

**THE POLITICS OF RIGHTNESS:
SOCIAL JUSTICE AMONG RUSSIA'S CHRISTIAN
COMMUNITIES**

Melissa L. Caldwell
University of California, Santa Cruz



The National Council for Eurasian and East European Research
University of Washington
Box 353650
Seattle, WA 98195

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Executive Summary

My purpose in this paper is to explore interfaith collaboration among Russia's Christian denominations as congregations work together in pursuit of social welfare and social justice goals. As I will describe more fully below, I am concerned with the ways in which Orthodox, Catholic, and mainline Protestant denominations creatively move beyond their theological and historical differences to forge common practices of social action. These common practices of social action invite us to reconsider not only the nature and place of moral systems in a pluralistic Russian religious society, but also the dimensions of that religious pluralism itself. As will become apparent, these interfaith collaborations produce a form of morality that requires the proper enactment of both praxis and ritual.

Introduction

On December 5, 2008, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia Aleksei II passed away at his residence outside Moscow. The news quickly spread via telephone, text message, the Internet, and e-mail. Within hours, several of Russia's television stations were already broadcasting commentaries and retrospectives of Patriarch Aleksei's life and career. In both public and private conversations, succession seemed to be the issue of paramount importance and rampant speculation, as observers debated who would assume the role of Patriarch and in what direction the new leader would take the Church.

The issue of succession especially concerned Russia's non-Orthodox Christian community, as clergy and parishioners alike wondered about the impact of this transition not only on the status of their own congregations and religious practices, but also on the interfaith partnerships they had forged with one another. Within the Protestant community at the center of my own field site in Moscow, clergy, church staff, and parishioners seemed certain that the next Patriarch would be either of two men who were highly placed clerics and Patriarchate insiders. Although my informants regarded both men as effective and charismatic leaders, they were more concerned with the clerics' personalities and perspectives on Orthodox theology and tradition, including the Church's role as a national institution. While informants viewed one man as progressive, amiable, and supportive of a broader ecumenicalism in Russia, they viewed the other man as somewhat mercurial and aligned with a more conservative, traditionalist vision of Orthodoxy and religious exclusivity.

In January 2009, Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk and Kaliningrad was chosen as the next Patriarch. Accounts of Metropolitan Kirill's selection furthered the uncertainty over the future of the Orthodox Church's attitudes and policies toward non-Orthodox Christian religions. At the

time, while Metropolitan Kirill was described on the one hand as a supporter of religious tolerance, he was also lauded for his dedication to promoting the preservation of Orthodox tradition and heritage in Russia. Religious communities pondered whether these two orientations could work productively together to foster simultaneously the continued revival of the Orthodox Church and a greater ecumenicalism within Russia, or whether this “tolerance” would be reserved for Orthodoxy within Russia and ecumenicalism would be promoted only with denominations outside Russia.

Since the late 1980s in Russia, the field of religion has been transformed both by the expansion of Christianity and by the shifting relationships of cooperation and competition that have emerged among Christian denominations. Most notable in accounts of these changes have been the doctrinal and political issues that have at different moments simultaneously divided and united Christian communities, particularly the complicated relationships of sympathy and hostility, cooperation and competition, that are reported to exist between the Russian Orthodox Church and non-Orthodox Christian denominations (Knox 2005, 2008; Wanner and Steinberg 2008:13-17). Because scholarly and popular accounts of the complicated relations among Christian communities have primarily highlighted antagonistic relations between Orthodox and non-Orthodox communities on the one hand, and among non-Orthodox Christian denominations on the other, little attention has been given to the cooperative efforts that have brought Russia’s religious communities, Orthodox and non-Orthodox alike, into conversation and action around a common set of interests beyond those of theology and ritual. What is particularly noteworthy is the extent to which diverse Christian denominations and communities are forging collaborative relationships to pursue social welfare objectives removed from any particular religious orientation.

My purpose in this paper is to explore interfaith collaboration among Russia's Christian denominations as congregations work together in pursuit of social welfare and social justice goals. As I will describe more fully below, I am concerned with the ways in which Orthodox, Catholic, and mainline Protestant denominations creatively move beyond their theological and historical differences to forge common practices of social action. These common practices of social action invite us to reconsider not only the nature and place of moral systems in a pluralistic Russian religious society, but also the dimensions of that religious pluralism itself. As will become apparent, these interfaith collaborations produce a form of morality that requires the proper enactment of both praxis and ritual.

This interfaith collaboration illuminates a somewhat unfamiliar perspective on the nature of religious life in Russia today. Studies of postsocialist religious life have typically been framed around individual religious traditions, an analytical tendency that highlights and reinforces the idea that religious traditions are set apart by unique beliefs, rituals, and denominational histories and that theological or doctrinal features are the most significant elements of ritual life (e.g., Hann and Goltz, eds., *In Press*; Steinberg and Wanner, eds., 2008; cf. Caldwell 2005).

An alternative strand in accounts of Christian communities in Russia rests on a largely unproblematized dichotomy between Orthodox and non-Orthodox denominations, a move that homogenizes an incredibly diverse set of Christian traditions into a generic category, often presented as "foreign," a gloss for "evangelical," "fundamentalist," and other explicitly proselytizing movements. Thus an unintended result of these orientations is that religious pluralism is frequently presented either in terms of doctrinal or theological distinction and separateness or in terms of religious homogeneity, rather than through accounts that acknowledge religious syncretism or overlap.

In a departure from these particularizing and singularizing narratives of individual religious communities, I am concerned with the ways in which a larger project of Christian religious life emerges and flourishes in the spaces of intersection and negotiation among diverse religious traditions and how members of these communities forge a broader and more flexible notion of Christian practice through their collaboration on social justice projects. The congregations and religious associations that are the focus of this discussion are mainline non-Orthodox Christian groups – Lutheran, Baptist, Anglican, and Catholic, among others – that have forged collaborative partnerships to support ongoing social justice and relief work in Russia. These groups have at times been joined by Orthodox communities as well, although the visible participation of Orthodox clergy and parishioners can be problematic politically in Russia’s religious sphere, an issue that I will discuss below.

This essay draws on long-term ethnographic research among Moscow’s faith-based social services communities. Since 1997, I have been working closely with several Christian congregations based in Moscow and following their worship and social welfare programs (see Caldwell 2004, 2005, 2008, In Press). Reflecting the transnational dimension of religious life in Russia today, particularly among non-Orthodox Christian communities, these worship and social welfare programs draw together a diverse community of clergy, parishioners, recipients, and community activists from Moscow and across the globe. Thus one of the intriguing features of these communities is the demographic, national, and theological diversity represented within their communities. This diversity, in turn, directly complicates the creation and implementation of moral codes as participants in these communities draw on different backgrounds and belief systems to inform their moral practices.

Reconciling Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy in Christian Justice Work

In order to place the religious denominations that I am discussing in proper context, it is important to clarify several points concerning religious life in Russia today. The denominations that I am describing here – Lutheranism, Catholicism, Anglicanism, and other mainline Protestant traditions – occupy an ambiguous position in Russia’s religious hierarchy. Both popular opinion and official legal codification have endowed the Russian Orthodox Church with the formal status of Russia’s “official” national religion (Agadjanian 2001; Dinello 1994; Garrard and Garrard 2008), thereby making the ROC akin to a state church. What provides the Russian Orthodox Church with the most political traction in this sphere are Russian cultural practices that associate ethnicity with religion. Russian Orthodoxy is associated with an ethnic Russianness, whereas Lutheranism is associated with ethnic Germans and Scandinavians, Catholicism with ethnic Poles and increasingly today with Asians, and the other Protestant denominations with other European ethnicities. Consequently, even as non-Orthodox religions have typically been categorized in both local and official practice as “foreign” and are positioned lower on Russia’s religious hierarchy, denominations such as the ones listed above have, in fact, long been part of Russia’s “indigenous” religious landscape – for several centuries in some cases.

Embedded within ongoing debates and contestations about managing Russia’s diverse religious landscape are negotiations over moral systems (Garrard and Garrard 2008; Steinberg and Wanner, eds. 2008). Although religious institutions have never been the sole sources of morality in Russia, especially during the Soviet period when the state promoted its own visions of a secular morality, in the post-Soviet period morality has emerged as an important venue through which religious traditions and religious practitioners can articulate their roles in this new

society and attract followers (e.g., Caldwell In Press; Rogers 2008; Zigon 2008). As religious institutions and traditions assume status as the repositories and conduits of moral sensibilities, practices of theological distinction are being reframed as practices of moral distinction. In other words, individual religious communities are distinguished from one another through the particular moral systems with which each is associated. Conflations of moral particularity and theological particularity occur through assertions by clergy, religious practitioners, and their observers alike (Caldwell 2008; Hann and Goltz, eds., In Press; Mitrokhin 2004; Rogers 2008; Zigon 2008).

Ultimately, what is at stake here is the extent to which any particular religious institution or tradition can lay exclusive claim to a particular moral system. More important than the efforts of religious communities to stake out their claims within a field of moral systems, however, are their efforts to stake a political claim as the most legitimate, perhaps even sole, authority of morality in today's Russia. The Russian Orthodox Church has been particularly active in asserting its moral authority through extensive morality campaigns covering such diverse issues as sexuality, abortion and reproductive politics, family relations, drug and alcohol use, gambling, immigration reform, and national security, among many others. Debates over moral authority also shape efforts by such institutions as the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian state to determine legally and socially the status of the many different religious traditions that exist in the country.

Within the Christian realm alone, Russian Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, Methodist, Baptist, and many other congregations and clergy are engaged in extensive public relations outreach to introduce their specific visions of a moral and good life to potential followers. These efforts to promote religious movements are reflected not just in the increase in churches and

church services but also in the recent surge in religious publishing of Bibles, prayer books, meditation guides, spiritual self-help manuals, and other guides for denominationally or spiritually specific moral living; television and radio programs devoted to instructional conversations about religion; and more informal person-to-person outreach. Such guides are not simply meant to introduce potential followers to a particular religious tradition but rather to provide them with a coherent framework for orienting their beliefs and practices to those religious traditions. Muscovites like individuals in my own field site stated that they found it useful to buy religious tracts and “how-to” books so that they would know how to act and what to believe in particular denominational settings.

Contestations over defining and legitimating particular combinations of religious and moral sensibility associations, coupled with the attendant issues of how individuals align their personal beliefs and actions “correctly” in accordance with theological policy and practice, comprise what I am calling a “politics of rightness.” In other words, practitioners are concerned not simply with fulfilling the conditions of their respective religious traditions, but with fulfilling them properly according to the rules of how that fulfillment should occur.

I use the concept of “rightness” for three reasons. First, I use it as an ethnographic marker, as this is the concept that emerged most frequently in my conversations with Christian social justice workers. A common response to my questions to these individuals about why they do the work they do was the simple statement “It is the right thing to do.”

Second, I am using “rightness” because it redirects our analysis of the values informing social action beyond a dichotomy between doxa and praxis, and between the ethical and the moral, to focus instead on the norms of both doxa and praxis. Jarrett Zigon argues (2007) that the difference between the ethical and the moral is a distinction between doxa and praxis. That is, the

moral refers to repertoires of knowledge that shape actors' beliefs and perspectives. These repertoires are deeply embedded systems of knowledge, whether subconscious or unconscious, and thus not immediately knowable or accessible to actors even as they shape actors' beliefs and actions. The ethical, by contrast, pertains to those moments and processes of awareness and reflection on these repertoires of knowledge and the circumstances in which they are evoked and engaged. In contrast to Zigon's perspective, my argument in this essay employs this distinction between doxa and praxis in order to show how they are both entangled in this politics of rightness, while not separating out one as moral and the other ethical. Rather, they are both parts of the same whole.

Third, and most important, my consideration of "rightness" draws inspiration from James L. Watson's insightful distinction between orthodoxy as a system of "correct belief" and orthopraxy as a system of "correct practice" (Watson 1988). With this distinction, Watson calls attention to the fact that there are coherent and delineated forms and procedures that are inherent in both belief and ritual systems. For religious rituals or beliefs to have meaning and efficacy, followers must adhere to the proper or correct enactment of these forms and procedures. Thus part of my concern in this essay with the "politics of rightness" is how the proper enactment of belief and practice reflects the moral order of Christian social justice work, because social activists are careful to create a common framework of "rightness" underlying their activities and the values they attach to those activities.

The issue of efficacy that Watson raises (1988), and that other theorists of ritual have similarly raised (e.g., Turner 1969), is critical for understanding not just how Christian social justice activities work but also whom they serve. Within anthropological studies of religion, analysts have emphasized the ways in which belief and performance are directed at the self, at a

deity, or at both simultaneously. Fenella Cannell has argued that “personal interiority” is a recurring theme in understandings of Christianity, and more particularly Protestantism, so that the motivation for Christians is a process of self-making as an expression of efforts to imitate God, to become godly (Cannell 2006:20; see also Miller and Yamamori 2007:2). Redemption, salvation, and transcendence are all states oriented to particular relational configurations between the self and a deity.

Curiously, anthropologists and other scholars of religion have not fully considered how orthopraxy and orthodoxy might be directed toward others beyond the self or a deity – most notably other members of society and society itself. This orientation to society confuses conventional distinctions between this-world and other-world religions (e.g., Weber 1946). Although such practices as tithing, alms-giving, and charity may be framed as a means to articulate and attain a presumed relationship between the giver, in this case a religious practitioner, and the deity, those same activities are also directed, whether explicitly or implicitly, to a this-worldly social community of real individuals (Caldwell 2008; Coleman 2006; Parry 1986). Thus social action presents a possibility for a simultaneous orientation to both an other-world and a this-world larger than the Self.¹

The efforts of religious communities and their supporters to help other people thus present a different way of understanding conventional categorical distinctions between worlds and participants. In their work on Pentecostal Christian social justice projects, Miller and Yamamori use the term “Progressive Pentecostalism” to denote these overlaps: “Pentecostalism has often been otherworldly, emphasizing personal salvation to the exclusion of any attempt to transform social reality, whereas the movement we are describing continues to affirm the

¹ See Scott Kenworthy’s discussion (2008) of this for the case of the Russian Orthodox Church.

apocalyptic return of Christ but also believes that Christians are called to be good neighbors, addressing the social needs of people in their community” (Miller and Yamamori 2007:2).²

At the same time, the rules and expectations that may frame and guide the presumed relationship between self and deity may be different from those that frame and guide the presumed relationship between self and fellow person. To put it in concrete terms, while parishioners at one Christian church in Moscow were encouraged to express their spiritual relationship to God through regular tithes to the church, they were encouraged to express their social justice commitment by making those tithes in the form of specific food and other items that could be used in the church’s ministry to the homeless. Parishioners who generously make inappropriate donations present a delicate and profound quandary to clergy who must decide whether to accept a gift that cannot be used or to reject or dispose of it. In the weeks leading up to a special worship service dedicated to the presentation of material goods to the church for subsequent distribution to a local charity, the church’s minister repeatedly warned congregants that if they did not adhere to the restrictions on the types of food items that could be donated (canned goods only), their gifts would be discarded.

Framed within these perspectives, “rightness” can thus be understood as proper adherence to a set of practices and beliefs about social action in order to bring about benefits simultaneously to the self, to others, and to a higher being. In the next section I turn to a discussion of how religious communities collaborate to forge a shared set of social justice orthodoxies and orthopraxies.

² Miller and Yamamori (2007:4) also write that “Progressive Pentecostals...are attempting to build from the ground up an alternative social reality.”

Forging Interfaith Ties and Common Rightness

Over the past five years, Russia's religious communities have quietly launched an explicitly collaborationist approach to charity and social advocacy. Previously, there was something of a specialization of charitable work among congregations. Whereas the Christian Church of Moscow³ specialized in feeding programs, primarily for elderly pensioners and veterans, and, more recently in monitoring race relations and supporting victims of racist violence (Caldwell 2004), the Anglican Church has focused on support for the homeless and drug and alcohol rehabilitation. The Korean Methodist community has actively cared for orphans and the disabled, while the Catholic Church has provided extensive support for refugees and asylum seekers, and the Baptist Federation has worked with ex-prisoners and children, among others. Russian Orthodox churches have supported a broader set of initiatives – feeding programs, elder care, homeless support, and drug and alcohol rehabilitation, to name a few. This diversity seems to reflect both the fact that there are more Orthodox congregations in existence and the fact that the institutional structure of the Orthodox Church has facilitated more diverse activities.

Currently, congregations representing diverse theological orientations are increasingly pursuing cooperative ventures across denominational differences. In some cases, congregations from one denomination support the charitable projects of a congregation from another denomination by providing money, material goods, and volunteers. In other cases, several congregations have joined forces to operate welfare programs together. Clergy, church staff, and lay people meet regularly to share ideas and strategies and to help one another on projects. Local interfaith initiatives are supported at the international level by international and transnational

³ A pseudonym.

ecumenical institutions and funding organizations. The denominational affiliations and histories of these local initiatives are not always matched by the denominational diversity of these ecumenical organizations, such as when the Presbyterian Church supports the Baptist Church with funds and staff expertise and when support from Lutheran World Relief finds its way to individual Catholic congregations.

Through these interactions, a wider community of individuals devoted to relief and social justice concerns has emerged in Russia. This community is both manifested in face-to-face encounters, as clergy, staff, congregants, and other volunteers gather for meetings and work activities, and in virtual encounters as people meet and communicate through Livejournals, blogs, and other Internet networking programs. Young people have been particularly active in using religiously oriented Internet discussions to coordinate spontaneous acts of public service voluntarism akin to “flash mobs.”

Despite the Russian Orthodox Church’s official stance of theological separatism from other Christian denominations, individual Orthodox congregations are very much part of these new interdenominational collaborations. One of the more progressive Orthodox churches in downtown Moscow has long enjoyed close relations with its Protestant counterparts. For many years the Orthodox church sponsored a feeding program that operated in the same space and at the same time as a feeding program sponsored by the Christian Church of Moscow. The two churches ordered the same meals for their clients, and their clients were drawn from the same demographic of elderly and disabled pensioners living in the same neighborhood. The only visible sign that there were two separate programs operating simultaneously in the same place was that staff from the two programs were seated at separate tables. Even the registration cards that clients from the two programs presented to receive their meals were so similar in shape and

style that at first glance it was difficult to notice the difference.

In Moscow, Christian clergy and congregants have actively pursued opportunities to bridge denominational differences in order to create a more unified and cohesive sphere of interfaith social action. In spring 2007 the newly arrived pastor at the Christian Church of Moscow (CCM), set up a series of appointments to meet his counterparts at several other Christian congregations in Moscow. There were several factors motivating the pastor's networking. First, as an American, he had recently arrived in Moscow to begin his new position, and he was interested in understanding the larger religious landscape in Moscow. Second, he had quickly discovered that Moscow lacked the tight community of religious professionals that he had enjoyed in his previous hometown, and he was particularly interested in establishing closer ties with his fellow clergy in the hopes of initiating pulpit exchanges and joint fellowship events with other congregations.

A third factor was that the pastor's congregation, the CCM, had long sponsored several charitable programs in Moscow and was in the planning stages of a new program. Members of the congregation felt strongly that their newest project should be a more ecumenically collaborative venture. At the congregation's urging, the pastor wanted to meet with clergy in other congregations in order to gauge whether they would be interested in joining with the CCM in charitable programs.

By mid-summer, he had met with many of his counterparts throughout Moscow – not just with clergy serving congregations with large non-Russian populations but also Russian clergy serving Russian congregations, notably the Baptist Federation, the Russian Lutheran Church, the Russian Catholic diocese, Russian Korean Methodists, Russian Korean Presbyterians, and Russian Orthodox clergy. He and his colleagues had also already begun visiting one another's

church services in “pulpit exchanges,” and congregations were visiting with one another through shared fellowship activities, including excursions to local monasteries and other tourist sites.

At the same time, these congregations had also begun working closely with one another on charitable projects. In one case, one Protestant church and several Russian Orthodox parishes had joined forces to expand their homeless outreach programs. Formerly, members of the Protestant congregation had donated their time, services, and money to assist in the programs sponsored by several Orthodox churches. One reason for these forms of assistance was that the Protestant church was not able to provide these same services in its own church building because of legal restrictions. Now, however, church members were interested in pursuing possibilities for setting up programs for shelter and medical assistance within their own building. Clergy and members of the Orthodox churches thus began contributing their own expertise and resources to reciprocate and help the Protestant congregation develop these objectives. In several other cases, youth groups from several congregations served as volunteer support staff in the summer camps for underprivileged families operated by another religious community.

Collaborationist ventures such as these require that congregations and religious institutions representing different theological perspectives find common ground in how they structure their programs, determine eligibility for recipients, provide services, the expectations they place on their volunteers, and even how they present service programs to the public. When clergy, staff, and volunteers from different congregations meet to discuss joint activities, conversations typically revolve around how to reconcile their denominational and theological differences in pursuit of a common goal.

An excellent example of how congregations have worked together comes from a charitable initiative launched by the CCM, the Russian Lutheran Church, and the Russian

Catholic community. In summer 2007, representatives from three different communities – the Catholic charity Caritas, the Lutheran Church of Russia, and the Christian Church of Moscow – engaged in a series of meetings to explore opening a joint feeding program to serve single mothers with large families. This was a completely new program for each of the three communities: the CCM specialized in working with the elderly; the Catholic community provided support primarily to low-income families and refugees; and the Lutheran church was most proficient in small-scale parish outreach programs such as work with the homeless and educational support. Together the three communities hoped to mobilize their respective contacts among Moscow’s social workers and welfare officials, local businesspeople, and their volunteer and donor pools.

Over the course of several planning meetings, clergy, staff, and volunteers worked together to blend their communities’ respective strengths. Talking with one another through translation (Russian, German, and English were the three languages at play), the participants discussed how their respective religious communities approached issues such as defining need and deservingness of assistance, personal responsibility, and commitments to help others, both theologically and practically.

In most cases denominational differences arose in the guise of differences in institutional structures and experiences. Participants quickly agreed that they shared similar, if not identical, views on the necessity of helping the less fortunate; such help was seen as an essential part of the spiritual journeys of both individuals and their respective congregations, even as they admitted that their own denominations had different degrees of experience with the practical implementation of such projects. For instance, the CCM was the most experienced congregation in terms of knowing how to procure funding and volunteers for welfare projects, attract and

motivate volunteers, and ensure the long-term oversight and maintenance of active welfare programs. Although Caritas staff had far less experience starting and managing formal welfare programs, including administration and staffing issues, they had established strong working relationships with social workers and other administrators in the city administration, connections that the CCM lacked. Staff from the Lutheran Church, meanwhile, had little experience with both operating welfare programs and working with local administrators, but they did have connections with state-level public officials and politicians and with officials in international religious bodies.

Although the Baptist Federation had been invited to participate, the organization did not play an active role in establishing the project. Senior pastors and the outreach director for the Baptist Federation had each admitted that their community was not yet experienced in social welfare work and so they could not take a leadership role in the initiative, yet they reassured their colleagues that they and their members were committed to the idea of the program and pledged to help in any way they could.

Doctrinal differences rarely emerged during the course of planning meetings except as interesting points of comparison among the denominations represented. These conversations typically entailed comparative parsing out of minute differences in the meanings behind particular words or practices in their respective liturgies and prayers. Throughout the meetings, participants repeatedly reassured one another that these theological differences were so minor as to be inconsequential and thus not an impediment in their larger task of collaboration.

Although every meeting began and ended with a prayer, led by one of the clergy members and with each participant following the prayer in his or her own way – such as crossing himself or herself, invoking Jesus or the Holy Trinity, or using gender-inclusive or gender-

exclusive language in prayers – these performances of denominational difference seemed to be relatively inconsequential to the participants. In fact, the recitation of the “Lord’s Prayer” was conducted in multiple languages and cadences. The prayers become a means for participants to affirm their common practical objectives while recognizing their different religious traditions. On one occasion, a Lutheran minister and the assistant to the Russian Lutheran Bishop suggested that perhaps the social work programs should also include a more explicit mission-oriented approach. His colleagues politely acknowledged this idea but then moved quickly to non-religious themes in their plans, and the issue was dropped. Thus for the most part, the planning meetings between CCM, Lutheran, and Catholic clergy and volunteers focused almost exclusively on the institutional issues at hand – locating a cafeteria to provide the food services, compiling a list of eligible recipients, training volunteers, and ensuring sufficient funding.

The opening festivities for the new feeding program were also an overtly ecumenical affair. Clergy and congregants from the CCM, Lutheran Church, Catholic Church, Episcopal Church, Baptist Federation, among others, attended the opening celebration. Although officials from the Russian Orthodox Patriarchate had been invited, they declined to attend. Although at first glance, this could be interpreted as evidence of the Orthodox Church’s concerns about non-Orthodox Christian congregations, the reason was far more significant.

Unofficially, the Patriarch’s office sent word to the Lutheran Church that they supported the venture but regretted that they could not attend the festivities publicly because of ongoing political problems with members of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad and not because of theological or political differences with members of these non-Orthodox Christian communities. In other words, while the Patriarchate’s position on social justice activity was aligned with that of these particular congregations, the larger political issues surrounding theological differences

prevented the Russian Orthodox Church from demonstrating its support publicly.

The ecumenical diversity displayed by this feeding program plays out in many other interfaith activities across Moscow and Russia more broadly. Catholic-inspired social programs such as the Sant'Egidio street ministry and Sisters of Mercy attract a theologically diverse set of volunteers who either set aside doctrinal differences or find ways to reconcile those differences as they work side by side. Similarly social projects sponsored by individual Methodist and Baptist congregations attract not just people who identify themselves as belonging to many other Christian denominations but also Jews, Muslims, atheists and other non-practicing individuals. Within the field of HIV/AIDS prevention and drug treatment, development programs encourage interfaith collaborations among Orthodox, Christian, and Muslim congregations, even though in some cases these collaborations take place informally and out of public view.

In each of these programs, clergy, staff, volunteers, and recipients alike described their activities in terms of aligning their personal beliefs and practices of social action into a set of tenets based on a common understanding of social justice. Rarely did informants explain their views in terms of religious motivations or theological requirements. Rather, informants consistently framed their perspectives in the languages of socially correct action: “human rights,” “humanitarianism,” “social justice,” “love,” “friendship,” and more simply “the right thing to do.”

This significance of common rightness is illuminated in informants’ responses to my questions as to why they directed their time, labor, and other resources to particular programs. Although factors such as social networks, time constraints, and distance were important considerations in how clergy, staff, and volunteers made decisions about which projects to support and in what ways, these issues seemed in many ways to be secondary to another factor:

the “rightness” of a particular social program.

More precisely, clergy, staff, and volunteers evaluated whether the interests, goals, and methods of social programs not only appealed to their own sense of appropriate social work, but also whether these programs were consistent in how they pursued their objectives. For instance, one of the qualities of the CCM’s food sharing programs that appealed to volunteers was that the community consistently and reliably met its goals. This consistency gave the CCM’s programs an appearance of stability that many volunteers, donors, recipients, and other supporters found reassuring. In turn, that stability imbued the CCM with value as a successful and compelling leader in the field of Russian social justice work.

Attributes of consistency and reliability also informed the social value of other successful interfaith programs. Most notable are the activities of the progressive Orthodox church mentioned previously. This particular congregation had long sponsored a number of social work initiatives, often in partnership with non-Orthodox Christian congregations. Although it was rumored that the congregation had at times been under pressure from the Patriarchate for not adhering to church policy regarding theological interpretation and relationships with non-Orthodox congregations, the church continued its social work in partnership with a broader ecumenical community. The church’s commitment to adhering to its own principles of social action appealed to observers who saw this consistency as evidence of the church’s moral authority. Ultimately, it is the ability and willingness of faith communities and their participants to conform to norms of social action that becomes in some ways more important than theological orientation in how faith communities are evaluated in terms of their value and contributions to Russian society.

In the logic of orthodoxy and orthopraxy proposed by Watson, these faith communities

become meaningful in Russian religious life because they are properly adhering to the rules of doxa and praxis for social action. And by extension, it is this conformity to the norms of social action – “rightness,” in other words – that enables these communities to stake out claims in the field of morality.

Conformity as Moral Authority

The importance of “rightness” for constructions of morality emerges perhaps most strikingly in Russians’ views on social and moral decay in Russia, which appeared regularly in both public discourse and private conversations with informants (see also Zigon 2008). Citing such diverse issues as growing socioeconomic disparities, the increasing plight of lower-income Russians, the intrusion of socially deviant activities such as graffiti and drunkenness into public spaces, piles of trash and other refuse, public discourteousness, environmental degradation, and political and financial malfeasance, Russians have expressed their concerns that the transition from socialism to capitalism has damaged the social and moral fabric of the country (e.g., Caldwell 2004; Ries 2002; Patino 2008; Stephenson 2006). For their part, public institutions such as state agencies and the Russian Orthodox Church have also lamented this perceived social and moral decline through public campaigns to solve such problems as gambling, prostitution, human trafficking, and illegal immigration, among many others.

Discussions about “moral decay” and “moral breakdown” of Russian society are directed at ideas about the disarray and disintegration of the structures and codes of norms in society. In other words, concerns about moral decay are, at heart, concerns about “rightness” as Russians debate the extent to which individuals and institutions conform to or deviate from social norms

of appropriate behavior.⁴

For the specific case of social assistance and social action, Muscovites' concerns with immorality arise when Russians criticize those who are believed to be withholding assistance from family neighbors. In this configuration, immoral individuals are those who violate social norms of mutual assistance and reciprocity by keeping money and other resources for their own purposes rather than sharing with the people presumed to be in their social networks (Caldwell 2004:86-99). In other words, selfishness is immoral because it fails to conform to cultural norms of mutual support. This understanding of immorality as lack of conformity to norms is similarly evident in public attitudes, mostly negative, about New Russians, *biznesmen*, and other political elites who are suspected (or known) to have violated the standards of social and economic propriety. Intriguingly, Russia's mafia is often valorized because it, unlike the state, is believed to provide social order and stability to society (Ries 2002).

Moralizing discourses were evident in the frustrations of Muscovites who criticized state agencies and state workers for being apathetic or even hostile to the needs of the less fortunate, thereby deviating from expectations about compassion and care. Even aid programs themselves risk criticisms for not meeting public expectations about assistance. When I first began working with the CCM's feeding programs in the late 1990s, donors frequently gave the community small food and personal hygiene items (e.g., candy bars, instant soup packets, soap, and toothbrushes, among other things) to distribute to recipients. On some occasions, there were enough donated items for every client to receive more than one; on other occasions, items were limited to one per person. Clients became accustomed to receiving these free items, and on days when supplies were limited, or even worse, were depleted early in the morning, it was not unusual for clients to

⁴ See Svetlana Stephenson's discussion (2006) of Soviet and post-Soviet attitudes about the immorality of homelessness.

become angry and berate staff and volunteers for treating them improperly and unfairly. For their part, clients who manipulated the system to receive more than their “fair share” were similarly accused of impropriety by other clients.

Curiously, Russian Orthodox Churches have been sharply criticized as immoral, and more precisely as corrupt, institutions because of their social action policies. Despite long traditions of charity as an essential mission and responsibility of the Church (see Kenworthy 2008; Lindenmeyr 1993, 1996), practical realities prevent Orthodox churches (like most religious institutions) from providing assistance to every person who requests it. Yet Russians have singled out the Russian Orthodox Church for being an especially immoral and corrupt institution because of the Church’s presumed violation of a sacred trust with the Russian nation (Caldwell In Press). In other words, the Russian Orthodox Church is seen as having violated proper norms of social action, and thus by failing to conform to “rightness.”

Hence it is the ability of institutions and individuals to conform to orthopraxies and orthodoxies of social action that determines whether they are “moral” or “immoral.” And despite these public criticisms of Orthodox churches as failing to conform to cultural norms of social action, Russians by and large see faith communities as the institutions most likely to meet the standards of “rightness.” Interfaith projects seem particularly well-positioned to demonstrate their moral authority because all of their efforts to create truly collaborative partnerships are ultimately oriented at minimizing individual differences in the mission of achieving conformity with a shared set of values and practices about social action. Through careful negotiation of theological and political differences, churches forge a new common ground, a consensus in Habermasian terms (1987) that in turn sets standards to which they can adhere and demonstrate

Homeless people are often officially labeled with moralizing terms such as “parasite” and “criminal” because they are presumed to violate social norms about proper residence and labor patterns.

their moral authority.

Reconsidering Christian Moral Exceptionalism

As a result of these projects of alignment, social justice activities become the arena where Russians look to a set of cultural guidelines and social norms regarding proper actions and beliefs. It is this attention to qualities of correctness, appropriateness, and rightness that is important for understanding the complicated nexus of morality, religion, and spirituality not just in Russia, but also in studies of Christianity and other religious movements more generally.

For the case of religious life in Russia, interfaith social justice projects challenge and complicate more familiar accounts of religious institutions as moral authorities by investigating how these qualities of morality come into being and how authority is achieved. Interfaith communities directly challenge perceptions of Christian moral exceptionalism in which particular denominations or congregations are accorded special legitimacy as sources and arbiters of moral authority, a tendency that is particularly relevant for popular and scholarly attitudes toward Russian Orthodoxy. It is important to note, however that these legitimizing attitudes are not exclusive to Orthodoxy, as is illuminated by ongoing tensions among Russia's religious communities as congregations use moral difference in their competitive efforts to attract members. Morality is very much both an ecumenical phenomenon and a collaboratively constructed venture.

Attention to interfaith social action projects also reveals that Christian communities are not necessarily moral in and of themselves. That is, it is not their status as religious institutions that endow them with the status of moral authorities. The enactment of particular norms through the realm of religious activity may give them greater cultural valence, but their value is not

derived specifically or exclusively from religion. Rather, morality is a state that must be achieved through a process of conformity.

When seen from this perspective, morality is disarticulated from religion. This movement of morality outside the exclusive domain of theology and doctrine thus facilitates ecumenicalism. For the case of the Russian Orthodoxy, the disentangling of theology and morality enables Orthodox churches to resolve the conundrum of Christian exceptionalism: individual churches from diverse denominations can work together for a common project of moral action separately from the issues of faith, belief, ritual, and identity that would otherwise divide them.

Attention to the codes of doxa and praxis for social justice presents an important reminder that the entirety of religious activity encompasses both practical, this-worldly interests and spiritual, other-worldly interests. Fenella Cannell has suggested in her work on Christianity that there is a tension between those theological positions that churches accept as orthodox and those positions that remain unorthodox (Cannell 2006:7).

While Cannell makes an important contribution by complicating understandings of the need for adherence and conformity as the means to empower and enliven theological, liturgical, and doctrinal positions, she overlooks the ways in which more practical, and not necessarily theologically unique or specific, aspects of religious life are embedded within just as significant systems of orthodoxy and orthopraxy. Finally, even as Cannell's call to reconsider "the idea of Christianity as a religion of radical discontinuity" (Cannell 2006:8) critically intervenes in monolithic accounts of a universal Christianity, consideration of the non-theological aspects of religious social action open new interstices and spaces for considering how and where both common Christianities and common moralities might take shape. Interfaith social justice activities remind us that there are always multiple orthodoxies and orthopraxies pertaining to

different registers of religious life at work. And just as rituals do not have meaning and transformative power in and of themselves but only through their proper enactment (Turner 1969), morality acquires power and significance only through its proper enactment.

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