

#751 The Cultural Roots of Schism (Part 2)

Colleagues,

This week we bring you Part 2 of Chris Repp's paper on the role of cultural differences and political expediencies in some of the major schisms in the history of the Church. In [Part 1](#) of this paper (first presented in its entirety in August of last year, at St. Augustine's House in Oxford, Michigan), Chris discussed the cultural roots of the Donatist controversy and the resulting schism. In this final part, he draws on his rich knowledge of Russian church history to explain the origins of the so-called Old Believer schism in the Russian Orthodox Church. In so doing, he casts revealing light on the very human motives at work in the life of the Church at every age, including the present day.

Peace and Joy,

Carol Braun, for the editorial team

"Dividing The Kingdom: Case Studies in the History of Church Conflict"

by Arthur C. Repp

THE OLD BELIEVER SCHISM IN RUSSIA

The second case study I turn to now is much less well known to western audiences, even among those with an otherwise thorough knowledge of church history. This was the Old Believer schism in the Russian Orthodox Church in the middle of the seventeenth century, a schism that persists until the present day.

Before considering the details of the schism, a very brief survey of Russian church history is in order, or to be more precise, the history of Christianity in the land we now call Russia. Christianity was introduced by fiat under Prince Vladimir (Volodimir) of Kiev in 988, under the influence of the Byzantines. Legend has it that the prince sent representatives to investigate four different religions, Islam, Judaism, Roman Catholicism, and Eastern Orthodoxy, and Orthodoxy won out because the envoys who had been to the Hagia Sophia Church in Constantinople reported that during the services there they didn't know whether they were in heaven or on earth, so beautiful was the Orthodox liturgy. In reality, the choice of Orthodoxy likely had much more to do with the forging of a political alliance with the then-powerful Byzantine Empire. The state of Kievan Rus', as it is known, was conquered by invading Mongol armies toward the end of the thirteenth century, and for the next two hundred years was a vassal of the Mongols. It was during this time that the seeds were sewn for a shift of power northwards. The principality of Novgorod on Lake Il'men made peace with the Mongols in order to turn its attention to fighting off the Roman Catholic Teutonic knights based in the Baltics. Better to have pagan overlords who would in some measure tolerate their Orthodox faith, than Roman Catholics who would surely insist upon conversion. It was also during the period of Mongol domination that the small settlement of Moscow rose to prominence, due in no small part to the fact that it controlled important waterways in the heart of what we now know as European Russia, and also thanks to the dense forests that surrounded it. It was during the reign of Ivan III, also known as Ivan the Great (1462-1505) that Moscow liberated itself and its surrounding territories from the Mongols, successfully refusing to pay the demanded tribute. Ivan's remarkably long and successful reign began only a decade after the fall of Constantinople (1453), whose last patriarch, fleeing the Turkish

conquest, died in the city of Vladimir in the general vicinity of Moscow. From this arose the so-called doctrine of Moscow as the Third Rome, the notion that the center of Christianity had passed from the First Rome to Constantinople, the Second Rome, and from there finally to Moscow. It was no accident, then, that Ivan took for himself the title of tsar', the Russian version of Caesar, or that he adopted for his seal the double-headed eagle of Byzantium. The idea of Moscow as the Third—and as the doctrine went, the final—repository and guard of Orthodoxy ("a fourth Rome there shall not be," so the saying went) was linked to the memory of the Council of Florence [1439] at which, in a bid for Western help against the invading Turks, the Eastern Orthodox patriarchs (with one exception) signed a union with Rome. This union established a principle of "unity in faith/diversity in rites" that is still operative within Roman Catholicism today. From the Eastern point of view, however, the patriarchs had without warrant compromised on the four chief points under dispute between East and West: the filioque clause inserted by the Western Church into the Nicene Creed, the use of unleavened bread in the Eucharist, the doctrine of Purgatory, and the principal of papal primacy. In the Russian mind, the Greeks were now heretics because of this union, leaving Russia alone as Orthodoxy's last bastion. Conflict on its western borders over the next two centuries with the likes of Poland, Lithuania, and Sweden kept the threat of Roman Christianity in the popular consciousness, even as it made available the benefits of Renaissance and Enlightenment learning through borderland cities like Kiev, which also emerged from Mongol domination at this time.

The seventeenth-century schism had its origins in the 1630s among a group of reform-minded clerics who called themselves the Zealots of Piety. This was late in the reign of Mikhail Romanov, the first tsar of the Romanov dynasty, which came to power as

Russia emerged from a period of national crisis known at the Time of Troubles. Mikhail's father, Filaret, was the patriarch of the church during his son's reign and *de facto* ruler of Russia until his death in 1633. As the country emerged from the Time of Troubles, he attempted to safeguard Orthodoxy from the heretical influences of Roman Catholicism and Protestantism through a policy of intellectual isolation from the West. The Zealots, also concerned with safeguarding Orthodoxy, viewed the crisis of the Time of Troubles—involving the collapse of the previous dynasty, a prolonged famine, and an invasion from Poland and Lithuania—to be evidence of God's displeasure at Russia's lack of faith. They therefore desired to remedy this situation by strengthening the church's authority, reforming its clergy and liturgical practice, and strengthening the faith and piety of the laity. They sought, for instance, to reform the popular observance of religious festivals, which in many places were interwoven with pagan elements, evidence of the fact that Christianity had never fully taken hold in Russia, but was overlaid on top of its pre-Christian religion in what Russian scholars have named *dvoeverie*, or "double faith." Church festivals were, moreover, in many places often little more than an excuse for drunken debauchery, in which even the clergy participated. An indication of the moral state of the church at the time may be inferred from a letter of the patriarch addressed to the clergy calling on them to refrain from drunkenness during Lent and concentrate on repentance. [1] One of the ways the Zealots sought to make the Orthodox faith a more significant part of people's lives was through the introduction of sermons into the Sunday services, a novelty at the time. Perhaps an even more important reform of the liturgy advocated by the Zealots was ending the practice known as *mnogoglasie* (lit. "many voices"). A development of the previous century, *mnogoglasie* was the practice of chanting different parts of the liturgy – in some cases as many as five

or six – at the same time, in order to shorten the very lengthy Eucharistic service. Obviously the meaning of the liturgy would be totally lost in this practice, but the letter of the law would be fulfilled: the service would be sung in its entirety. Nevertheless, this reform was resisted by many of the clergy. The best that could be achieved at this point was reducing the number of concurrent voices to two or three.

The reform efforts accelerated with the ascent of the next Tsar, Aleksei Mikhailovich Romanov, in 1645. In the first years of his reign a number of the Zealots were placed into important positions in the administrative hierarchy of the church. [2] In these years they also strengthened their ties with the Ukrainian and Greek churches. In 1649, Tsar Alexei ordered the Russian Patriarch to consult the Patriarch of Constantinople on the question of the Russian practice of *mnogoglasie*. The Greek Patriarch was categorical in his rejection of this liturgical innovation. At the same time, a new project was undertaken to correct translations of the church fathers and the service books, and for this Greek and Ukrainian scholars were recruited, as there was no one in Russia with a knowledge of Greek sufficient for the task.

This is where the trouble began. It was soon discovered that there were a number of differences between the Greek and Slavonic versions of the liturgy, including the prescribed way of making the sign of the cross. In this case, the Greek practice was to join the thumb to the index and middle fingers, while folding the remaining fingers into the palm. The Slavonic arrangement of the fingers was rather more complicated. It involved crossing the thumb over the ring finger, keeping the index finger straight, and slightly bending the other two. In this way, the fingers made the shapes of the letters in the Greek abbreviation of “Jesus Christ” (ICXC). One of the Zealots, a monk named Nikon who had risen to the prestigious position of

Metropolitan of Novgorod, was elevated to office of patriarch in 1652. His unusually quick ascent to the top of the church's hierarchy, together with his exalted view of the church's position in society and role in the affairs of state made him supremely confident in his ability to pursue his reform agenda. Moreover, he had discovered in the Patriarchal library the documents of the establishment of the Moscow Patriarchate in 1589 and a subsequent council in Constantinople, in which the Greek Patriarch charged the Russians to "keep the correct faith, free from innovations." [3] Thus emboldened, Nikon unilaterally ordered the publication of new service books in the year following his ascent. These new service books incorporated a number of changes that brought them into conformity with the Greek liturgy, on the assumption that the Greeks had preserved the more ancient practices.

Here was the rub: Nikon's deference to the Greeks, the Second Rome, which had long ago fallen into apostasy. As one Russian historian has observed, "Quite simply, Nikon decided to accept as authoritative the contemporary Greek liturgy. If the [Zealots of Piety] were willing to recognize the gradual accretion over time of minor errors in Russian liturgical practices, they were completely unprepared to recognize the primacy of a tradition 'sullied' by constant intercourse with Islam and undermined by its past compromises with Rome (especially the Florentine Union of 1439). ... In short, it was impossible for them to reconcile their vision of the Third Rome with Nikon's revolutionary initiatives." [4]

Even before the new service books were printed, Nikon issued an edict in 1653 just before Lent, which instructed the clergy to change the manner of bowing during certain services (from the waist, not all the way down to the knees), and to henceforth make the sign of the cross with three fingers in the Greek fashion. The priest of the Church of the Mother of God of Kazan

across Red Square from the Kremlin, known as the Kazan Cathedral (*Kazanskii Sobor*), was one of the first to refuse to comply with this order, and he was defended by a number of Nikon's fellow zealots. Among these were Ivan Neronov, a leading Zealot who, inspired by the example of St. John Chrysostom, had become famous as a preacher, first in the area of the Upper Volga (to the northeast of Moscow) and then in Moscow itself. He was also one of the chief advocates of reforming the practice of *mnogoglasie*.

As Patriarch, Nikon saw himself as co-equal with the tsar, following the Orthodox theory of *symphony*, the marriage of church and state. Opposition to his decrees was simply not to be tolerated. Priests who resisted the liturgical reforms were forbidden from leading services, and the most outspoken among them, including Neronov and the charismatic archpriest Avvakum, were arrested, defrocked, and sent into exile at monasteries in the Russian wilderness. [5] Neronov later recanted his opposition, but Avvakum remained an outspoken opponent of Nikon's reforms and became the chief spokesman, and eventually martyr, of the Old Believers (more accurately Old Ritualists, *staroobriadtsy*).

After acting unilaterally, Nikon sought the endorsement of his actions at a church council called in the following year, which confirmed his right, and even his duty as the guardian of Orthodoxy, to make reforms, although it did not explicitly mention the matter of how to make the sign of the cross. Only one bishop present at the council objected to the reforms, Pavel of Kolomna. Nikon consulted with the Patriarch of Constantinople, who was looking to Russia to liberate the Greeks from the Ottoman Turks. The Patriarch of Constantinople recommended excommunication. Bishop Pavel was removed from his see, exiled to a monastery in the north, and according to Old Believer sources later flogged and burned to death without a

trial. [6]

It did not take long for Tsar Alexei to view Nikon's overbearing administration of the church as a threat, and the patriarch soon found himself out of favor at court. In 1658, only six years after taking office, Nikon—in an apparent power play—withdrew from public life but refused to resign his position as patriarch, thus paralyzing the church administration at the highest level. After numerous attempts to bring him out of his self-imposed exile, a church council in 1666-7 deposed him and elevated a new patriarch. But while the council rejected Nikon himself, it nevertheless upheld his reforms. Half of the members of the council were foreigners, who were vehemently opposed to both the old ritual and the doctrine of the Third Rome. [7] And so, after several failed attempts a compromise with those who resisted the reforms, the council declared the old practices heretical, and prescribed secular punishments for those who practiced them. [8]

Here was an astonishing thing. In the eyes of the Old Believers, the leaders of the church, in league with suspect foreign prelates, were casting aspersions upon the last refuge of the true Orthodox faith, the Third Rome. Avvakum later wrote of his experience at the council, recounting how he appealed to Byzantine and Russian precedents, including the major Russian church council of the previous century, and praised the piety of the Russian saints. By his account, "the [foreign] patriarchs fell to thinking, but our people, they jumped up like wolves and howled and spit on their own fathers, saying, 'Our Russian saints were stupid and did not understand, they were not learned. How can we trust them, they could not even read?'" [9] If this account—written some twenty years after the events described—can be trusted, it provides an important insight into the attitudes of the respective parties in this dispute. As one scholar noted, "Russians committed to the Old Belief now

confronted a terrible choice: to acquiesce and risk eternal damnation or to continue their commitment outside the Church which had been their lifetime spiritual home.” [10]

As many chose the latter option, this now became more than an internal church dispute. Resistance to the council’s decision was regarded as rebellion against the state. A year after the council, conservative monks of the Solovetskii Monastery openly rebelled against the decrees of the council, and held out against the tsar’s army within their fortified walls for eight years. Other Old Believers went even further. If the tsar allowed such heresy and apostasy to occur, then only one conclusion was possible for many of the Old Believers: the tsar himself was in league with the Antichrist, or in some versions, was the Antichrist himself. Such a belief would later lead to the deaths of tens of thousands of Old Believers at their own hands. Self-immolation was seen as preferable to cooperation with the Antichrist. Many others, who were unwilling to die for the cause, fled to the periphery of the Russian state, where in subsequent generations they became unwitting agents of Russianization. Thus, what began as a power struggle among the higher clergy ended as a mass movement of resistance against the state. For the next century, “every popular uprising ... was fought under the banner of the Old Belief.” [11] Only in 1971, under the Soviet regime, did the Russian Orthodox Church finally rescind the anathemas of seventeenth century and recognize the validity of the Old Ritual. [12] Nevertheless, the schism remains unhealed.

What do we learn from these two episodes of church conflict? We learn that religious conflict can mask fundamental cultural and social differences. We learn that however necessary the kingdom of the left hand may be to preserve order and avoid chaos, its incursion into—or confusion with—the kingdom of the right hand can be disastrous for church unity. [13] We learn that it is

hazardous for those who are *simul iustus et peccator* in this life (at the same time saint and sinner, as Luther insisted) to claim a monopoly on the truth. Certainly in the two cases considered here there was middle ground that was left unoccupied. While the Catholic position in the Donatist controversy is surely ultimately the correct one when faced with the question of the efficacy of the baptisms performed by an unfaithful or immoral priest, surely everyone would acknowledge that unfaithful and immoral clergy are counterproductive to the church's mission. It was certainly a failure on the part of the Catholics not to take into account the experience of their Donatist opponents, those who had endured the brunt of the persecutions, the loss of family members and loved ones—however self-righteously that experience might have been expressed. Something similar might be said of the case of Patriarch Nikon and his former associates among the Zealots of Piety. His zeal for the reform that all of them wanted became compromised by his own ambition for power, which polarized the situation. Equally uncompromising were his opponents, who could not be satisfied with toleration, but insisted upon a complete restoration of the Old Ritual, and a corresponding anathema of the perceived innovations of the other Eastern Orthodox Churches. In both cases the church was irrevocably damaged. As anyone who is married knows, being right does not guarantee a successful marriage. [14] I say this as someone who loves to be right. Ask my wife. But as St. Augustine himself has taught us (in a development of his thought after his writings against the Donatists), on this side of the grave we have no sinless options. We have only the choice between sin and sin. There may indeed be times in the life the church, as in the life of a married couple, when separation may be the lesser sin than remaining together. But I suspect that those instances are far fewer than the number of schisms and divorces that actually take place—and in any case, schism and divorce are always tragedies.

Our only hope is in the forgiveness of God for Jesus' sake for the sinful choices we make, and in the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to work in us faith that is active in reconciling love for one another. May God grant us such grace.

Endnotes

- [1] Paul Bushkovitch, *Religion and Society in Russia: The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 56.
- [2] V.V. Vinogradov, *Introduction to Archpriest Avvakum, the Life Written by Himself: With the Study of V.V. Vinogradov* (Ann Arbor: Michigan Slavic Publications, 1979), p. 10.
- [3] Bushkovitch, p. 60.
- [4] Vinogradov, p. 12.
- [5] Bushkovitch, 60.
- [6] Notes to Vinogradov, pp. 223-4.
- [7] Vinogradov, p. 22.
- [8] Cherniavsky, Michael, "The Old Believers and the New Religion," *Slavic Review* XXV (March 1966), p. 8.
- [9] Cited in Bushkovitch, p. 70.
- [10] Vinogradov, p. 22.
- [11] Cherniavsky, p. 20.
- [12] Vinogradov, p. 24.
- [13] See Martin Luther, *On Secular Authority*.
- [14] I am indebted to Frederick A. Niedner for this observation.

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