



RUSSIA'S STATE CHURCH

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The recent actions of the indelicately named female punk band “Pussy Riot,” whose members on March 3 entered the Christ the Savior Cathedral in Moscow and sang a song on the altar that included an appeal to the Virgin Mary to “Drive Putin away,” have opened up a major controversy in Russia about the ties between Putin and the Russian Orthodox Church.

The members of the band are still in custody. Three have been charged with hooliganism, a crime that carries a maximum sentence of seven years and, as matters stand, imprisonment for the women is not out of the question.

The actions of Pussy Riot inspired indignation on the part of Church leaders and regime officials. Patriarch Kirill called their action a “mockery of a sacred place.” Sergei Lavrov, the Russian foreign minister, said it was “blasphemy.” The women were described as “satanic devils” and “prostitutes” and there were calls for them to be ripped to pieces on the ancient execution site in Red Square.

What was lost in all this was the identification of the Russian Orthodox Church with the Putin regime. Putin’s inauguration was marked by the ringing of church bells in the Kremlin. Kirill held a special prayer service for his “health” and “success in government,” in the Cathedral of the Assumption in the Kremlin. In the Novodevichy Monastery, the nuns sang psalms round the clock for Putin’s health.

Against this background, the actions of Pussy Riot appear to be directed not against Orthodoxy so much as the political role of the Church. In an open letter to Patriarch Kirill published on the Russian news site, grani.ru, Andrei Bessmertnii-Anzimirov, a layman, pointed out that the actions of Pussy Riot cannot be classified as blasphemy because the women appealed to the Virgin and not to Satan and although their song was unusual, there was nothing about it that was prohibited.

Bessmertnii-Anzimirov said that in the last 20 years, there has been a tendency to treat Orthodoxy not as a religion but as an ideology, the supposed “backbone of Russian culture and statehood.” He cautioned, “When we speak about Orthodoxy as the backbone of the Russian culture and nation, we should always remember who is the backbone of Orthodoxy—about Jesus Christ.” If there is not such a consciousness, he said, Orthodoxy is turned into a “quasi-religion.”

In fact, there is evidence that, in many respects, this is what has taken place. Putin is regularly accompanied by the hierarchs of the Church in religious garb at political events and is shown attending services on all religious holidays. Orthodoxy is the only religion whose services are shown on television. Orthodox chapels have appeared in railroad

stations, in airports, on the territory of military units, and in the departments of the police. The presence of Orthodox priests is common for the “sanctification” of banks, offices, homes and even weapons, such as tanks, military ships and airplanes. A course in “Orthodox Culture” is offered in the schools but no other religion is the subject of such a course.

Orthodoxy, through the agency of thousands of selfless and dedicated local priests, gives to masses of people a sense of social defense and solidarity. It helps to impart a feeling of national identification and connection with traditions, providing a haven from an often cruel existence and offering consolation in the face of sickness and death.

The good works of local priests, however, are not necessarily reflected in the behavior of the church hierarchy which has long been coopted to lend legitimacy to the authoritarian Russian state.

Kirill, who was the Metropolitan of Smolensk, succeeded Alexei II who died in December 2008 after 18 years as head of the Russian Church. According to material from the Soviet archives, Kirill was a KGB agent (as was Alexei). This means he was more than just an informer, of whom there were millions in the Soviet Union. He was an active officer of the organization. Neither Kirill nor Alexei ever acknowledged or apologized for their ties with the security agencies.

As head of the Russian church’s department of foreign church relations, Kirill supported a new Russian ideology based on the denial of human rights. At the tenth meeting of the World Russian People’s Council, an international public organization headed by the Patriarch, in Moscow, April 4, 2006, Kirill said that “faith, morality, sacred places, and homeland” stand no lower than human rights. If these values are in conflict with the realization of human rights, “the society and government and law should harmoniously combine them.” How this could be done was not made clear but, according to the Council, it is impossible to allow a situation in which human rights “threatened the existence of the motherland.”

During the Soviet period, fear was an important factor in the cooption of the Church by the regime. But in the post-Soviet period, the chief motivator may be corruption. After the fall of the Soviet Union, the church received official privileges, including the right to import duty-free alcohol and tobacco.

In its February 15, 2012 issue, Novaya Gazeta published an article about the personal wealth of the Patriarch, which it estimated at \$4 billion. The newspaper referred to the dossier assembled by Sergei Bychkov, a journalist who has written extensively about Kirill’s involvement with the tobacco business. Not one of Bychkov’s more than a dozen articles has been refuted and Kirill himself acknowledged the veracity of many of the facts collected by Bychkov.

In 1993, a financial group, “Nika,” was created with the participation of the Moscow Patriarchy. Its vice president became the archpriest Vladimir Veriga, at the time the commercial director of the Department of External Church Ties (DECT), which was run by Metropolitan Kirill. After a year, there appeared two commissions on humanitarian assistance, one connected to the Russian government that determined which “humanitarian assistance” it was possible to free from taxes and excise duties and the other connected to the DECT, which sold the goods, including cigarettes and alcohol, to commercial structures. In this way, a large part of the humanitarian assistance that was freed of taxes was sold through regular commercial channels at existing market prices.

According to figures from the government commission on humanitarian aid cited by Novaya Gazeta, in 1996 alone, the DECT imported eight billion cigarettes. This was a serious blow to the tobacco barons of the period who were obliged to pay duties and excise taxes and, as a result, could not compete with the Church. This business was carried out despite the fact that Orthodoxy considers smoking to be a sin.

According to Novaya Gazeta, the DECT, in addition to Nika, became the founder of the “Peresvet” commercial bank and the companies, “International Economic Cooperation,” “Free Popular Television” and others. After 1996, the most profitable line of business became the export of oil, which was freed at the request of the former Patriarch Alexei II from customs duties. The annual turnover of the company in 1997 amounted to \$2 billion.

The third direction of Kirill’s activities was sea products. According to the site, Portal-Credo.ru, which follows the situation of religion in Russia, and which was cited by Novaya Gazeta, quotas for Kamchatka crab and shrimp were allocated in the amount of more than 4,000 tons to the firm, “Region,” reportedly founded by Kirill.

In his public statements, Kirill does not deny that he is rich. In fact, this would probably be fruitless. Novaya Gazeta called attention to the luxuries that Kirill enjoys, a Breguet watch worth \$30,000 which Ukrainian journalists noticed, a personal plane, a villa in Switzerland, and a penthouse in the famous “House on the Embankment” with a view of the Christ the Savior Church in the center of Moscow.

Despite this, Kirill does pay obeisance to the validity of traditional Christian virtues. In one of his statements in Ukraine, the Patriarch said, “It is very important to learn Christian asceticism. This is the ability to regulate one’s demands. This is the victory of a person over lust, passions and instinct.” According to Kirill, asceticism should be the rule for both the rich and the poor.

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