with this decision, the clerical authorities lost no time in providing the religious sanction requested: they could do so because this represented no canonical breach, but indeed a fulfillment of the penalties prescribed by canon law. Finally, and most importantly, Martynov's public penance was not simply a matter of going to confession four times a year, although he did have to do so. Being under church penance, as his example shows, also placed real limitations on one's actions: Martynov could not travel from Kiev to either St. Petersburg or Moscow, or even to tend to family property affairs on their

Voronezh estate after his father's death, without a written letter of release from his confessor every time. Moreover, the confessor's testimony—that Martynov showed true compunction and contrition, that he was taking his penance to heart, that he was no threat to society—was examined seriously by the governors general of every region to which he wished to travel, as it was by church authorities every time Martynov requested a lightening of his term of penance.<sup>26</sup> Thus, even in cases where the emperor appeared to be taking some unauthorized initiative, if his aims happened to coincide with those of bishops who themselves wished canon law to guide civil penalties more directly, they were glad to support him. On the other hand, when the matter concerned breaches of canon law—such as the Spiritual Regulation's apparent undermining of the confessional seal—they resisted passively even if they could not do so openly.

#### *Confession and Class and Nationality Issues*

Over time, it became evident that the requirement of annual confession could have broader ramifications than those envisioned by the framers. While the initial purpose of requiring annual confession was to control and catechize the large and unruly flock, the flock showed itself capable of surprising enterprise. Peasants became adept at using the requirement to go to confession against their landlords. The archives of the Holy Synod are full of cases where serfs complained to priests that work obligations prevented them from the full cycle of penance, confession, and communion known as govenie. One might note here that annual confession-to-communion in Russian practice was not simply a matter of showing up in church on one occasion, but required a preliminary period of preparation involving daily church attendance and fasting for at least one week. In case of dire need, this might be reduced to three days. But in either case this meant anywhere from three days to one week of time away from work. It is not surprising that landlords might resist granting this 'leave.' What is surprising is

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<sup>26</sup>All the information in this case comes from the archives of the Kiev Consistory, in TsDIAK, f. 127, op. 955, d. 33, I st. (1842), ll. 1-63ob.

that peasants, even serfs, felt within their rights to protest this and to expect that the law might be on their side, as indeed it usually was. Similarly, peasants might make a show of resisting going to confession to call attention to other grievances (or, indeed, report those grievances at confession). This suggests that what state and church authorities initially imagined as a way of controlling an unruly population could be used by the same population as a legitimate way of getting time off to attend to their spiritual lives.<sup>27</sup>

The situation was even more charged in the regions of the Russian empire where Orthodox Christians were either an absolute minority, or where they were administered by the non-Orthodox. In the regions of the former Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth, also known as the Pale of Settlement, many Orthodox Christian Ukrainian or Belarusian peasants belonged to either Roman Catholic or Jewish landlords. When they came for their annual confession and communion, they routinely complained to parish priests that they could not fulfill the requisite govenie because the landlord would not give them the time off. The local religious administrations were prepared to make concessions to the landlords, offering to limit the time of preparation to the minimum three days required by church practice, and pointing out that this should not interfere with the work of the estate, as half the serfs could come during the first week of Great Lent, and the remainder during the last week. Nevertheless, Nicholas I's government was more categorical, insisting that peasants of the Russian (rossiiskoe) confession be given every opportunity to meet their religious needs with no hindrance, and prescribing stern penalties for Roman Catholics who might try to interfere. Thus while disputes over confession were primarily class conflicts in areas where both landlords and serfs were Russian and Orthodox, they became issues of state interest when those interfering were of a different nationality or confession.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> RGIA, f. 515, op. 8, d. 396, ll. 207-210, 223-4.

<sup>28</sup> See, for example, the blagochinnyi priest's report from the Umanskoe Religious Administration to the Kievan Consistory in TsDIAK, f. 127, op. 636, d. 88, ll. 1-1ob (1840).

## *After 1988*

Many aspects of confession in Russia today have much in common with past, prerevolutionary, practice. People are still expected to fast before going to confession and communion; they still often schedule those sacraments for the traditional Lenten periods. The Orthodox Church still publishes large-circulation guides to train penitents to confess properly. Nevertheless, three aspects of confession as it is now practiced represent something new. These are written confessions, the practice of spiritual eldership (*dukhovnichestvo* or *starchestvo*), and confession for the sake of confession (without communion as the logical end of the process). The first and the third have been adopted extensively and without little fanfare; the second has emerged as so much of a potential threat that the Moscow Patriarchate officially condemned its abuses in 1998. Here, I will concentrate on the innovative aspects of these three practices and what they tell us about contemporary Russian religious and political culture.

Written confessions were extremely unusual in imperial Russia before and after 1917. It was not only a matter of low literacy rates. According to the standard tableside companion of the Russian priest, the Church hierarchy thought they were acceptable only for literate deaf-mutes. While there are notable exceptions, such as the written confessions sent to St. John of Kronstadt, written confessions were still mostly rejected as being the easy way out—it was one thing to jot down one’s sins in the privacy of one’s room and put them in the mail, and another altogether to utter them face-to-face before a familiar parish priest. The few written confessions that survive from before 1917, then, are anomalies.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> S. V. Bulgakov, *Nastol’naia kniga dlia sviashchenno-tserkovno-sluzhitelei* (Kharkov: tip. Gubernskago pravleniia, 1900), v. 2, pp. 998, 1014, 1036.

The situation has changed sharply after 1988, however. Now, as part of the campaign to re-church the neophyte Orthodox population of Russia, written confessions have been identified as a useful supplement to—though not quite a substitute for—the standard spoken confession. Almost every guide to confession published since 1988 includes a section for writing down one’s sins every day, the idea being that one will bring these notebooks or lists and use them to jog one’s memory. While the published guides warn against a rote recitation, many people are apparently still fearful of leaving something out (and thus, they believe, having to come back before they can go to communion), so they prefer to read the list in its entirety. Most interesting here is that it is not considered acceptable for the penitent to hand the list to the confessor and expect him to read it silently. Even in this written form, the confession is meant to be something uttered and generated by the penitent. And, as with pre-revolutionary deaf-mutes, the penitent expects to see his list destroyed before his eyes or to have it given back to him. Thus, the old liturgical phrase asking God to ‘tear asunder the hand-writing of my sins’ has acquired a new and literal meaning.<sup>30</sup>

This appears to be part of a larger tendency for both laity and clergy to work from a written text. Just as laypeople are encouraged to confess from a set list, so priests (particularly inexperienced ones) after 1988 tend to read sermons from a book rather than delivering their own. These practices are meant to help the laity to focus, and to prevent the priest from saying something incorrect. But they also appear to reflect the new reality of re-schooling and re-churching a largely religiously inexperienced population.

Perhaps one reason why written confessions have attracted little controversy is because their utility is obvious and they do not appear to be doing any damage. The practice of going to

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<sup>30</sup> The reference (*i pregrashenii nashix rukopisaniia razderi*) is to the troparion sung at the sixth hour during Lent.

confession without automatically going afterwards to communion is slightly more suspect. Although priests frown upon the disjunction and try to steer parishioners away from it, confession pursued as an independent activity persists for at least two reasons. First, communion requires the traditional week-long (or three-day) period of fasting and church attendance; confession does not. Therefore one can do it practically any time the mood strikes, without extensive preparation in advance. Second, confession is practically the only opportunity in present-day Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Georgia, to talk to a priest about oneself. After morning liturgy, priests are usually busy with baptisms and burials and such para-liturgical services as blessing new apartments or cars. Confession, on the other hand, all but requires them to hear people out. While these two new aspects of confession have incorporated themselves relatively seamlessly into post-atheistic Russian religiosity, the practice of spiritual eldership, *dukhovnichestvo* or *starchestvo*, has wrought havoc both in people's personal lives and in their relation to the clerical, especially episcopal, hierarchy.

The abuses now associated with 'eldership' are something new. To people living outside of Russia, the practice of spiritual elders is linked to such historically positive examples of sympathetic clairvoyancy and training in the mystical life as Dostoyevsky's Father Zosima, or the historical Optina elders, or St. Paisii Velichkovskii, or St. John of Kronstadt. It is thus difficult to understand how there might possibly be a problem. But after decades of state atheism, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the practice has since mutated into something quite different from what it was at the beginning of the twentieth.

First, there is the matter of numbers and scale. In pre-revolutionary Russia, it was understood that both '*dukhovniki*' and 'elders' were extraordinary. Confessors like the Optina



elders, Bishop Feofan the Recluse, and Bishop Ignatii Brianchianinov attracted attention precisely because there were so few of them. The vast majority of the population contented themselves with routine confessions to a parish priest. Such spectacular exceptions as St. John of Kronstadt were just that. This is not to say that people did not take confession seriously, but simply that they did not expect more from either the sacrament or the confessor than a ‘regular’ priest could provide.

If the pre-revolutionary situation as regards *dukhovniki* was ‘defitsit,’ then in comparison the present is hyper-inflation. Even partly-churched people have not ‘mere’ confessors, but full-fledged spiritual fathers; even Vladimir Putin has his own. Their spiritual obedience to these ‘elders,’ moreover, goes beyond anything dreamed of before communism.

Dmytro Rybakov, a historian based in Kiev, has suggested that the problem lies in the old Soviet hypertrophied sense of the ‘cult of personality’ and a correspondingly atrophied sense of individuality. In the free-market atmosphere of free-for-all, he claims, people are looking for a leader (*vozhd*’), and a spiritual elder appears to be the best available such guide.<sup>31</sup> In other words, it appears that the experience of communism has left Orthodox Christians in post-Soviet space—whether Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, or Georgia—more inclined to put themselves in the hands of their confessors than they have since the middle of the seventeenth century, if indeed they ever did.

But post-atheist seekers did not come to this on their own. Church kiosks from Solovki to Pochaev are filled with booklets called, for example, ‘How to find a *dukhovnik* according to the counsels of elders and holy fathers of the Church’ and ‘The revelation of thoughts to the elder and confession before a *dukhovnik*.’ All bear the key ‘*po blagoslaveniiu*’ (‘with the

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<sup>31</sup> Personal communication, February 20, 2006.

blessing of’) phrase on the reverse of their title-pages. And all contain the message that ‘regular’ confession is necessary and good, but having a true spiritual director—a *dukhovnik*—is even better. Citing abundantly from such classic works of Orthodox mystical theology and asceticism as the *Philokalia* or the *Ladder of Divine Ascent*, they in effect seek to re-create the discipline of monastic obedience in the lay world.<sup>32</sup>

The results are mixed. Even such apparently neutral titles as ‘*Chinoposledovanie ispovedi*’ or ‘The Sacrament of Repentance’ have questions about sins, or lists of sins, so detailed that they boggle the mind. One reads, for example, ‘Spent a lot of time doing unnecessary laundry.’ (That supposed vice, incidentally, prompted the ire of no less an authority than Patriarch Alexii II, who noted with heavy irony that laziness and slovenliness did not *in themselves* mean a Christian way of life, and added that not everyone had the opportunity to buy imported automatic washing machines which might mean less time at the wash-tub.)<sup>33</sup> Another conservative list had people repent of two hundred and ninety-six separate kinds of sin.<sup>34</sup> And at least one over-earnest elder confessed his spiritual children straight from the old Mount Athos ordo, which apparently included the query of whether they had had improper relations with a chicken.<sup>35</sup>

But these illustrations might seem simply anecdotal. More serious, and of particular concern to the church hierarchy, are those cases where the *dukhovnik* extends his sphere above and beyond the call of duty. Some *dukhovniki* demand that couples who have only a civil marriage, but who were never married in church, part ways. Others require that Orthodox

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<sup>32</sup> See, for example, *Ispoved' i sviatoe prichastie: poiasneniia* (Melitopol': izd. otdel monastiria prep. Savvy Osviashchennogo, 2003).

<sup>33</sup> ‘Podlinnyi starets berezhno otноситsia k kazhdomu cheloveku,’ *Tserkov' i vremia*, (#2 (9) 1999, p. 14.

<sup>34</sup> *Posobie i ispovedi v pomoshch kaiushchemusia* (Pochaev: Spaso-Preobrazhenskii Mgarskii Monastyr', 2005), pp. 109-120.

<sup>35</sup> quoted in N. Mitrokhin, *Russkaia pravoslavnaia tserkov'* (Moscow: NLO, 2004), p. 107.

Christians leave spouses who are not Orthodox. Monastic *dukhovniki* forbid their spiritual children to enter into matrimony, insisting that the monastic state is higher. Others do not give their blessing for a spiritual child to marry the person he or she has chosen, insisting that out of obedience they marry someone the *dukhovnik* recommended. Others yet do not bless seeking medical assistance, serving in the army, holding the wrong political opinions, or pursuing secular literature as a profession. It hardly needs to be underscored that counsels of this sort might eventually undermine the good order of civic and political life.

As a result, as of 1998, the Moscow Patriarchate has officially forbidden *dukhovniki* to compel their spiritual children to do any of the following:

- 1) enter the monastic life,
- 2) carry out any sort of ‘church’ obedience,
- 3) make any kind of donations,
- 4) get married,
- 5) divorce or refuse to marry, except in such cases where there were canonical impediments,
- 6) refuse their spouses normal marital relations,
- 7) refuse to serve in the military,
- 8) refuse to take part in elections or other civic responsibilities,
- 9) refuse to seek medical help,
- 10) refuse an education,
- 11) changing jobs or homes.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>‘Podlinnyi starets,’ p. 17. Of course, the issue of spouses (usually wives) steering their spouses away from sexual relations at times other than the traditional fasts when this is expected has a long history in both Eastern and Western Christianity. See Dyan Elliott, *Spiritual Marriage: Sexual Abstinence in Medieval Europe* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).

But the very fact that these limits had to be spelled out, and the fact that in its decree the Synod recognized that it was addressing explicit and numerous complaints by laity, suggests that the problem had reached significant proportions. To be sure, such ‘excesses’ are clearly a function of inexperience and, correspondingly, naive enthusiasm, on the part of both confessors and penitents. Present-day post-Soviet space offers a perfect illustration of what happens when living traditions are not preserved and both sides seek to re-create an ideal Orthodox reality ‘by the book.’ It becomes all the more problematic if one realizes that the books consulted are in most cases reprints of nineteenth-century translations of even earlier works for ascetics, and not more recent or more liberal examples of pastoral guidance. The backlash, both personal and official, against such an excessive interpretation, and the wide publication of well-tempered criticisms and counsels by the late, eternally reasonable, Metropolitan Antony of Sourozh, however, suggest that this is a feature characteristic of a transitional period and that in years to come Russian penitents may ask less both of themselves and their confessors.

The sociologist Nikolai Mitrokhin has another explanation for the new emphasis and dependence on the figure of the confessor. He links the attachment to the *dukhovnik* to apocalyptic and eschatological world-view typical of the neophyte who, he argues, has usually undergone social traumas in the post-Soviet shakeup of previous habits and expectations. The quest for salvation and for an end to this ‘unjust’ life to him are compensations for what the neophyte has lost. In a variant of the old ‘dvoeverie’ paradigm, in which nineteenth-century ethnographers argued that Russian peasants practiced paganism and Christianity at once, Mitrokhin argues that the *dukhovnik* (or *starets*—to him there is no functional difference) represents a parallel, or alternative, church ‘within’ the official Orthodox Church. The ‘*starets*’

phenomenon actually began to spread in the Soviet era further than it had in the past precisely because the elder or eldress was not linked to official Soviet church structures, which significant numbers of people still mistrusted after Metropolitan Sergii (Stragorodskii)'s declaration of loyalty to the Soviet regime in 1927 and the collaboration of the Moscow Patriarchate with Stalin from World War II onwards. If people did trust the average parish priest before 1917, they were far less likely to during the Soviet period, particularly after the official church reached a concordat with the persecuting regime. On the other hand, the impulse to unburden oneself to someone else persisted—hence the urge to seek out ‘unofficial,’ even unordained, men and women one could trust.<sup>37</sup>

It is precisely the neophytes' exaggerated dependence on the unofficial ‘elder’ or ‘eldress’ that undercuts the traditional chain of authority in Orthodoxy. In fact, paradoxically, the beginning of the twenty-first century has seen a revival of the phenomenon characteristic of early Old Belief—the ‘confessional family’ in which individuals are linked by common obedience to the same spiritual leader. Perhaps recalling the damage caused by Avvakum in the seventeenth century, the Moscow Patriarchate recently (2003) published a guide to the more suspect anti-hierarchical groupings within the Orthodox Church: not coincidentally, most of them are led by ‘*startsyy*’ or ‘*staritsy*.’<sup>38</sup>

But here, as with interpreting the Spiritual Regulation of Peter I, one must be wary of making facile judgments and oppositions between ‘official’ and ‘unofficial’ spiritual guides. For many of the current bishops in the Moscow Patriarchate have the same spiritual attachments, and often the same elders, as do their lay flocks. Archimandrites Naum (Baiborodin) and Kirill

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<sup>37</sup> Mitrokhin, *Russkaia Pravoslavnaia Tserkov*, pp. 92-100.

<sup>38</sup> These include the brotherhood of the Tsar-Redeemer, the “Oprichnoe bratstvo sv. Iosifa Volotskago,” the “novye simonovtsy,” the ‘imiabozhniki,’ and others. See *Iskusheniia nashikh dnei. V zashchitu tserkovnogo edinstva* (Moscow: Danilovskii blagovestnik, 2003).

(Pavlov) of the Trinity-Sergius Lavra are among the best-known ‘elders’ who confess hierarchy and laity alike, but there are others. It may be the sharing of trusted spiritual confessors, as well as shared participation in the sacraments, that has allowed the believers of Soviet and post-Soviet Russia to overlook their hierarchy’s collaboration with the atheistic and post-atheistic state.

A final aspect of post-Soviet confessional practice has its roots in the Soviet era—that is, the ‘general confession’ where the priest’s flock comes together to hear a more or less exhaustive confession read over them as a group. A collective absolution then follows. In the Soviet era this was justified both by a desire for privacy (confessional records could be used against one) and by the shortage of clergy. In the first years after 1988, similar arguments applied. The waves of people coming to church overwhelmed the still-low number of clerical cadres and general confessions seemed to be the only way of coping. Now, after nearly twenty years, an equilibrium has been reached, and general confessions appear to be a regular feature chiefly of provincial life, or anywhere there is a shortage of clergy. Where there is enough parish or monastic clergy, general confession has largely died out.

Thus, confession in modern Russia reflects, and helps form, the paradoxes in Russian political and religious culture. From the middle of the seventeenth century onwards, state and church authorities have sought to use the sacramental confession as a means of learning about, teaching, in short controlling the inner lives and public actions of their flocks. Peter I’s initial attempt to get father-confessors to report on their spiritual ‘children’ for the good of the ‘father of the fatherland,’ applied with a renewed burst of energy by Nicholas I, was pushed far further by the communists of the twentieth century. And yet one cannot assume that these actions irrevocably compromised the sacrament of penance in the eyes of believers, or made it somehow

‘inauthentic.’ For, in forms as varied as the ‘skete rule’ of the Old Believers, serfs’ protests against landlords who tried to keep them from the sacrament, or the written confessions penned by nineteenth-century pious women or early-twenty-first century laypeople making their way back to the church of their ancestors, Orthodox Christians in modern Russia have continued to find their own ways of approaching confession, and thus to themselves control, their spiritual lives.