

The Russian Orthodox Church under Patriarch Aleksii II and the Russian State: An Unholy Alliance?

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Like most present-day Russian institutions, the Russian Orthodox Church is in the process of defining a role for itself amidst the political, social, and economic turbulence of postcommunist Russia. The Russian Orthodox Church is unique, however, because it enjoys an unrivaled degree of respect and legitimacy as the embodiment of Russia's spiritual past and is invested with a national historic tradition that carries great mythical power. This respect and legitimacy have been supplied and acknowledged by the population at large and by the political elite, and have been reinforced by the collective memory of seventy years of systematic and often brutal repression suffered by the church at the hands of the Soviet state. But to what ends is the church hierarchy, under the leadership of Patriarch Aleksii II, using the immense power that it wields in today's Russia? How, and to what ends are secular authorities taking advantage of that power?

Anyone attempting an assessment of the church's present role will almost immediately have his or her attention drawn to the large number of press articles on the church's dealings with political powers. The sheer amount of publicity and high-profile political activity surrounding Patriarch Aleksii in particular and the Russian Orthodox Church in general makes one wonder whether the church does indeed stand above the political fray, as its hierarchs claim, or whether it is in fact deeply enmeshed in that fray as merely another champion of its own vested interests.

As with many of the political movements formed in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the glue that united Russian Orthodox Church officials into a consensus was their opposition to the communist regime.¹ In the postcommunist era, however, the fragile alliance between the church's various factions broke down as criticism began to be openly leveled against the Moscow patriarchate from various sources within the church.² With time, the schisms over a wide variety of issues have become deeper. The most infamous attacks against Aleksii and his church

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have been launched by the so-called Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR), which lays claim to the moral and spiritual authority that the traditional Russian Orthodox Church purportedly forfeited with its agreement to collaborate with the Soviet state, and more ominously, with the KGB itself. These charges of collaboration were substantiated to some degree in 1991 by Father Gleb Yakunin, a dissident priest and a member of the Congress of People's Deputies, who gained access to KGB files proving Aleksii's cooperation (under the codename "Drozdov").

The extent or relevance of Aleksii's collaboration with the KGB aside, the patriarch's opponents have cited other quite serious grievances.³ Yakunin himself has accused Aleksii's church of a long list of offenses, becoming more vocal after he was defrocked by the Holy Synod for his decision to run in the December 1993 Duma elections. In an open letter of 4 January 1994, Yakunin charged that church leaders had violated the canon in defrocking him, that important persons in the church hierarchy had worked as KGB agents, that the church had a secret fund and extorted money from its parishes, and that pro-fascist forces were gaining strength within the church. In addition to these accusations, Yakunin offered suggestions on how fundamental reforms could be carried out within the church and called on its leaders to repent.⁴ Yakunin can be identified as the leader of the "liberal-dissident" opposition to Aleksii's church. He has come out consistently against amendments to the 1990 laws on the freedom of conscience and religion, amendments ardently championed by Aleksii, that would restrict the activities of foreign religious organizations on Russian soil.⁵ Yakunin has also pegged himself as a progressive by leveling criticism at the absence of deeply needed reforms (after seventy years of emasculation of church institutions) that Aleksii II ostensibly could have and should have initiated, yet did not. As Yakunin stated at a 1994 press conference defending his open letter: "In the two years in which the state security's control of the church has collapsed, effectively no reforms, either profound or even cosmetic, have taken place in the Russian Orthodox Church. I fear that eventually there will occur a reorientation of the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church towards an alliance with the communists and the Zhirinovites."⁶

Yakunin's anxieties regarding a partnership between the church and the so-called red-brown coalition were by no means unfounded, as can be demonstrated through a comparison of Aleksii's definitively hostile reaction to Yakunin's challenges with his rather noncritical attitude toward right-wing extremist elements within the church. Indeed, Aleksii wasted no time in censuring Yakunin following his open letter of 19 January 1994. Aleksii's response followed on 8 February, in the form of a letter to Yakunin's "new boss," State Duma chairman Ivan Rybkin. In his letter, Aleksii reaffirmed the Holy Synod's decision to defrock Yakunin, rebutting Yakunin's arguments against the decision. He also announced that Yakunin would henceforth be deprived of the right to wear priestly garb and the right to perform any religious services. Finally, Aleksii cautioned Rybkin that Yakunin could not be objective on the issue of relations between church and state, because his actions were deliberately aimed at creating a schism within the church.⁷

On the other side of the political spectrum, we encounter Metropolitan Ioann of St. Petersburg and Ladoga the most prominent church personality to have proclaimed explicit right-wing nationalist and anti-Semitic views, and the extreme nationalist Free Russian Orthodox Church, founded in May 1990 as the Russian branch of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia. In sharp contrast to the swift and harsh measures by the patriarch in dealing with Yakunin, the most striking feature of Aleksii's dealings with right-wing extremist elements has been his relative silence. Indeed, Aleksii avoided any public condemnation of Metropolitan Ioann's reactionary rhetoric and made no attempt to censure the activities of the so-called Free Russian Orthodox Church, whose leaders openly sympathize with nationalist forces.⁸ Aleksii's failure to speak out against such right-wing extremist tendencies within the church has made him vulnerable to accusations of tacit agreement.⁹

It is evident that the Russian Orthodox Church as an organization bears a striking resemblance to a typical contemporary Russian political organization in its problems with factions and personal rivalries. This may not come as a surprise to those who see Russian life in general as coming apart at the seams. As Father Alexei Bogrov, head of the Moscow Open Orthodox University, has remarked: "Society is suffering and the church also suffers. . . . How could it be otherwise? The church is strongly politicised and divided, as is all society."¹⁰ There are other, more subtle connections, however, between the schismatic conflicts within the Russian Orthodox Church and its dealings with external, secular political elites. Indeed, the characterization of the church as an organization fraught with internal dissension over both church issues and political convictions raises several important considerations.

First, the wide variety of conflicting viewpoints makes it clear that caution must be exercised when attributing any kind of statement, policy, or political ideology to any member of the church hierarchy or to the Russian Orthodox Church as a whole. Second, only a very large volume could do justice to the issues involved in these internal church skirmishes; for this reason, I focus on the policies, general political activity, and public image of Patriarch Aleksii II. It is Aleksii, after all, who was elected the sole authority entitled to speak for and to establish the policy of the church as a whole.¹¹

Third, I believe it can be demonstrated that these factional rivalries within the church have served Patriarch Aleksii as a powerful political tool. With the liberal dissident Duma member Father Yakunin leading the progressive opposition and the fascist sympathizer Metropolitan Ioann leading the reactionary wing of the church, Aleksii has managed to create an image for himself as a relatively moderate figure, in terms of church policy and in the political sphere, where he fits in rather nicely at the level of a Gorbachev-type figure and latter day supporter of President Yeltsin's government. The second way that Aleksii has used the church's factional splits to his political advantage was by flirting with the so-called red-brown coalition to put pressure on Yeltsin and on the State Duma to pass the 1997 law on freedom of conscience. Aleksii has been a loyal supporter of Yeltsin, while the "tacit support" he has simultaneously given to Metropolitan

Ioann and the right-wing nationalists may be interpreted as a ploy to gain political bargaining leverage.

It should be noted, however, that extreme nationalism is compatible with the xenophobic and protectionist nature of the amendments for which Aleksii has so actively lobbied, and against which those associated with the liberal opposition, such as Father Yakunin, have protested in the name of the constitution and of free religious association. This is not the place for a discussion of the constitutionality or necessity of the 1997 law, but it is important to point out that the dissent within the church itself enabled Aleksii to pose a serious threat to Yeltsin's government; that of a potential alliance between the red-brown coalition and the Russian Orthodox Church to exclude foreign religious groups.

The fourth implication for the church's relations with secular power from the consideration of its schismatic condition and involves one of the most intense topics of internal and external debate; the church's history of collaboration with the Soviet government and its unwillingness to confront that past. More importantly, there is a fundamental and quite legitimate concern that today's church hierarchs, inculcated with subservience to the Soviet government and purposely stunted in their spiritual growth and education, can play a role in facilitating and supporting Russia's democratic transformation. Edward E. Roslof of *The Christian Century* is one of many who reject the clergy's ability to rise to the occasion: "Beyond personalities, the Orthodox Church remains a Soviet bureaucratic institution—one of the few remaining. It avoids its past, seeking property and position while claiming authority from the crown of martyrdom. In reality, its authority is in decline."¹²

Is this only a short-term concern that will work itself out as a new generation of clergymen are educated and ordained? Or will the church's long tradition of servility to secular power prove far more difficult to eradicate? One way of assessing the degree to which the church under Aleksii II has been able to break out of the mold of subservience would be to look for any actual incidences of direct church criticism of the policies taken up by Yeltsin's administration, in cases where criticism might have been justified or expected. Not only would such criticism evidence a break with the tradition of subordination and a corresponding rise in church authority; but it would also indicate that Aleksii's church could stand outside and above the politicking and competition for favors that are so characteristic of Russian politics today.¹³ That Aleksii refused to distance himself from Metropolitan Ioann for political reasons foreshadows my central argument. The fact that Aleksii is very much entangled in politics, and thus does not and cannot occupy any kind of "moral high ground" beyond the worldly interests of Russia's politicians, can be substantiated through his flawless record of unflagging and active support for the Yeltsin government and his consistent refusal to directly criticize that government's policies, even in its darkest hours.

All that is needed to demonstrate the degree of Aleksii's enmeshment in secular politics, and to show that his rhetoric serves as a smoke screen, is a simple comparison of word and deed. Journalists and scholars have been making such comparisons since Aleksii's confirmation as patriarch in June 1990, but over time

they have evolved from mildly suspicious speculations to outright accusations of hypocrisy, and with good reason. For those who judge something amiss when they see the patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church and the highest authorities in the Russian state each courting the other's favor, the causes for alarm have multiplied over the past several years.

In October 1991, only three months after Aleksii II had blessed President Yeltsin at his inauguration, observers already noted a sense of cooperation between members of the church and the state. The *Financial Times* reported: "Following the defeat of the August coup in the Soviet Union, a partnership appears to be emerging between the church and Russia's new 'democratic' reformers."¹⁴

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The evolution of an alliance between President Yeltsin and Patriarch Aleksii, however, could have been anticipated even prior to the July 1991 inauguration. Yeltsin seems to have been the one to begin the mutual courtship between himself and Aleksii's church. He recognized the church's support as a highly valuable political asset in his bid for the

presidency of the Russian Federation and did not hesitate to take advantage of this by means of highly publicized participation in church activities. For example, in 1991 Yeltsin participated in a televised Easter service in Moscow in an attempt to win support among Christian voters, although he is not a Christian.¹⁵ People's suspicions at this early stage seem to have been focused more on Yeltsin's blatant political use of the church's respected position and large following than on Aleksii's cooperation with his scheme. After all, the patriarch could not turn Yeltsin away from the Easter service.

It was not long, however, before Aleksii began to be caught up in a web of hypocrisy dealing with the church's involvement in politics. Aleksii has said: "My flock cannot be affiliated to any political party, and even a political bloc. The church appeals to that depth of man's life, which is in no way related to politics. Therefore, as a religious person, I feel obliged to resist politicization of church life in every possible way."¹⁶ The truth, however, is that these statements do not correspond to reality, presenting us with what Vladimir Semenko quite justifiably terms a "paradox": "The paradox of today's church situation is that in their overwhelming majority, the [church] hierarchs together with secular publicists come out against an Orthodox state, in favor of a temporal, secular state, and at the same time want to collaborate very closely with it."¹⁷ Indeed, Aleksii *was* a politician in the official sense of the word in the not-so-distant past; in 1989, he ran for and was elected to a seat in the Congress of People's Deputies.¹⁸

How are we to make sense of a subsequent and completely contradictory statement by Aleksii in an interview, in response to a question about the church's

involvement in politics: “There is nothing abnormal about the participation of the clergy and the laity in politics. After all, the Christians must demonstrate their faith with their deeds, revitalizing and bringing spirituality to all spheres of societal life, including the political sphere.”¹⁹ How also to reconcile this policy reversal with the subsequent defrocking of Gleb Yakunin for running in the 1993 State Duma elections, and with a whole catalogue of later claims of the church’s aloofness from politics? The list of irreconcilable statements and activities goes on and on. At the very least, we can say that there are extreme contradictions in the patriarch’s statements, and thus, his words cannot be taken at face value and must be tested against actual deeds. When Aleksii claims that the church is separate from politics he is expressing a theoretical ideal in which he probably believes very strongly; unfortunately, the practical realities—the smaller, mundane details of political encounters—are left out of the rhetoric, and it is in fact those very details that constitute the true state of affairs between the church and Russia’s leading politicians. Aleksii’s rhetorical mechanism is most likely a mark of his past, and this gap between the spoken word and reality is probably being perpetuated by thousands of members of the Soviet system in various capacities all over Russia, perhaps without their even being aware of it.²⁰

Aleksii’s relationship to the Yeltsin administration can be characterized as one of mutually active support, in open contradiction to Aleksii’s contentions that his church stands outside and beyond the political sphere. Perhaps the first genuine opportunity that Aleksii had to criticize Yeltsin and his policies in a major way came in October 1993, with the conflict between Yeltsin and the parliament. Aleksii warned against the possibility of civil war and of innocent blood being shed as a result of both sides’ refusal to compromise and offered his services as a mediator. Aleksii was praised for his attempt at mediation, for resisting the efforts of both sides to win his support by promising a swift passage of the new freedom of conscience law, and for focusing on ways to avoid bloodshed rather than addressing the political demands of either side, even though the talks soon failed as violence erupted among demonstrating crowds on 3 October.²¹ After the bloodshed had occurred, however, the church brought its moral authority to bear by criticizing only those on one side of the dispute—not the side that had ordered reprisals by the armed forces on 4 October.²² Aleksii and the Holy Synod morally indicted only those who had “started it,” which sounds more like an accusation out of a children’s argument than a just ascription of responsibility for the loss of innocent life that was caused by both sides of the conflict. Indeed, Aleksii’s church remained silent and uncritical of Yeltsin’s handling of the crisis in general, saying nothing about the state’s use of force to suppress the attempted uprising, about its censorship of the media and restriction of political freedoms, or about human rights violations as merchants and refugees from the Caucasus were expelled from Moscow.²³

The next obvious occasion on which the church justifiably could have, and probably *should* have, come out against Yeltsin’s policies was when the decision was made to use military force to crush separatist forces in Chechnya, in December 1994. Aleksii, however, merely issued vague appeals to both sides to

stop the bloodshed and asked that the conflict be resolved at the negotiating table rather than on the battlefield, just as he had during the crisis of October 1993. During an August 1995 interview with the popular Russian newspaper *Argumenty i Fakty*, Aleksii issued the following appeal:

And now through your newspaper I once again say to those who are warring with one another: Stop! Don't let the demon of vengeance and hatred enslave your souls! I especially appeal to all the Orthodox Christians who have found themselves in the region of conflict, and have suffered from it: Have the courage to forgive the offender, however hard it may be to do so. . . . God grant peace to land of the Caucasus, to the people who live there. And for the peace to be lasting, it must be just, and that is why disagreements must be resolved not by force, but through dialogue, based on an honest attitude toward one another.²⁴

Less than two months after making this appeal, however, Aleksii supplemented his avoidance of direct criticism of Yeltsin's policy on Chechnya with yet another appeal—this time urging Russia's young men to join the army and to defend their motherland. Elena Chinyaeva rightly observes: "In the context of the highly unpopular Chechen war, that appeal sounded ambiguous, to say the least."²⁵ I would venture to point out that Aleksii's October appeal to Russia's conscripts was in open contradiction to his August appeal to stop the bloodshed in Chechnya. After all, Aleksii was not urging these men to join the army so that they may simply "forgive the offender" once they assume active duty! Yuri Feofanov goes further in his analysis of Aleksii's rather shocking statement, alleging that it was expressly designed to assist the government in its conscription effort and constituted a dangerous entreaty to Russia's young men to fuse the services that Christ had once urged man to render separately, unto Caesar and unto God.²⁶

We will probably never know which of the two appeals—the one begging soldiers to end the violence and to forgive the offender or the one supporting the struggle against enemies and the spiritual benefits of military service—corresponds more closely to Aleksii's true beliefs. It is not very difficult, however, to guess which appeal would be rewarded by Yeltsin's government. Nor is it difficult to guess in what ways Aleksii would prefer the government to express that appreciation. First, regarding the much-sought-after amendments to the law on freedom of conscience, Aleksii may have been following the old adage that one can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar, abandoning his vinegary strategy of flirting with the right-wing nationalist extremists in favor of the sweeter technique of active support for the administration's goals. Aleksii would have to wait a few more years, however, until Yeltsin would be ready to sign into law the proposed legislation restricting the activity of foreign religious groups.

The second means of compensation for his support that Aleksii may have had in mind is government assistance in securing funds for the rebuilding of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. The idea that such financial support would be forthcoming was planted by Yeltsin in 1994, when he responded favorably to the project organizers' request that the federal government cover 85 percent of the cost of reconstruction. In a letter to project organizers, Yeltsin assured them: "I am confident that the Russian government and regional authorities at all

levels will relate to this as one of the most important state tasks.”²⁷ It has been suggested, and is more than likely, that Yeltsin had further political gains in sight, namely, winning the support of both the Orthodox and the patriotic-nationalist population, when he agreed to support Aleksii’s pet project.²⁸ Verbal assurances of financial support notwithstanding, it remained to be seen where the federal government would be able to turn up 85 percent of the over 300 million dollars that would be needed to rebuild the cathedral.

It is more than likely that Moscow Mayor Yuri Luzhkov footed a large portion of the reconstruction bill. His city attracts and generates an enormous amount of capital, grossly out of proportion with economic activity everywhere else in Russia. Of course, the project stood to benefit Luzhkov as well; its realization would enhance both his own prestige and Moscow’s image as the heart and cultural center of all Russia. The picture that seems to be emerging, then, is that of a political endeavor designed to boost the prestige and support base of everyone involved—President Yeltsin, Mayor Luzhkov, and Patriarch Aleksii—and fueled not by pure spiritual strength, as these three men would have us believe in their speeches, but by dollars and rubles coming from mysterious sources.

As Professor William Brumfield has put it: “Some have questioned the sincerity of the repentance that the project is supposed to represent, when it seems so closely allied to the political and financial interests of the church, the city and the state.”²⁹ One other detail that seems to substantiate the view that rebuilding the cathedral was first and foremost a political objective is that the project’s organizers wanted to rush the construction to meet unreasonable deadlines. A public committee chaired by Patriarch Aleksii planned to complete the basic construction of the cathedral in time for the 850th anniversary of Moscow’s founding in 1997, even though the project’s chief designer, Boris Mogolnikov, criticized the set deadline as unrealistic.³⁰ One would expect that Patriarch Aleksii would have met with wisdom and sensitivity the legitimate concern expressed by Mogolnikov that the completion of the cathedral—a holy place—should not be rushed for the sake of some ceremonial occasion. This does not, however, appear to have been the case. The deadline of the 850th anniversary of Moscow smacks of Luzhkov’s interference, and who would dare to oppose his opinion of the desirable pace of construction and risk losing funding for the project? Apparently not Aleksii.

There have been many speculations and only fragmentary revelations as to where the funding for reconstruction originated. The official word was that the cathedral was to be rebuilt using government subsidies and public donations, but it appears that Aleksii also felt moved to ask Yeltsin to grant them access to an oil pipeline. The Moscow patriarchate also was permitted to supplement its budget with excise taxes collected on the import of up to fifty thousand tons of tobacco products.³² Aleksii’s use of these money-making schemes defiles the vision of Russia’s spiritual renewal that was to be expressed through the rebuilding of the cathedral and that was propagated in all of his public statements. One would think that the patriarch, as a holy man and spiritual authority, would hasten to contradict Machiavelli’s principle that the end justifies the means; instead, Aleksii seems to have appropriated that principle for his own use.

The question has been frequently asked, and even posed directly to Aleksii himself, whether it was wise to spend such an enormous sum of money rebuilding the cathedral at a time when most ordinary Russians have been suffering even trying to make ends meet.³³ Aleksii, naturally, answered with more of his high-sounding rhetoric about spiritual rebirth and repentance. The reconstruction project seems, however, a highly extravagant expenditure, funded from ambiguous sources and paid for at the expense of other projects that could have benefited a larger number of people in widespread localities throughout Russia. No one would deny the powerful symbolic value of the successfully rebuilt Cathedral of Christ the Savior gracing the Moscow skyline, but the church's difficulty in securing funds should have been a stark indication that neither the government nor the people could afford such a project at the time. Aleksii, Luzhkov, Yeltsin, and others were determined to proceed, however, and resorting to unwholesome fundraising activities, they tarnished the spiritual symbol they had set out to create, erecting instead a symbol of Orthodoxy's value, and Aleksii's prowess, in the political sphere.

Yeltsin seized every opportunity to capitalize on that value, profiting immensely from his close relationship with Aleksii during his campaign for the 1996 presidential elections. While Yeltsin exploited the church's popularity, visiting local churches, lighting candles in front of television cameras, and making public appearances with Aleksii, the patriarch also profited in this mutually lucrative relationship, obtaining a suite of offices at the Kremlin.³⁴ Yeltsin's campaign managers even considered using a priest in their advertisements as a message to voters sympathetic to the church, but in the end decided that the strategy "might backfire and play into the hands of the opposition, since the church is not supposed to officially be involved in politics."³⁵ And here is a very interesting detail, in view of the Yeltsin-Luzhkov-Aleksii cooperation on the cathedral project: "The powerful mayor of Moscow, a co-chairman of the Yeltsin campaign, has no such qualms [about using religious motifs]. Giant billboards all over Moscow feature Yeltsin and Yuri Luzhkov shaking hands against the glittering gold and white backdrop of the Kremlin's Ioann Lestivichnik church and belfry. Above it, the logo reads, 'Moscovites have already made their choice.'"³⁶

Aleksii, who is supposed to be outside politics, gave a show of active and vocal support for Yeltsin that was unprecedented in its candor. What is more, he did so in flagrant violation of a church ruling passed in March 1996 for the express purpose of prohibiting members of the clergy from officially campaigning in the presidential election.³⁷ The key word here is "officially," as both Aleksii's active support and Yeltsin's ways of utilizing that support straddled the fragile fence between legality and illegality, in terms of both church rulings and federal election laws. Although Russia's election law prohibits political appearances on the last day of the presidential campaign, it was on this very day that Yeltsin went for a stroll around the Kremlin's Cathedral Square with Aleksii. Television cameras recording, Aleksii made an obvious campaign pitch for his companion, telling the Russian tourists who had gathered there: "Please make the right choice tomorrow. . . . Because tomorrow the fate of Russia shall be determined."³⁸ In addition to actively campaigning for Yeltsin, Aleksii also managed to tip the scales in his favor by

turning a cold shoulder to Communist Party candidate Gennady Zyuganov and to clergy members who supported him.³⁹ The patriarch's behavior was, once again, in sharp contradiction to his claims of political non-interference and neutrality, as Vladimir Semenko has rightly observed: "His Holiness the Patriarch has already long been considered by the general public as a church politician, and not as a spokesman for the Church of Christ, standing above any earthly power. In complete accordance with this notion was the pre-election agitation of the Patriarch and some other church representatives in favor of one of the parties (in the given case, it is absolutely irrelevant which one)."⁴⁰ Based on an examination of actual events, it seems that Aleksii is not only considered, but indeed considers himself, a "church politician," as the patriarch undoubtedly realizes how much political influence he wields and has taken pains to exert that influence to the highly visible benefit of his church and of Yeltsin's administration.

As one would anticipate, Aleksii's support for Yeltsin did not stop at the campaign. Indeed, both president and

patriarch became even more brazen when it came to public exhibitions of their mutual endorsement. For example, Aleksii attended the president's inauguration as an official participant, in blatant violation of Articles 14 and 82 of the Russian constitution, which respectively define the contingent of official participants at the inauguration ceremony and establish the separation of church and state and the equality of religious groups before the law.⁴¹

Next came the unveiling of a new Russian Orthodox political movement in February 1997. The All-Russian Public Movement "Orthodox Russia" (*Obshcherossiiskoe Obshchestvennoe Dvizhenie "Rossiya Pravoslavnaya"*) held its opening conference in Moscow, attended by delegates from fifty-seven Russian regions, at which both President Yeltsin and Patriarch Aleksii expressed their support for the movement's aims: "to strengthen in Russian society 'the Christian ideals of peace and accord and Orthodox morals,' and to unite Orthodox believers in a secular movement 'which would have influence in all spheres of the Russian state system.'"⁴²

In his Easter message to Aleksii, President Yeltsin said that he was looking forward to "fruitful co-operation between Russian state structures and the Orthodox Church."⁴³ And the scene of the Easter benediction in the new Cathedral of Christ the Savior foreshadowed the continuation of this mutually profitable relationship between Aleksii and the administration: "As incense and chants filled Moscow's glittering new Cathedral of Christ the Savior, a long line of dark-suited politicians waited patiently off to one side. It was well past midnight, but the hour could hardly deter the prime minister and other top officials eager to be seen on nation-

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al television being blessed by one of Russia's most powerful men—Aleksii II, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia."⁴⁴ Aleksii reaped the benefits of his consistent support for Yeltsin when the president signed the draft law on freedom of conscience in September 1997, although it must be acknowledged that this conciliation came only after a long, heated, and highly publicized struggle between the two leaders. Aleksii expressed satisfaction with the final version of the law, which included the restrictions on foreign religious groups for which he had lobbied, and which Yeltsin had formerly opposed. Aleksii's relations with Yeltsin, according to statements issued on the eve of the Russian Orthodox Christmas celebrations of 7 January 1998, once again supported optimistic forecasts of further cooperation and an even closer unofficial alliance between church and state.⁴⁵

It is not hard to understand why leading politicians such as Yeltsin and Luzhkov, and others such as Gennady Zyuganov, have been courting the Russian Orthodox Church's support at every opportunity. In surveys taken over the past several years, the church has consistently ranked as the most trusted organization in Russia, occasionally placing second only to the army. According to a survey published in *Argumenty i Fakty* in July 1997, only 11 percent of Russians trusted the president whereas 61 percent distrusted him; the government as a whole received the equally dismal response of 12 percent and 61 percent, respectively; the church, however, was trusted by 44 percent of Russians and distrusted by 20 percent.⁴⁶ The current administration, therefore, has had ample reason to seek an alliance with the church as a highly respected institution, to boost its support base through the highly publicized mutual association. On the other hand, Aleksii's church has been supporting Yeltsin because he has been generous both in building the church's political status (through the freedom of conscience law) and in facilitating its growth as a religious institution (through the return of church property and financial assistance).

If the church is as powerful as it is hailed to be, however, why would it feel the need to enter into such a partnership with the Yeltsin government, particularly in the case of the law on the freedom of conscience? I would hasten to agree with Martin McCauley, professor of politics at the University of London, who has observed: "A church that finds it necessary to appeal to the state to limit its competition is obviously a weak church."⁴⁷ The question of how much power the church really has seems to be a fairly complex one. Some have observed, concerning the "powerful" church's bargaining efforts, that "although the church is enshrined in power at the top, it fears an erosion of support from below."⁴⁸ And although the number of parishes and churches continues to grow, and the percentages in surveys reveal an almost unrivaled degree of trust for the church, those numbers may be misleading. As Alessandra Stanley points out: "A recent study suggests that 30 percent of Russians under 25 have moved from atheism to a belief in God, but that does not mean they are active members of the church. Priests complain that while in the first flush of the church's revival millions of Russians eagerly sought baptism and church weddings, most never set foot in church again."⁴⁹ How is one to reconcile the contradictory realities of politicians vying for the church's support, Aleksii's intense lobbying for restrictions on for-

eign religions, his refusal to criticize Yeltsin's policies, evidence depicting a lack of rigorous Orthodox belief among the population, and the relatively high trust ratings and general respect given the church by that same population? It appears that the Russian Orthodox Church's power is based on a widely held myth that the church encapsulates the very spirit of Russia and represents its most important national historic tradition, which is thought to be central in defining what it means to be Russian. This myth was inadvertently reinforced by those who attempted to eradicate it from the collective memory; the fact that the church endured seventy years of Communist persecution is today viewed as proof of its spiritual power.

It is in both the government's and the church's interests to perpetuate this national myth, for if it were to collapse, the church would lose even more of its believers to other denominations than has already been the case, and the government would lose an invaluable legitimacy-adding appendage. Perhaps in the future the Russian Orthodox Church will acquire authority and respect that is not borrowed from its historical crown of martyrdom and is not based on its activity in the political limelight. This would mean having a more personal and more profound connection with the population and building a support base founded on knowledge and experience rather than on a vague idealized notion of what the church represents. This process will take time, and the church seems to be making progress in more and more localities. However, I would caution Aleksii or any church hierarch to distance himself from the political world, because if the people start comparing the myth of the glorious and morally superior Russian Orthodox Church to the reality of Aleksii's hypocritical statements and political wheeling and dealing, chances are they will not like what they see. I believe that Yuri Feofanov had good reason to write: "I am afraid that the church, triumphant and successful . . . is itself capable of ruining itself in the eyes of its own flock."⁵⁰ So that the church will not injure itself in the eyes of its own congregation, Aleksii needs to abandon his policy of support for Yeltsin and his policies, and to criticize where deserved.

Indeed, even in Muscovite Russia the tradition of Orthodox church law adapted from Byzantium obligated church rulers to speak out openly against the secular ruler in certain cases.⁵¹ On one hand, to appeal to the Muscovite tradition of spiritual and secular relations in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the contemporary Russian situation presents a number of difficulties. Orthodoxy does not enjoy the status of the official religion of Russia, and the secular ruler is no longer conceived as an agent of God, bound by Orthodox principles. The degree of continuity in church traditions between the Muscovite period and today is highly questionable, especially in the Soviet period. On the other hand, the argument can be made that Aleksii's political behavior should be judged not only by the standards set by the Russian constitution, or according to what seems logical or consistent to secular observers, but should also be examined from the perspective of the traditional church law, which may take precedence in Aleksii's mind.⁵² Donald Ostrowski identifies four possible positions that are stipulated for "wise advisers," including church hierarchs, and are contingent on the secular leader's

observance of "God's law."⁵³ As long as the secular leader does not transgress God's law, the traditional church law recommends a noncritical stance, which serves to produce a sense of harmony between church and state. Thus, there is a fundamental conflict between the church's ideal of harmony between church and state (Orthodoxy being the official and only true religion), and the Russian constitution's official separation of church and state, which gives the church an unofficial status and ostensibly places it on equal legal footing with other religious groups, although this principle has indeed been complicated by the 1997 law on freedom of conscience. Perhaps it is this harmony, prescribed by church law, that Aleksii has been striving to achieve by actively supporting Yeltsin.

Even according to church law, however, this ideal symphony between church and state has its limits. First, it should be noted that vocal criticism and passive disobedience are prescribed in cases when the secular leader "orders subjects to transgress God's law, which would threaten the salvation of their souls. Then it is their [the clergy's] duty to refuse to obey, even unto death."⁵⁴ It may be argued that President Yeltsin put the salvation of his subjects' souls in jeopardy by ordering the reprisals of October 1993 and by launching the war on Chechnya. According to church tradition, then, Aleksii had the obligation of vocally criticizing Yeltsin and encouraging passive disobedience in those cases, which he did not do.

The second way in which the church tradition limited the ties between church and state was by designating two separate spheres of responsibility, which overlap only in matters of external church administration. While the secular ruler bore exclusive responsibility for temporal matters, such as governing, conducting foreign affairs, and commanding the military, the patriarch was wholly responsible in matters of faith and the holy sacraments. From this it followed that just as the emperor was not to interfere in internal church matters, the patriarch was not to participate in the temporal sphere.⁵⁵ It is clear that Aleksii has violated this key principle of church law with his overtly political activities. Indeed, what Aleksii may be trying to do is to use the constitution to justify his activities that violate church law, and at the same time to use church law to justify his activities that violate the constitution. In this way, Aleksii can point out that it is not against the constitution for a clergyman to run for office (as he did for the Congress of People's Deputies in 1989), or to lobby for constitutional amendments, while at the same time he can point out that according to church tradition, Orthodoxy is to be considered the official religion of Russia, thus making it necessary for him to participate in the inauguration of the president. Although it cannot be proved that Aleksii has consciously adopted this highly insincere strategy of shifting back and forth between constitutional and church principles whenever he deems it convenient, he can point neither to the constitution nor to church law as justification for his failure to criticize Yeltsin's administration regarding the events of October 1993 and the war in Chechnya.

Finally, Aleksii's refusal to criticize Yeltsin's administration cannot be explained away by the church's historical legacy of subservience to, or "harmony with," secular power. The best possible expectation we can hold for the future is that Yeltsin's administration will pursue sound and commendable policies that

Aleksii *will not need* to criticize, and that Aleksii will remain aloof from the political world and strengthen his church with the faith of devout men and women throughout the Russian federation.⁵⁶

NOTES

1. The characteristics of postcommunist Russian political activity are outlined among others in Michael Urban and Vladimir Gel'man, "The Development of Political Parties in Russia," in *Democratic Changes and Authoritarian Reactions in Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova*, Karen Dawisha and Bruce Parrott, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 175–219.

2. Dimitry V. Pospelovsky, "The Russian Orthodox Church in the Postcommunist CIS," in *The Politics of Religion in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, Michael Bourdeaux, ed. (Armonk, N.Y. and London: M. E. Sharpe, 1995), 45–46.

3. For lengthy discussions of both sides of the controversy surrounding Aleksii II's collaboration with the KGB, see John B. Dunlop, "The Russian Orthodox Church as an 'Empire-Saving' Institution" (incriminating), and Dimitry V. Pospelovsky, "The Russian Orthodox Church in the Postcommunist CIS" (exculpating), both in *The Politics of Religion in Russia and the New States of Eurasia*, Michael Bourdeaux, ed. (Armonk, N.Y. and London: M. E. Sharpe, 1995).

4. *The Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 46 (1993): 22, complete text of Alexei Kirpichnikov, "The Clergy: Religious War by Correspondence—Father Gleb Isn't Clinging to Fatherhood," *Segodnya*, 12 February 1994, 3.

5. See, for example, Wendy Slater and Kjell Engelbrekt, "Eastern Orthodoxy Defends Its Position," *RFE/RL Research Report*, 3 September 1993, 52.

6. "Gleb Yakunin Warns Patriarch about Political Extremism and Corruption in Church," *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, 26 January 1994, source: Russia's Radio, Moscow, in Russian, 1900 gmt, 24 January 1994.

7. Kirpichnikov, "The Clergy: Religious War by Correspondence."

8. Elena Chinyaeva, "Russian Orthodox Church Forges a New Role," *Transition*, 5 April 1996, 18.

9. Pospelovsky, "The Russian Orthodox Church in the Postcommunist CIS," 58–59.

10. John Lloyd, "Orthodox Church Seeks a New Role," *Financial Times*, 29 July 1995, 2.

11. Be that as it may, Aleksii has himself taken pains to remind the public of this fact. He declared in an April 1994 interview with *Moskovskie Novosti*'s Vladimir Shevelev: "It should . . . be borne in mind that no matter how high a position Metropolitan Ioann might occupy in the church hierarchy, he cannot speak on behalf of the Church [as a whole]. That is the right of the local council and the council of church hierarchs. In the interval between councils only the Holy Synod and the Patriarch are accorded such a right." *Moskovskie Novosti*, 17–24 April 1994, 11. I am very grateful to Michael Flier for his assistance in translating the quotations from Russian sources that appear in this article.

12. Edward E. Roslof, "The Myth of Resurrection: Orthodox Church in Postcommunist Russia," *The Christian Century*, 17 March 1993, 290.

13. Wendy Slater elaborates this view in "The Church's Attempts to Mediate in the Russian Crisis," stating: "The dilemma faced by the Russian Orthodox Church is that if it is to rise above politics . . . it will, at some point, be required to break its tradition of acting in consort with the Russian state. In order to occupy the moral highground, therefore, it will be forced to criticize the state's excesses. . . . If it is really to stand above politics and prove itself a moral authority . . . the Church's leadership must continue to clarify its positions, distance itself from maverick figures such as Metropolitan Ioann, and learn to criticize the supreme secular power." *RFE/RL Research Report*, 29 October 1993, 10.

14. Gillian Tett and Leyla Boulton, "Russian Church Steps into the Spiritual Breach," *Financial Times*, 23 October 1991, 6.

15. Vanora Bennett, "Russians Turning to the Church as Communism Crumbles," *Reuter Library Report*, 26 April 1991.
16. Quoted in "The Church Is Against 'Political Marriages,'" *Russian Press Digest*, 28 May 1991, source: *Izvestiya*, 28 May 1991, 3.
17. Vladimir Petrovich Semenko, "Dukhovno-gosudarstvennaya struktura," *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, Online edition, 25 October 1996.
18. It should be noted that Aleksii was still Metropolitan of Leningrad and Novgorod at the time of his candidacy for and election to the CPD. He was subsequently elected Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, in June 1990, following the death of Patriarch Pimen. See Richard Owen, "Russian Welcome for Reformist Patriarch," *The Times*, 9 June 1990.
19. "The Church of the Poor: Interview with Aleksii II," Official Kremlin International News Broadcast, 19 June 1992.
20. Semenko expresses a similar interpretation of the church hierarchy's statements in his "Dukhovno- gosudarstvennaya struktura."
21. Slater, "The Church's Attempts to Mediate in the Russian Crisis," 6–10.
22. In her analysis of the church's handling of the situation, Slater asserts that: "During the crisis, the Church exercised its spiritual authority to threaten with excommunication and anathema anyone who 'raised his hand against the unarmed and spilled innocent blood.' This threat raised comment in the Russian press, but the wording of the statement, adopted by the Holy Synod on 1 October, meant that no participant in the demonstrations or storming of the White House could fairly be punished by excommunication . . . Russian observers praised the Church for staying out of politics during the crisis. . . . Recent statements by Church leaders, however, have been critical only of the 'leaders of the rebellion.'" Ibid.
23. Ibid.
24. Interview with Aleksii II, Natalia Zhelnorova, "Patriarkh: Ne vsiakomu dukhu ver'te," *Argumenty i Fakty*, 17 August 1995, 3.
25. Chinyaeva, "Russian Orthodox Church Forges a New Role," 17.
26. See Yuri Feofanov's front-page headline account of the Patriarch's statement in "Obrashchenie patriarkha k prizyvnikam: tol'ko li slovo Bozh'e?" *Izvestiya*, 12 October 1995, 1.
27. Peter Ford, "In Moscow, A Grand Cathedral May Rise Again," *Christian Science Monitor*, 28 September 1994.
28. Ibid.
29. William Brumfield, "An Elephant or Savior?" *Moscow Times*, 25 January 1997. Alessandra Stanley of the *New York Times* has aptly characterized the dealings surrounding the reconstruction as "a ritual of Russian power politics," providing readers with a vivid description of this ritual: "Security guards bowed, secretaries crossed themselves and the Mayor of Moscow humbly kissed his hand. In what has become a ritual of Russian power politics, the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church, Aleksii II, made a slow, solemn entrance into the temporal world of dotting bureaucrats and elected officials. This time, they offered him a cathedral." See Stanley, "From Repression to Respect, Russian Church in Comeback," *New York Times*, 3 October 1994, 1.
30. Ford, "In Moscow, A Grand Cathedral May Rise Again."
31. Semenko, "Dukhovno-gosudarstvennaya struktura."
32. Ibid.
33. See, for example, Zhelnorova, "Patriarkh," 3.
34. Paul Glastis, "A Mixed Blessing for the New Russia," *U.S. News and World Report*, 24 June 1996, 47.
35. Mikhail Margelov, producer of Yeltsin's political ads, quoted in Stanley, "Church Leans Toward Yeltsin in Russian Vote."
36. Stanley, "Church Leans Toward Yeltsin in Russian Vote."
37. Ibid.

38. Lee Hockstader, "Yeltsin Makes Last-Minute Pitch: As Polls Prepare to Open in Vote, Church Head Cites 'Right Choice,'" *Washington Post*, 16 June 1996, A27.
39. Stanley, "Church Leans Toward Yeltsin in Russian Vote."
40. Semenko, "Dukhovno-gosudarstvennaya struktura."
41. See Gleb Yakunin, "Zayavlenie komiteta zashchity svobody sovesti," *Ekspress Khronika*, 16 August 1996.
42. "Yeltsin and Patriarch Aleksiy II Voice Support for New Orthodox Political Movement," *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, 11 February 1997, source: ITAR-TASS news agency (World Service), Moscow, in English, 1508 gmt, 9 February 1997.
43. "Russia. Don't bless my souls," *The Economist*, U.S. edition, 21 June 1997, 56.
44. Associated Press, "Orthodox Church Comeback Losing Ground Under Yeltsin," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, 27 July 1997, 14A.
45. See, for example, "Yeltsin Lauds Orthodoxy on Russian Christmas Eve," Reuters, 7 January 1998.
46. "Whom Do Russians Trust?" *Argumenty i Fakty*, 29 July 1997.
47. Quoted in Associated Press, "Orthodox Church Comeback Losing Ground Under Yeltsin."
48. Ibid.
49. Stanley, "From Repression to Respect: Russian Church in Comeback."
50. Feofanov, "Obrashchenie patriarkha k prizyvnikam," 1.
51. For a thorough discussion of relations between spiritual and secular rulers in Muscovite Russia and the Byzantine legacy, see Donald Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross-Cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier, 1304-1589* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 199–218.
52. I would like to thank Donald Ostrowski for encouraging me to consider Aleksii's political activity from the perspective of the historical church law.
53. Ostrowski writes: "Both Byzantine and Muscovite political theory as espoused by Church bookmen prescribed these four positions for wise advisers: (1) non-critical and silent obedience; (2) vocal criticism but obedience nonetheless; (3) vocal criticism with passive disobedience; and (4) vocal and active opposition. These four options for the wise advisers depended upon whether a legitimate ruler was following or not following God's law, ordering others to transgress God's law, or simply lacked legitimacy." See Ostrowski, 205. See also Table 9.1, 204.
54. Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 204. According to Karamzin, the church's responsibility to act as the state's conscience continued in the post-Petrine period. See Nikolai Karamzin, *Notes on Ancient and Modern Russia*, ed. and trans. Richard Pipes (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1959), 125, cited by Ostrowski, 214, n62.
55. Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols*, 208. See also Table 9.2, 209.
56. Some have perceived Aleksii's refusal to attend the burial of the alleged Romanov bones as a step in the right direction, given the fact that Yeltsin attended the state funeral in St. Petersburg while Aleksii led a local congregation in prayer for the Romanovs at Sergeev Posad. Others, however, interpret Aleksii's refusal to attend the funeral as merely a self-interested political move intended to appease conservatives within the church. See, for example, Marcus Warren's article in *Daily Telegraph*, 18 July 1998, 9, and "Last Rites for Russia's Wrongs," *Daily Telegraph*, 18 July 1998, 23.