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## The Pussy Riot Case and the Peculiarities of Russian Post-Secularism

*Translation by April French*

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*This article analyzes materials generated by and related to the Pussy Riot Trial, which was conducted in response to the scandalous “Punk Prayer” performed by the musical group on February 21, 2012 in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior of the Russian Orthodox Church in Moscow. These materials are used to illustrate the peculiarities of the post-secular situation in Russia, focusing on two particular issues: 1) The “Punk Prayer” and the religious-secular boundary; 2) The “Punk Prayer” and post-secular hybrids. Uzlaner emphasizes that post-secularism does not follow a single pattern and has not led to a unified normative vision. To understand the post-secular situation, we should turn our attention to collisions between different normative models of post-secularism, each supported by its own actors and activists. The Pussy Riot case and its discussion in the public sphere allow us to single out two such models: the “pro-authority” (supported by state and Church leadership) and the “oppositional” (supported by the political opposition and opposition within the Church).*

**Keywords:** desecularization, “Punk Prayer,” post-secular, post-secular hybrids, Pussy Riot.

MANY authors, including several from Russia, have studied the problem of post-secularism sufficiently well from a theoretical standpoint (Kyrlezhev 2004; Morozov 2007; Uzlaner 2008a; “Postsekuliarnaia filosofia” 2011; “Religiia v postsekuliarnom kontekste” 2012). There is, however, a clear lack

First published in Russian as: Uzlaner, Dmitry. (2013). “Delo ‘Pussi raiot’ i osobennosti rossiiskogo postsekularizma.” *Gosudarstvo, religiia, tserkov’ v Rossii i za rubezhom* 31(2): 93-133.

of empirical research that could operationalize the current theory as it applies to Russian realities. In this article, based on material surrounding the Pussy Riot case, I intend at least partially to fill this lacuna.

Judging from its resonance in the mass media, the Pussy Riot case became the main event of 2012, if not in the social and political spheres, then at least in the area of religion. The essence of the case and the sequence of events can be briefly summarized as follows: on February 21, 2012, at the very height of the presidential election campaign, the musical group Pussy Riot, already well-known for its scandalous artistic-political protests, organized a performance in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior. The group entered the church in the guise of regular visitors; then the participants removed their outer clothing (under which multi-colored dresses were hidden), put on balaclavas, and began to perform a so-called "Punk Prayer"<sup>1</sup> called "Mother of God, Banish Putin!" on the soleas<sup>2</sup> of the church, directly in front of the Royal Doors of the iconostasis. Security guards and chance witnesses escorted the women out of the building. No one detained them, so they easily dispersed into the crown outside. While at the church, the women did not have time to sing the entire song, but later that day a video based on the performance appeared online, with the full text of the "Punk Prayer" and photos from the Cathedral of Christ the Savior ("Pank-moleben" 2012). By the next day, the Orthodox movement known as the World Russian People's Council had already filed a lawsuit with demands to bring criminal prosecution against the participants in the performance.

The Tagansky District Court of the City of Moscow subsequently sanctioned the detention of Nadezhda Tolokonnikova and Maria Alyokhina, members of the punk group, on March 5. On March 16, a third member of the group, Ekaterina Samutsevich, was arrested. On July 30, Moscow's Khamovniki District Court started to review the

1. The song title "Punk Prayer" (the most widespread English rendering) is "*Pank-moleben*" in the original Russian. In order to grasp the extent of the radicalism entailed in Pussy Riot's invocation of this term, it is essential to understand that the word *moleben* refers to a special service of prayer that can be conducted either by a priest or a layperson. In Russian history, the *moleben* has been used in times of national crisis to beseech Christ or the Virgin Mary for protection. Neither "prayer" nor "prayer service" fully captures the essence of this term. When not using the term "Punk Prayer" specifically, we have varied between "prayer" and "prayer service" as contextually approximate English renderings on a case-by-case basis. — Translator and editors.
2. The technical term for the portion of the raised floor that extends beyond the iconostasis in an Orthodox church. — Translator.

essentials of the case. On August 17, Judge Marina Syrova sentenced the three members of Pussy Riot to two years at a minimum-security penal colony for hooliganism (Article 213, Clause 2 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation<sup>3</sup>). This sentence was appealed to the Moscow City Appellate Court. On October 10, 2012, the City Court upheld the sentence of the Khamovniki District Court with no changes for Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina.<sup>4</sup> It did, however, commute Samutsevich's sentence to probation; she was freed at court.

The records of this case constitute a very interesting source for the sociological, anthropological, and psychological analysis of contemporary Russian society. This article will limit itself to the consideration of two themes that shed light on the specific nature of Russia's particular post-secular situation: (1) the "Punk Prayer" and the religious-secular boundary; and (2) the "Punk Prayer" and post-secular hybrids (to be defined below).

One of the key intuitions that guided me as I wrote this text was the notion that the post-secular situation is one of profound ambiguity, confusion, and fluctuation. Deeply rooted boundaries, constants, and definitions concerning the religious and the secular are now actually open-ended and have been called into question (Uzlaner 2008b). The standard secular vision of a socially differentiated society, in which the religious and the secular are separated into distinct corners, is beginning to break down. This creates the impression that religion is encroaching upon those spaces that are supposed to be alien to it (whether politics, law, culture, economics, etc.). In contrast to the prevailing opinion, however, the blurred boundaries characteristic of post-secularism and the incursion of religion into secular space (and of the secular into religious space) are not subject to a unified logic, nor do they fall in line with a supposed monolithic form of post-secularism. On the contrary, as will be shown based upon the materials of the Pussy Riot case, the issue at hand involves the collision of various competing normative models of post-secularism, each supported by its own activists and interest groups. In the course of our examination, we will delineate at least two such models, the "pro-authority" and the "oppositional." It is most interesting to observe how the secular state has been pulled into this conflict through the law enforcement and court systems. At times, this conflict has taken on the character of a (quasi-)theological dispute, and the state has begun to concern itself

3. Article 213 is located in Part II, Section IX, Chapter 24 of the Criminal Code.

4. On December 23, 2013 Tolokonnikova and Alyokhina were released due to amnesty.

with problems for which it does not have the corresponding expertise, language, or properly trained personnel to solve.<sup>5</sup>

Since this case has achieved such a high profile, I consider it necessary to clarify my position as a scholar. In this article, I do not aim to prove the correctness of one of the sides or one of the possible visions of post-secularism. Instead, using the materials of the Pussy Riot case, this article will lay out what constitutes Russian post-secularism, along with its associated conflicts.

### **The “Punk Prayer” and the Religious-Secular Boundary<sup>6</sup>**

As mentioned above, in the post-secular context, the boundary that separates the religious and sacred from the secular and profane is now in flux. Constant battles are taking place in order to determine exactly which way this boundary should run (Fenn 1978). The once well-defined boundary is now becoming “a frontier” in which various “activists and actors of desecularization” are staging front-line battles (Karpov 2012). Indeed, the very status — religious or secular — of one or another phenomenon is now disputed, as is the issue of who exactly has been vested with the authority to certify such a status. In this conflict, the final word of interpretation remains with the state, which must constantly resolve any conflicts that arise through its law enforcement agencies and court system, with the participation of specialist experts who are part of the state’s “ideological apparatus” (see below). After all, the unregulated dislodging of previous footholds is a constant and obvious threat to the state. In the new post-secular situation, the secular state thus finds itself pulled into (quasi-) theological disputes.

Pussy Riot’s “Punk Prayer” and the ensuing debate graphically illustrate these processes. The Russian court was pulled in *volens volens* to decide fairly specific theological questions in order to restore the blurry religious-secular boundary and to assert once again the balance destroyed by the “Punk Prayer.”

5. Traditionally, the Church has dealt with such issues, because it formulated what could properly be considered “religion” by sanctioning or anathematizing new forms of piety, authenticating miracles and relics, regulating new folk movements, etc. Yet, with the rise of the modern sovereign state, which asserts the full powers of its authority in a controlled territory, these functions have gradually been transferred to the jurisdiction of secular authorities (Asad 1993: 36–39).

6. This section is based on an earlier publication (Uzlaner 2012).

## The “Punk Prayer”: A Religious or Secular Activity?

The first conflict of interpretation that arose in connection with the “Punk Prayer” had to do with how to characterize Pussy Riot’s performance appropriately. Was the action religious (a prayer service, holy foolishness or Maslenitsa (Carnival) foolishness), or was it secular (sacrilege,<sup>7</sup> hooliganism, an artistic performance, or a political and civil protest)? People hold disparate positions as to whether it was a genuine (though radical and untraditional) prayer service, an intentional form of blasphemy and hooliganism, an inappropriate artistic performance, or a civil and political protest. Thus, it is not surprising that the specific classification of the “Punk Prayer” is being determined by the interests of warring sides, each of which is intent upon its own version of drawing the boundary between the religious and the secular.

Let us begin with the members of Pussy Riot. By all appearances, the group’s participants themselves did not fully understand how to describe what they had done accurately. Thus, in their idiosyncratic press release (Pussy Riot 2012a), there are signs indicating that it was a specifically religious act:

“Because peaceful demonstrations with hundreds of thousands of people are not producing immediate results, before Easter we will ask the Mother of God to banish Putin more quickly,” announced Serafima, the most pious punk feminist, to the rest of the team as they set out for the Cathedral [of Christ the Savior] in the February morning frost.

Yet, in one of their first interviews after their act (Dobrokhotov 2012), there are signs that Pussy Riot took the act to be more like an artistic performance (i.e., something secular) masked by external Orthodox attributes:

Correspondent: So if you are turning to the Mother of God, does it mean that you are positioning yourselves as believers?

7. While “sacrilege” or “blasphemy” might generally seem to fall into the religious category, inasmuch as they are inconceivable apart from a religious context, the interpretation consistently implied in this article suggests that in the Russian context they are frequently regarded as an expression of secular ideology embodied in the deliberate entrance into the religious sphere with the intent to disrupt and/or disrespect. — Translator.

Kot [Cat]: Well, some of us are believers, but I certainly wouldn't say we were "Orthodox." This appeal was more like a game, an artistic move.

Schumacher: Yes, it was a unique subversion.

Here, of course, with the words "more like," the fundamental and emphatic ambiguity of the action becomes apparent. The ill-defined position of those who sang the "Punk Prayer" hindered its final classification as a religious or secular act.

Yet, in the end, the position that insisted upon the religious character of the "Punk Prayer" reigned until the beginning of active investigative proceedings, as demonstrated by this excerpt from a statement published on Pussy Riot's blog (2012c) on March 4, 2012 (i.e., practically at the moment of their arrest):

In all of our public statements, we constantly emphasize that the punk prayer "Mother of God, Banish Putin" was truly a prayer — a radical prayer directed to the Mother of God with a request to prevail upon the earthly authorities and the ecclesiastical authorities who take their cue from them. Among the two-dozen Pussy Riot members, many are Orthodox believers for whom a church is a place of deep prayer. Yes, our prayer overstepped the bounds of what is acceptable for many in a church. But we did not desecrate the church, nor did we blaspheme. We prayed, and many priests do not doubt that "Mother of God, Banish Putin" was a true prayer. We passionately prayed to the Mother of God, asking her to give us all the strength to fight against our incredibly merciless and wicked overlords. And we will continue to sing songs and will pray for those who want us killed and thrown in prison, because Christ teaches us not to wish death or prison on those whom we do not understand.

To what can such a clear emphasis on the specifically religious aspect of the "Punk Prayer" be attributed, as distinct from the earlier more ambivalent position that emphasized an artistic, subversive composition? Perhaps the defense attorneys encouraged this interpretation, since it allowed them to count on the most minimal punishment or even on complete immunity from legal prosecution on the basis of the constitutional right to freedom of religion (Article 28 of the Constitution of the Russian Federation). However, another interpretation is also possible: the "Punk Prayer" attains maximum radicalism when it is recognized as a prayer and not as an political performance art (a flashy but fleeting performance in the context

of global artistic events). When “Mother of God, Banish Putin” is understood precisely as a prayer, it turns out to be a courageous claim to Christian content and values, their reorientation into a different course from the one set by those who speak officially on behalf of the Russian Orthodox Church.

For the purposes of this article, the crux of the matter is that the “Punk Prayer” sheds light on the “pro-authority” model of post-secularism, implicating it in the close interaction of ecclesiastical and secular authorities, complete with an unusual “exchange of gifts” (i.e., political protection in exchange for moral support in the context of a growing protest movement).<sup>8</sup> The “oppositional” model stands against this “pro-authority” model, with the “Most Holy Mother of God and Ever-Virgin Mary” at the head of a protest march and civil opposition. As a prayer, Pussy Riot’s performance is a challenge to the authority of the Patriarchate, a contestation of its monopolistic claims on both the Russian Orthodox legacy and the stipulation of the terms of this legacy’s interaction with the secular reality of Russia’s sociopolitical life. The members of the punk group exhibited an awareness of this point throughout the entire affair. Yet over time in their rhetoric, this awareness yielded more and more to an alternative interpretation of the “Punk Prayer” as political performance art, apparently as a consequence of the international campaign in support of the punk activists.<sup>9</sup>

Let us turn now to the perspective of the ecclesiastical authorities. By all accounts, the official representatives of the Church sharply judged the radical challenge of the “Punk Prayer.” From the very beginning, they fundamentally refused to see in it any kind of connection to a meaningful religious activity. Immediately following the initial news of Pussy Riot’s performance, Fr. Vsevolod Chaplin (2012), chair of the Moscow Patriarchate’s Synodal Department for the Cooperation of Church and Society, posted a piece called “Blasphemy at the Royal Doors” on his blog, *Orthodox Politics*. Vladimir Legoida (2012), chair of the Synodal Information Department, repeats Chaplin, writing that the performance was “a

8. Pussy Riot’s performance took place just as civil protest was on the rise. If we take the position of the group’s participants at face value, their act was incited by the support that the Patriarch showed for Vladimir Putin in early February 2012, at the time of Putin’s election to a third term.
9. Curiously, any record indicating that Pussy Riot once considered the “Punk Prayer” a religious activity has disappeared from the group’s official blog and is no longer accessible.

blasphemous and loathsome act.” In this interpretation, Pussy Riot’s “Punk Prayer” was an unmistakably secular action; the unsanctioned invasion of the profane — art, politics, and ideology — into a sacred space that is alien to it; and the perpetration of blasphemous and disorderly acts in that space.

Insisting upon the secular character of the “Punk Prayer,” official representatives of the Church demanded that secular authorities alone should handle the case. In the words of Chaplin (“Pank-feministki” 2012), “the crime committed (and I am convinced that it was definitely a crime) should be exposed and judged in the courts.” Here, one sees the Church’s desire to distance itself fundamentally from the legal process. As Legoida (2012) writes, “The Church does not have the right to directly interfere with the operations of the law enforcement agencies, which are working on this case seriously and conscientiously.” In this instance, we observe a categorical refusal to analyze the situation in theological language, to translate it to the level of religious significance, or to see in it echoes of any problems that might exist in modern Orthodoxy. Perhaps the harsh reactions of many Orthodox spokesmen against Archdeacon Andrei Kuraev’s position stemmed from such categorical refusals (Kuraev 2012b). Kuraev (2012a) attempted to place the “Punk Prayer” in a specifically religious context and to see in it a religious act that does not contradict Orthodox traditions (carnavalesque form of transgression during *maslenitsa*, a week of carnival before Lent), although he believed the women who participated in the “Punk Prayer” were not fully cognizant of this.

In their interpretations of the “Punk Prayer” as a secular act, Church authorities have sought to maintain for themselves the monopolistic right to delimit the religious and the secular and to sanction or forbid any non-traditional religious forms that arise inside the controlled space of Russian Orthodoxy. If the “Punk Prayer” were actually a prayer, it would be an unsanctioned attempt to redraw the boundaries that separate the religious and the secular. For this reason, under no circumstances can the Church grant it the status of a prayer. To them, it is nothing but blasphemy and hooliganism, and they believe that the particular form of post-secularism posed by the “Punk Prayer” should, therefore, be summarily rejected.

Let us now examine the views of the so-called “schismatics” (i.e., those Christians in opposition not only to the Russian Orthodox Church, but also to the existing political regime). Considering the above, it is unsurprising that “schismatics” have been inclined to place

decisive emphasis upon the religious character of the “Punk Prayer.” Thus, according to Yakov Krotov, a priest from the Kharkov-Poltava Diocese of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church, which does not recognize the authority of the Russian Orthodox Church:

Based on the canons of the Byzantine Church, this particular act was not *sviatostatstvo* (sacrilege). The main root of *sviatostatstvo* is the verb *tat'*, the stealing of church valuables. In this case, there was no robbery at all. What is more, strictly from a formal standpoint, there was not even blasphemy. Thus, it was technically a prayer within a church. The methods and forms of this prayer are untraditional for central Russia, but it was technically a prayer (Sharyi 2012).

Vladimir Golyshev (2012), the author of the satirical play *Lyzhneg* about the current Patriarch,<sup>10</sup> repeats Krotov’s sentiments:

1. The girls came to a house of prayer in order to pray.
2. They prayed in the way they considered most fitting for our time and for the given location.
3. Today, in the liturgical practice of Russian Orthodox parishes, there are so many wild, unauthorized ad-libs — all of them vulgar, tasteless, and often openly blasphemous — that to speak of the violation of any kind of “rule” by the Pussy Riot girls is simply laughable.

Such an interpretation makes a claim to a redefinition of the boundaries of the religious and the secular, asserting boundaries that differ from those defined by the ecclesiastical authorities. The “Punk Prayer” is a religious protest not only against Putin, but also against the Church itself. According to these newly drawn boundaries, many of the Church’s practices turn out to be outside the bounds of the sacred, unlike the scandalous “Punk Prayer.” Put another way, Pussy Riot’s performance, in this interpretation, becomes a symbol of another, “oppositional” version of post-secularism, in contradistinction to the “pro-authority” version.

Let us turn at last to the wider Russian public sphere. In Russian society, the “Punk Prayer” evoked widely varying approaches to its proper classification. For example, Yuri Samodurov (2012), a human

10. The title of this play, *Lyzhneg* (lit: lover of alpine skiing), refers to the rumors that Patriarch Kirill is addicted to alpine skiing. This implies that the Russian Patriarch is fond of worldly pleasures.

rights activist and the former director of the Andrei Sakharov Museum and Public Center, underscored the particularly secular, political performance art character of the “Punk Prayer”:

(...) for a moral, political, and legal evaluation of this religious blasphemy, society (including citizens who are believers), the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church, and law enforcement agencies must consider that the meaning and purpose of [Pussy Riot’s] performance was absolutely *not* to be a *militantly atheistic or anti-religious act*; it was a purely secular and unquestioningly *political act*.

For how else is it possible to conscientiously and appropriately interpret the oft-repeated lyrics sung by the girls in a beautiful chant much like a genuine prayer — “Mother of God, rescue us from Putin!?”

The opposition politician Alexei Navalny (2012) showed solidarity with those supporting this interpretation of the “Punk Prayer” as a secular action when he described Pussy Riot as “silly girls who committed minor hooliganism for the sake of publicity.”

For the opposition, such an interpretation of the “Punk Prayer” makes complete sense. On the one hand, the opposition does not wish to argue with Orthodox believers, who constitute a significant portion of the electorate, so it does not look for a religious meaning in the act. On the other hand, it seeks to see in everything a political subtext and a civil protest that must take on more and more exalted forms.

Yet by no means did all of Russian society sympathize with this secular interpretation. For example, the curator and art critic Andrei Yerofeyev, who together with Samodurov was a defendant in a criminal case against the exhibit “Forbidden Art,” does not agree with Samodurov’s treatment:

“It seems to me that in this instance, the question is not about a performance (aktsiia) of contemporary art, but about an act (aktsiia) of young believers,” he said, adding that the act became an expression of protest against the way the head of the Church, without consulting his flock, is supporting one of the candidates in the presidential election.

“These young believers came to the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, to the home of the Patriarch, and conducted a prayer service — that is what Pussy Riot called their musical appeal to the Mother of God. This uncanonical form of prayer is a prayer service in a punk style” (Karev & Krizhevskii 2012).

Thus, the “Punk Prayer” found itself at the intersection of various interpretations. And behind each one stood a preferred version of the correct position of the religious-secular boundary and a particular normative vision of post-secular Russia.

### **The Cathedral of Christ the Savior: Religious or Secular Space?**

A second conflict of interpretation was associated with the location of the “Punk Prayer,” the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. Is this church a secular/profane or a religious/sacred space? Again, one or the other answer to this question emanates from the different normative visions of post-secularism defended by various sides.

Official representatives of the Church saw the “Punk Prayer” as a secular/profane behavior, hooliganism, and blasphemy conducted in a religious/sacred space. The participants in this performance, however, took the directly opposite position, saying that they conducted a religious act — a prayer service — in a place that is actually profane. An official statement by Pussy Riot (2012b) declared:

We believe that it [the Cathedral of Christ the Savior] is not a church, but a shame (ne khram, a sram). The Shame of Christ the Savior. And it is not a house of the Lord, but an office of the Russian Orthodox Church. We came formally to the office of the Russian Orthodox Church to speak out. Rather than a place of spiritual life, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior looks more like a business center — banquet halls rented out for exorbitant prices, a dry cleaner and laundry service, and a parking lot protected by security guards. The website of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior shows that “The Hall of Church Councils is a multi-purpose hall (...) Various events take place in the Hall of Church Councils, including concerts of church choirs, folklore ensembles, and symphony music, solemn ceremonies and other events.” The hall is equipped with two snow makers, two smoke machines, and a bubble maker. As you see, everything was prepared for our “Punk Prayer.” We presented our church choir and our solemn punk-act prayer service using the 64-channel Midas Heritage 2000 sound board owned by Russian Orthodox Church, Inc. and included in the list of ecclesiastical equipment on the church’s website.

Krotov agrees with the view that the Cathedral of Christ the Savior is a secular space: “[Pussy Riot] chose a church that does not belong to the

Russian Orthodox Church but is the property of the Moscow Mayor's Office. It has often been said that topless runway modeling takes place there and that women display diamonds. And the response has been: "This is not [a part of] the Patriarchate, but the property of the Moscow Mayor's Office" (Sharyi 2012).

The logic of these people's rhetoric, which excludes the Cathedral of Christ the Savior from religious space, is perfectly clear. They are criticizing the Church's current policies and the version of post-secularism on which the Church insists. They have chosen to target the Cathedral of Christ the Savior as the chief symbol of these policies. As in the case of the status of the "Punk Prayer," we again find ourselves in the very epicenter of a multi-faceted conflict of interpretation, as various sides attempt to draw the religious-secular boundary in their own way.

### **Just Who Are "Believers"?**

The third and final interpretive conflict touches on the fundamental question of who exactly count as "believers," since it was "believers" whose feelings turned out to be injured by the "Punk Prayer." It was in the name of "believers" that the entire judicial process took place, and members of Pussy Riot went to prison specifically for hatred toward "believers." Yet who can be called a believer? Who can be recognized as a rightful representative of the social group "Orthodox believers", whose religious feelings were or were not insulted and against whom did Pussy Riot (or did they not) direct intentional hatred?

With respect to this question, we once again encounter serious disagreement. For example, the journalist Maxim Shevchenko, who identifies himself as an Orthodox believer, justifies his indignation toward Pussy Riot by rehashing the absolutely secular idea of Samuel Huntington concerning the "clash of civilizations." Shevchenko (2012) sees the "Punk Prayer" as "an invasion of the front-line squadrons of liberal Western civilization into the personal life of millions of Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians, Georgians and Armenians."

Yet some people who identified themselves with Orthodoxy voiced even more radical judgments:

- They should have dragged the whores out of the church by their hair and impaled all that filth on a stake, so no one would dare to mock the Russian Orthodox faith again.

- (...) do not be offended if they break your legs next time. Christians are sick and tired of being weak.
- If I had been one of the church clergy, I would have stripped them to their underwear, rolled them in honey and *pukh* [poplar down], shaved them bald and thrown them out in the freezing cold in front of the gathered television cameras.
- For the desecration of the church, they must be burned (...) PUBLICLY!... They are beasts.
- Hanging should be the punishment for things like this. I wonder, will they die tomorrow or will they first be tortured?<sup>11</sup>

To what extent is such a reaction characteristic of a believing Christian? How can the court certify that the lawsuit was truly submitted by believers and not by an ideologue in the highest degree, a person directed by fits of passion and thoughts in keeping with Huntington's ideas?

Fr. Igor Gagarin, a believer of a rather different sort, offers another reaction:

The Christian has something that no one else in the world has. There are words that are not comprehensible to many, yet to us, they are not simply comprehensible but also, I believe, extraordinarily precious. "But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you..." (Matt. 5:40<sup>12</sup>). It seems to me that the very essence of the difference between us Christians and all other people is encapsulated in these words. Many people say that we should not take revenge. As far as I know, even Islam says that to avenge is good, but to forgive is better. To forgive? Yes! Not to take revenge? Yes! But to LOVE?! Humanity has never heard such a thing except from Jesus Christ. And so the proposals to punish these lost sheep sound unchristian.

In many blogs, I have read things like, "What would they have done to those hooligans if they'd gone into a mosque?!" We don't need things in our churches to be like a mosque! Let the Muslims deal with those who defile their mosques in a Muslim way, but we will handle things in a Christian way. And how exactly? "If your enemy is hungry, feed him; if he is thirsty, give him a drink..." (Rom. 12:20). And right there we also read, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good" (Rom.

11. For a collection of such pronouncements, see Marsh Nesoglasnykh (2012, March 3).

12. The correct reference is Matthew 5:44.

12:20<sup>13</sup>). What could be more wonderful and exalted? And how bitter will it be if we refuse to do so in practice? By responding to evil with good, we do not give ourselves over to evil, but we conquer it with the only true victory. If we respond to evil with evil, then who is the victor but the one who pushed these foolish girls into their act [i.e., Satan]? Are we really going to be his puppets?!

Human justice requires that evil be punished. But we want something else, something more. We want evil to turn to good. The latter is so much higher than the former! Perhaps this seems utopian and completely impossible. But, praise God, every once in a while, such things do occur, and not all that rarely. Are there really so few examples?! (“Pank-feministki” 2012).

The members of Pussy Riot, along with their defense attorneys, followed the same logic. They did not want to recognize the parties injured by the “Punk Prayer” as believers who have the right to complain about their insulted religious feelings.<sup>14</sup>

Krotov unambiguously draws attention to the impossibility of considering the injured parties to be believers:

Correspondent: Can they [those who feel insulted] publicly demand punishment?

Krotov: No! If they believe that the Lord Jesus Christ is the Savior, they cannot do it even in their hearts. If they do not believe this, then, of course, their reaction can be exceptionally cannibalistic, or they can hanker to throw punches and knock out a few teeth. But if a person has had even the slightest experience of an authentic encounter with Christ, with the Kingdom of God in this world, he understands that a desire to avenge and punish is satanic (Sharyi 2012).

As we see, the religious-secular boundary is disputed even on the level of the injured parties. Are the persecutors of Pussy Riot really genuine believers or just pseudo-believers? And is it really true that genuine Orthodox Christians cannot allow themselves to demand punishment, even in their hearts? Here, we again step into a (semi-) theological issue that had to be decided by a secular court.

13. The correct reference is Romans 12:21.

14. See examples of this in the later part of the “Investigators and Judges as Theologians” section below.

Thus the “Punk Prayer” caused the boundary between the religious/sacred and the secular/profane to hang in midair. In the subsequent public reaction, the “Punk Prayer” rendered things that had previously seemed fully defined and immovable — prayer, church, and believers — ambiguous and flexible.

### **Investigators and Judges as Theologians**

The paradoxical nature of the situation is that in the Pussy Riot case, we do not simply encounter eternal disputes about eternal issues (e.g., Who are Christians? What is a church? What can legitimately be called genuine prayer?), but we encounter an *eternal dispute* that must receive a *concrete, instant resolution*. Otherwise, public peace will not be restored. The state must definitively decide this dispute as the sovereign arbitrator, putting the contested religious-secular boundary into place and separating the opposing sides into distinct corners. In order for this to take place, both the court and the investigators must have solidarity with one of the possible interpretations, effectively recognizing its truth in a given concrete historical situation.

Let us consider how the court decided all three questions discussed above (i.e., how to classify Pussy Riot’s performance, the church’s space, and real believers). The indictment explicitly interpreted the “Punk Prayer” as a secular action, the essence of which was common hooliganism carried out under the inspiration of religious hatred toward the social group “Orthodox Christians” (Article 213, Clause 2 of the Criminal Code). In the interpretation of the official indictment (*Obvinitel’noe zakliuchenie* 2012), what the Pussy Riot members called “a radical prayer addressed to the Mother of God” became “the commission of a rude violation of public order, expressing clear disrespect for society motivated by religious hatred and hostility and motivated by hatred with reference to any social group, by way of performing provocative and insulting actions in a religious building while attracting the attention of a wide circle of believing citizens.”

In the indictment’s interpretation, the “Punk Prayer” was reduced to “provocative and insulting actions.” It denied any intentionality of the acts committed, recognizing only the motive of “religious hatred and hostility.” According to the indictment, the girls:

vulgarly, provocatively and shamelessly moved around the soleas and ambon [a projection of the soleas], access to which is strictly forbidden to visitors. Over the course of approximately one minute, motivated

by religious hatred and hostility, they shrieked and yelled out expletive phrases and words that were insulting to believers. They also jumped around and lifted their legs, imitating dances and the striking of blows against imaginary opponents with their fists (*Obvinitel'noe zakliuchenie* 2012).

The indictment's position depended upon the third evaluation prepared by a team of expert witnesses, after the first two had not found anything objectionable in the "Punk Prayer." The defense accused the third team of expert witnesses, who prepared this evaluation, of clear bias (see below). The text of this expert evaluation is especially interesting in that it explicitly classifies the "Punk Prayer" in sacred-profane terms. The expert witnesses reduce the purpose of the performance to "a ploy to intermingle the sacred with the profane and foul" (*Zakliuchenie komissii ekspertov* 2012). They interpret the "Punk Prayer" as a profane phenomenon rudely invading sacred space:

The sacred space here was a place of worship [an Orthodox Church], its interior with the corresponding religious paraphernalia, containing objects venerated by Orthodox believers. These include a portion of the Lord's Robe, one of the religious relics venerated by all Christians.

The profane and foul here includes the entire performance itself, as well as its separate elements — the song's deceptive invectives against Orthodox clergy and values, the use of obscene and expletive language, shrieks, and the bodily movements of the women who took part in the performance, etc. (*Zakliuchenie komissii ekspertov* 2012).

As the investigation progressed, any interpretation of the "Punk Prayer" as an unconventional but still religious activity — complete with prostrations, signs of the cross, and the singing of psalms — was fundamentally rejected. At best, the witnesses allowed into the trial interpreted the act as an intentional mockery and a parody of religious behavioral patterns. In particular, according to the interpretation of Mikhail Riazantsev, sacristan at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior, the actions committed by the girls are reminiscent of "the activity of the League of the Militant Godless from the 1920s and 1930s, an organization that jokingly parodied sacred rites conducted by the Russian Orthodox Church, such as processions of the cross, public prayer services, etc." (*Obvinitel'noe zakliuchenie* 2012). Other witnesses upheld Riazantsev's position, classifying the "Punk Prayer"

either as an intentional mockery of Orthodoxy or as a type of “demonic activity.”<sup>15</sup>

In its sentence (*Prigovor* 2012), the court was in full solidarity with the position of the prosecution, classifying the “Punk Prayer” as hooliganism, that is, a secular action wholly devoid of any substantive aspects. The “Punk Prayer,” according to the logic of the court, entailed nothing but hatred toward the social group “Orthodox Christians.”

Of course, it is worth recalling that the position of the members of Pussy Riot themselves did change slightly. At court, they were already inclined to interpret the “Punk Prayer” as a secular phenomenon. They emphasized that it was political performance art directed against the fusion of political and ecclesiastical power at the highest level.<sup>16</sup> Echoes of their previous position (that the “Punk Prayer” was a prayer service) only occasionally crept into the statements of both the accused and the defense. In particular, defense attorney Violetta Volkova noted during a court session, “The court is attempting to retreat from politics into the criminal sphere. Yet the girls are being tried not for brightly colored dresses and an incorrect sign of the cross; they are being tried for a prayer, and this prayer was political” (Kostiuchenko 2012c). During her questioning at trial, Tolokonnikova referred to the words of Krotov: “It was not blasphemy. This is clear if you simply read the text carefully. The priest Yakov Krotov spoke out about our prayer. He said that the form of the prayer was untraditional for central Russia, but that it was technically a prayer” (Kostiuchenko 2012b).

During the trial, the defense attempted to write the “Punk Prayer” into a religious context with the goal of proving that Pussy Riot did not violate any Orthodox canons with their actions. Volkova said, “The expert witnesses claim that the girls parodied Orthodox rites through ‘excess movements.’ They do not specify which ‘excess movements.’ The girls blessed themselves with the traditional three-fingered sign of the cross and performed full prostrations. And in not one of the eight church councils, which by now I know practically by heart, is it forbidden to cross oneself with one’s back to the altar. One can pray with one’s back to the altar; one can pray!” (Kostiuchenko 2012b). Thus, Volkova attempted to prove that on formal grounds the “Punk Prayer” could be considered a prayer service and not the violation of a

15. See, for example, the testimony of the witness L. A. Sokologorskaia.

16. See below for more on the intersection of the religious and political spheres as a “post-secular hybrid” that was problematized over the course of the proceedings.

church's unwritten rules of behavior. Furthermore, Samutsevich gave a revealing response to a question by the prosecutor:

Prosecutor: Is it permissible in a church to dance and sing, while yelling out battle cries like “Holy shit!”?

Samutsevich: Do you want me to read you a lecture on the traditions of travelling minstrelsy (*skomoroshestvo*)? Minstrelsy has been in the Church, and it exists to this day.<sup>17</sup> It is permissible (Kostiuchenko 2012a).

For what reason did the punk group members reconsider their position? Why did they reject the religious conceptualization of their own action for a more comprehensible interpretation of the “Punk Prayer” as political performance art? Although one can probably not answer this question definitively, perhaps this transformation was connected to the reaction of the worldwide public sphere concerning the Pussy Riot case. The West interpreted Pussy Riot’s case primarily as a limitation of the group members’ political freedoms and a denial of the artist’s right to self-expression (e.g., Human Rights Watch 2013). It is entirely possible that this reaction predetermined Pussy Riot’s final position.

In the conflict concerning the location of the performance of the “Punk Prayer,” the defense continued to insist that, from a legal standpoint, the Cathedral of Christ the Savior is a profane space. Volkova directed attention to the fact that “the church building belongs to the Foundation of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. According to its bylaws, the foundation does not have a religious function. In other words, illegal religious rites take place at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. The upper sanctuary is a replica of a religious structure, much like a representation of a person. It has hands and feet, but no soul” (Kostiuchenko 2012c). The court, however, rejected the defense’s interpretation and favored solidarity with a more conventional reading:

The defense argues that the actions of the accused cannot be viewed as having taken place in a church, since the Cathedral of Christ the Savior

17. In this statement, Samutsevich seems to be following a recent tendency in Russian popular culture to equate the term *skomoroshestvo* (medieval East Slavic traveling minstrelsy) with holy foolishness (*iurodstvo* in Russian, a term with a long history in Eastern Christianity, prominently in the Byzantine Empire and medieval Russia). We should stress that these are in fact two different, although somewhat related, historical phenomena. — Translator and editors.

is not actually a church, nor has it ever been transferred to the Russian Orthodox Church, but it has only been granted for use by the Foundation of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior. According to these arguments, the conduct of ecclesiastical rites is not part of the statutory activity of the Foundation, so the Cathedral of Christ the Savior is [merely] a replica of a religious structure. The court finds these arguments untenable.

In its outer appearance, the building of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior corresponds fully with an Orthodox church, having cupolas crowned with crosses. The interior space of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior also corresponds with Orthodox canons. It has annexes, an altar, an iconostasis, a soleas, an ambon, and other such facilities. The church's walls have been painted in conformity with Orthodox tradition. The Orthodox Church recognizes these premises as a church and conducts religious events (rites) there in accordance with its statutory purposes.

The building complex of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior belongs to the city of Moscow. The church's foundation runs the operational administration of the complex. The Cathedral of Christ the Savior has been transferred without charge to the Russian Orthodox Church for permanent use.

As for ecclesiastical administration, this church has the status of a metochion [parish dependency] of the Patriarchate of Moscow and all Rus', an organ of the Russian Orthodox Church. The Bishops' Council conducted a religious ceremony called the Great Sanctification, which conferred on the Cathedral of Christ the Savior the status of a church, according to Church canons.

The presence of this building (address: 15 Volkhonka Street, Moscow)—along with the facilities used for the performance of ecclesiastical rites and other spaces such as a hall for Holy Synod meetings, a refectory, and even a parking lot—does not, in the eyes of believers, diminish the designation of this structure as a church.

In order to evaluate the status of the given building in connection with this criminal case, it is also material that the accused entered into the building as into a church, desiring to perform the aforementioned actions there, as in a cathedral of the Russian Orthodox Church. They did not hide this fact (*Prigovor* 2012).

In this way, yet another (semi-) theological dispute—specifically the dispute over whether this building could be considered a church—was decided in the courts.

Finally, in a somewhat curious way, the court also ruled on the question of who can be recognized as a believer and how to

define the social group “Orthodox Christians.” How did the court (and before that, the criminal investigation) delineate the social group “Orthodox Christians,” toward which hatred was shown in the performance of the “Punk Prayer”? And how did the criminal investigation, and subsequently the court, select the people who would be recognized as legitimate spokespersons for the entire insulted “social group?” The simplest means of doing this would be to use obvious formal criteria: self-identification, proof of baptism, knowledge of the Creed, prayer and church attendance. If viewed from the surface, the investigation did work along these lines; at least the testimony of nearly every witness was prefaced with a similar story: “He is an Orthodox Christian who was baptized as a child and affiliates himself with believers.”<sup>18</sup> Yet, if one were to dig slightly deeper, it would become clear that these criteria played only a secondary role. The truth is that many defense witnesses who matched these criteria were not recognized as representatives of the requisite social group and were correspondingly deprived of the possibility to testify at court.<sup>19</sup>

If one relies on court records, one finds that the social group “Orthodox Christians” was formulated as the trial unfolded based upon a person’s attitude toward the “Punk Prayer.” This was the decisive criterion for a person to fall into this group. As a result, the social group “Orthodox Christians” did not logically precede the “Punk Prayer” and become insulted by it. On the contrary, this group came into being in the process of the investigation and court trial precisely *through* a negative view of the “Punk Prayer.” The court constructed this social group on the basis of feelings of humiliation and insult brought on by the “Punk Prayer,” and on the basis of a desire to punish the offenders. Only those who conformed to these criteria — those who were ready to admit that they were insulted, to consider themselves the object of hatred, and to demand punishment — were admitted as witnesses.

Such social construction could not satisfy the side of the defense. Defense attorney Volkova brought up the point that the group “Orthodox Christians” was far from unified: “It is unclear why Orthodox believers are separated out into a single group! Among

18. This particular example comes from the testimony of the plaintiff S.V. Vinogradov, assistant to the chief power engineer of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior.

19. For example, Aleksei Navalny, a politician and Orthodox Christian, was not accepted as a witness for the defense. See “Sud nad Pussy Riot: Svidetelei zashchity ne puskaiut v zdanie, u politseiskogo epilepticheskii pripadok” (2012).

the Orthodox, there are many groups, and they are far from friendly to one another” (Kostiuchenko 2012b). In her final statement to the court, Tolokonnikova attempted to give an alternative interpretation of the category “believer,” highlighting the importance of compassion and mercy for any Christian:

(...) I know that right now a huge number of Orthodox people are advocating for us. In particular, they are praying for us at the court, praying for the Pussy Riot members who are held in confinement. We have seen the small booklets that these Orthodox believers are handing out. The booklets include a prayer for those held in confinement. This alone is a demonstration that there is no such thing as a unified social group of Orthodox believers, as the prosecution is trying to present. It does not exist. And now, more and more believers are coming to the defense of Pussy Riot. They are of the opinion that what we did is not worth five months in a pre-trial detention center, nor is it worth three years of incarceration, as the esteemed prosecutor wants (Kostiuchenko 2012d).

According to Tolokonnikova, the category of “Orthodox believers” constructed by the court should hardly be recognized as such: “It was not in vain that Christ spent time with prostitutes. He said, ‘It is necessary to help those who are stumbling’ and ‘I forgive them.’ But for some reason, I do not see this in our trial, which is taking place under the banner of Christianity. It seems to me that the prosecution is trampling Christianity underfoot!” (Kostiuchenko 2012d). In other words, Tolokonnikova tried to oppose the court’s interpretation with her own vision of who is a genuine Christian. In the interpretation of the defense and the accused, a much larger stress in the construction of the group “Orthodox Christians” is placed on mercy, forgiveness for all, and compassion.

From this brief overview, it is evident how initially the investigation, and then the court, resolved the ambiguous (semi-) theological problems that arose in connection with the Pussy Riot case. In fact, they did not so much solve the problems as they restored the boundaries that had been blurred by the “Punk Prayer,” thereby confirming the course of the particular model of post-secularism that the state has attempted to establish in recent years. Yet the questions brought forth by the “Punk Prayer” — concerning what constitutes a genuine prayer, a genuine church, or a genuine Christian — have hardly disappeared after the rendering of the verdict. With a sufficient measure of certainty,

one can, therefore, predict that the temporarily reigning calm on the religious-secular boundary will soon explode again at the hands of proponents of other answers and of another normative vision of post-secularism. And the state, for its part, will again have to involve itself in “theological matters” to which it is unaccustomed.

### **The “Punk Prayer” and Post-Secular Hybrids**

The court and the investigation played a key role in unfolding of what I call “post-secular hybrids,” a second interesting development pertaining to the Pussy Riot case. These “post-secular hybrids,” which are characteristic of the post-secular situation, stand out in the records of the case.

Let us begin with a theoretical digression. What do we mean by the concept of “post-secular hybrids”? As is well known, one of the most noticeable manifestations of secularization was the process of the so-called “institutional segregation of religion,” which, in its turn, was incited by the more general process of social differentiation. In the most general sense of the word, social differentiation is the process of the complication of society through its specialization. Every function of a society has its corresponding institution (Wilson 1966: 56; Berger 1969: 113). Karel Dobbelaere (2000: 22–23) explains that, as a result of modernization, a society differentiates itself along functional lines that develop corresponding functional subsystems (economics, politics, science, family, etc.). Every subsystem acts on the basis of its own mediating element (money, power, truth, love) and also on the basis of its own values and norms (success, the separation of powers, reliability and trustworthiness, the primary significance of love, etc.). Such a modern, socially differentiated society stands against the traditional as against “a social order regulated by religious requirements” (Wilson 1976: 10). Correspondingly, in the process of secularization, the social order frees itself from religious requirements, and each of its subsystems (including religion itself) achieves autonomy.

The transition to post-secularism is leading to a further transformation of this social differentiation of society. This transformation, however, is not going in the direction of a return to the pre-modern situation “of a social order regulated by religious requirements,” but rather to a situation of the emergence of post-secular hybrids marked by the interpenetration of religion and societal subsystems from which it had once been isolated. Talal Asad was one

of the first to direct attention to this phenomenon. With reference to “the revival of religion” (a fact long acknowledged in scholarly literature) and its conversion into one of the key factors in both domestic and foreign policy, Asad (2003: 182) asserts:

When religion becomes an integral part of modern politics, it is not indifferent to debates about how the economy should be run, or which scientific projects should be publicly funded, or what the broader aims of a national education system should be. The legitimate entry of religion into these debates results in the creation of modern “hybrids”: the principle of structural differentiation — according to which religion, economy, education, and science are located in autonomous social spaces — no longer holds.

This process has also had an impact on Russia. The Pussy Riot case shed light on several very striking Russian “post-secular hybrids.” I intend to examine three of them: the intersection of the religious and political spheres; religion as part of the public order; and confessional experts on religion.

### **The Intersection of the Religious and Political Spheres**

The most obvious post-secular hybrid of post-Soviet Russia is the formation of an elaborate apparatus for the intersection of the political and religious spheres. Some call this “the clericalization of the Russian state,” while others call it “fruitful collaboration between state institutions and the representatives of Russia’s traditional confessions and their corresponding institutions.” From the standpoint of the theory of desecularization, it is fully possible to consider the Russian political regime as an example of “a desecularized regime.” Vyacheslav Karpov (2012: 142) offers a definition of this term as “a specific normative and politico-ideological course of action, whereby desecularization manifests itself, expands and is supported.”

According to the conception of the Pussy Riot members, their “Punk Prayer” was directed against the particular post-secular hybrid that developed as a result of the actions of the “desecularized regime.” The essence of this hybrid, in Pussy Riot’s interpretation, is summed up as follows: a rapprochement between the presidential administration and the Moscow Patriarchate, in which the former receives moral and spiritual support in its struggle against the opposition, and the latter receives political influence and economic

benefits. “Indignation” motivated the actions of the punk group members in the church. Tolokonnikova in particular directed indignant words at the Patriarch in her final statement to the court: “See what Patriarch Kirill says! ‘The Orthodox do not go to protests’” (Kostiuchenko 2012d; cf. “Patriarkh Kirill” 2012). During her questioning, she clearly explained the motives of her behavior at the Cathedral of Christ the Savior: “We sang part of the chorus and ‘*Sran Gospodnia*’ [Holy Shit]. I have apologized and will continue to apologize if that offended anyone, but that was not my intention. This idiomatic expression referred to the previous verse about the fusion (*srashchivanie*) of the Moscow Patriarchate and the state, Putin and Kirill. ‘*Sran Gospodnia*’ is our evaluation of the situation in the [Russian] state” (Kostiuchenko 2012c). Samutsevich, in her final statement to the court, more explicitly described her view of this post-secular hybrid and subjected it to criticism when she spoke word-for-word about “the intersection of the religious and political spheres” (Kostiuchenko 2012d).

According to the logic of the Pussy Riot members, their “Punk Prayer” struck a blow against the particular intersection of the religious and political spheres offered to Russia by its “desecularized regime.” If we return once again to Karpov’s article (2012), then in this context it is fully possible to examine Pussy Riot’s performance through the logic of the typology of a “grassroots” reaction to the establishment of desecularized regimes “from above.”<sup>20</sup> From all appearances, such extensive public uproar and such an angry reaction to the “Punk Prayer” were due to the song’s interference with a process of the directed hybridization of politics and religion *controlled from above*. This implies that controlled hybridization can take place only in specific ways and through specific channels that have been officially or unofficially sanctioned. Orthodoxy and Christianity in general can increase their influence on society, but only in ways that are sanctioned, protected and *politically safe*. Any other hybridization is outlawed and subject to prosecution.

In her final statement to the court, Samutsevich turned her attention to this state of affairs: “In our presentation, without a patriarchal blessing, we dared to combine the visual image of Orthodox culture with the culture of protest, leading intelligent people to the thought that Orthodox culture belongs not only to the Russian

20. If we employ Karpov’s classification, the “Punk Prayer” is a reaction that combines elements of an “innovative” strategy with a strategy of “rebellion” (Karpov 2012: 146).

Orthodox Church, the Patriarch, and Putin, but it can also be on the side of civil insurrection and the oppositional mood within Russia” (Kostiuchenko 2012d). Through its performance, Pussy Riot placed the credibility of both Church and state authorities under question. The group did so by declaring that Christianity and Orthodoxy belong not only to those authorities, that Christianity is multifaceted, and that it is not compelled to fall in line with the “pro-authority” model of post-secularism.

Key to understanding the “Punk Prayer” is that it was not directed against the very possibility of the intersection of the religious and political spheres or against the very possibility of post-secular hybrids as such. It was directed against a concrete manifestation of the post-secular hybrid – the *symphonia* of state and Church. The “Punk Prayer” instead advanced another kind of hybrid as an alternative, one in which Orthodox culture turns out to be on the side of civil protest (i.e., the “Punk Prayer” set the “oppositional” model of post-secularism against the “pro-authority” model). In this context, Pussy Riot proposed a radically different, innovative reaction to the post-secular situation: instead of a classical, secular reaction that implies the intention to terminate the developing post-secular hybrids and to separate religion again from that with which it had become intertwined, the punk group, acting in the logic of new post-secular realities, attempted to set one hybrid against another.

Apparently, in the conditions of post-secularism, the question is not about the restoration of the old stubborn boundaries and the overcoming of hybridity as such. It is a question of the choice between *different* hybrids. In place of the hybrid that Pussy Riot rejected, it proposed its own. The “Punk Prayer” was an act of the appropriation of religious content and the use of religious space with the goal of redirecting them to another course not sanctioned by the authorities. The fundamental radicalism of Pussy Riot’s “Punk Prayer” consisted in the way it directed Christian content against the prevailing policy of the country.

There is every indication that the expert witnesses, the prosecution, and the court were all disinclined to see the obvious political component of the “Punk Prayer” due to this radical course toward the construction of alternative modes of intersection between the religious and political spheres. The depoliticization of Pussy Riot’s performance was one of the internal conceptual threads lending coherence to the entire legal process, from the pre-trial investigation

to the reading of the sentence. For example, the expert witnesses (*Zakliuchenie komissii ekspertov* 2012) depoliticized the performance as follows:

Taken as a whole and judging from the song's general conceptual composition, an analysis of the lyrics of the Pussy Riot song under investigation exposes the clear artificiality and logical groundlessness of the inclusion of the following textual fragment, which was placed at both the beginning of the song and repeated at the end: "Mother of God, Virgin, Banish Putin/Banish Putin. Banish Putin."

This textual fragment appears to be completely disconnected from and out of context in the song, which was fully devoted to the insult and mockery of the social group of Orthodox believers, not of Putin. The aforementioned fragment, considering that insulting words and expressions were not used in relation to this person [i.e., Putin] within the song itself (as opposed to other figures who were mentioned therein), can thus testify only to the ancillary and secondary nature of the song being performed for any motive of political hatred or hostility.

It is highly likely that the participants, fully cognizant of the possibility of incurring liability for performing this act and foreseeing the incurrence of such liability, employed the surname "Putin" in their song in order to create a basis for the subsequent artificial positioning of this performance as an expression of political protest against authorities and high officials, etc., and in order to make themselves out to be "prisoners of conscience who were persecuted by the authorities for their criticism" and so on. In actuality, it was a familiar technique of "the removal of responsibility," a common ruse (*Zakliuchenie komissii ekspertov* 2012: 18–19).

The Prosecutor employed this same strategy of depoliticization, virtually repeating the logic of the expert witnesses:

The defendants' statements about the performance's political motive are unfounded. Not one surname of any politician was pronounced within the church. An analysis of the song exposed the clear artificiality of the inclusion in the text, of "Mother of God, Virgin, Banish Putin!" The text was actually devoted to insulting the feelings of Orthodox believers. Putin's surname was mentioned only in order to create a pretext for the subsequent attempt to position the performance as a protest against the highest authorities (Kostiuchenko 2012c).

The attorneys for the plaintiffs used the same logic. In the words of attorney Lev Lialin, “When I entered this case, a civil crisis took place in my consciousness. I finally knew what a civil war was. The mass media was packed with outcries about politics and political prisoners. They were saying, ‘The girls are innocent...’ But it was not politics; it was filth!” (Kostiuchenko 2012c). In the sentence (*Prigovor* 2012), the judge showed unambiguous solidarity with the depoliticized interpretation: “There was no music or singing; there was chanting. There were no political motives or slogans; there were actions that insulted believers. It is improper to conduct oneself this way in a church.”

The court more or less unequivocally rejected the arguments of the defendants and their attorneys that it was impossible to ignore the political subtext of the “Punk Prayer.” As a result, Pussy Riot’s defense attorney Volkova felt compelled to state:

The court is attempting to retreat from politics into the criminal sphere. Yet the girls are being tried not for brightly colored dresses and an incorrect sign of the cross; they are being tried for a prayer, and this prayer was political. It would be a sin to turn our backs on this nail being driven now into the Constitution, from which blood is flowing. The Church has been turned into a memorial at the grave of justice, law, and human rights, all of which have been mockingly infringed (Kostiuchenko 2012c).

Tolokonnikova summed up the trial with the words, “This really hurts. They will not hear us” (Kostiuchenko 2012b).

Both the court and the investigators sought to deprive the “Punk Prayer” of its most radical dimensions. According to these authorities, the particular post-secular hybrid associated with the intersection of the religious and political spheres, the contours of which are discernible in Pussy Riot’s performance, had to be destroyed. It was necessary to disentangle the unsanctioned interlacing of religion and politics by showing that there was nothing in the “Punk Prayer” but hatred to Orthodoxy, for which certain insignificant political subtexts served as formal cover. Just as Pussy Riot undermined the post-secular hybrid created by the “desecularized regime,” so also the court had to destroy the hybrid that threatened to become its alternative.

In the context of post-secularism, religion and politics have become entangled. They are already inseparable. Yet a series of problems emerges. Who controls the conditions of this entanglement? Who

determines the legal channels by which it takes place? Finally, who should be declared the legitimate actors in this new post-secular space?

### **Religion as Part of the Public Order**

A second post-secular hybrid that became apparent during the Pussy Riot trial was the intersection of the internal norms of religious associations and the universal norms of state order. During the court proceedings, one issue came to a head: in a secular state, can the internal norms of religious associations be considered part of the public order and public principles to the extent that one could be sent to prison for violating them? In short, can someone be put in prison for violating the canons of the Council of Trullo?<sup>21</sup>

An open letter from various Russian attorneys (“Otkrytoe pis’mo” 2012), written immediately following the disclosure of the indictment, clearly specified this issue. In particular, the attorneys wrote:

Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina, and Ekaterina Samutsevich are accused of violating the rules of conduct in an Orthodox church. [According to the indictment,] they thereby demonstrated “blatant disrespect for the believers who were visiting and serving at the church”; “deeply insulted and denigrated the feelings and religious compass of believing Orthodox citizens”; “set themselves up against the Orthodox world”; and “demonstrably and pointedly attempted to dismiss centuries of preserved and hallowed ecclesiastical traditions and dogmas.” In the published indictment of these Pussy Riot members, there is not one word about activities that disturbed the public order or infringed on public safety.

The investigators accuse these women not of infringing on public order and safety, but of violating the canons and traditions of the Orthodox Church. Their behavior neither contradicted general state order nor undermined public safety. The operation of those prescriptions and proscriptions that they violated extend only to the territory of an Orthodox church. If they had done the very same thing outside of a church, it would not have been possible to accuse them of anything. The

21. The third expert evaluation enumerated the guidelines of the Council of Trullo (692 CE) as evidence of Pussy Riot’s violation of the rules of conduct within a church. This expert testimony laid the groundwork for the official indictment.

investigation does not demonstrate their violation of anything other than ecclesiastical rules.

The declaration of their activities as “hooliganism” equates the canons of the Orthodox Church with the norms of state order and signifies that the Orthodox Church is an inalienable part of the state. The filing of the indictment of “hooliganism” against Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, Maria Alyokhina, and Ekaterina Samutsevich is not merely a misuse of the Criminal Code, but also contradicts the secular character of our state, guaranteed by Article 14 of Russia’s Constitution.

The expert testimony, written by representatives of the specific post-secular hybrid associated with “the equation of Orthodox Church canons with the norms of state order” and the declaration that “the Orthodox Church is an inalienable part of the state,” argues:

It is important to note that the state confirmed the validity (...) of the internal constitutions of religious organizations through the legal norm of Clause 2 of Article 15 of the Federal Law “On Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations” (No. 125-F3 from September 26, 1997, including subsequent amendments). This law has enacted that the state respects the internal constitutions of religious organizations if said constitutions do not contradict the law of the Russian Federation (*Zakliuchenie komissii ekspertov* 2012).

In its decision, the court virtually sanctioned this post-secular hybrid, ruling that “the citation of ecclesiastical nomenclature and ecclesiastical norms, particularly the canons on conduct in a church, is employed solely for the purpose of defining whether or not there is a violation of the public order and a motivation of religious hatred and hostility in the actions of the accused” (*Prigovor* 2012). The effect of this argumentation is that from now on the canons of the Council of Trullo (as well as the canons of all other church councils) may very well be considered prescriptive with respect to the norms of public order.

In the same way that the court earlier sought to obliterate the specific post-secular hybrid discernible in the “Punk Prayer” — a hybrid that concerned the intersection of the religious and political spheres — Pussy Riot’s defense attorneys attempted in every way possible to demolish the specific post-secular hybrid sanctioned by the court. In particular, one of the defense attorneys noted, “[O]nly publicly disclosed rules apply. Where is the Council of Trullo published

[in our nation's laws]? Why are we citing ancient legal norms? We cannot live by the standards of Hammurabi, because that society used to cut off a person's hand for theft, and this does not accord with our understanding of humanism" (Kostiuchenko 2012c).

The Pussy Riot case has determined the course for the integration of the norms of religious associations into the body of ideas concerning the public order. This applies not only to Orthodoxy, but also to all of Russia's traditional confessions. In particular, the court gave such serious consideration to the position of the Council of Muftis in Russia that, in Pussy Riot's sentence, it quoted a letter written on April 3, 2012, by one of the organization's representatives:

From the standpoint of the canons of Islam, the unapproved public performance that occurred on February 21, 2012, in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior is conduct that must be condemned and that demands public apology for offense to the feelings of believers. Without question, any sanctuary (*khram*) contains holiness and is pervaded by a correspondingly exalted atmosphere, which those who are present should support, preserve and solemnly protect. Such a bacchanalia [i.e., Pussy Riot's act] discredits the status of the sanctuary and challenges the traditional way of life and the centuries-old traditions of the peoples of this country. It is clear from the perspective of Muslim culture that such behavior, not only within the walls of a religious sanctuary, but also outside of its confines, is sinful and damnable (See *Prigovor* 2012).

The expression "the spiritual foundations of the state" figures in the records of this case — particularly in the indictment, according to which Pussy Riot impinged upon said foundations. The use of this expression in court records represents the direct recognition of Orthodoxy as an inalienable part of the state. Although this expression had disappeared from the court's sentence, the pathos of the entire trial testifies to its being directed primarily against the denigration of these "spiritual foundations" by the "Punk Prayer."

### **Confessional Expert Witnesses**

A third post-secular hybrid that manifested itself over the course of the Pussy Riot case was the figure of the "confessional expert witness" (i.e., an expert witness who has certain confessional sympathies). Vsevolod Yurevich Troitskii, Vera Vasilevna Abramenkova, and Igor Vladislavovich Ponkin, who made up the third team of expert

witnesses, served in this capacity. In the final analysis, it was they who played the key role in forming the definitive logic of the indictment. It was they who gave the investigation the formulation with which the punk group was convicted after a rather expeditious trial (in particular, the statements suggesting a violation of the Apostolic Canons and the canons of the church councils). And it was they who came to the assistance of the prosecution when the two previous expert evaluations, conducted by the State Unitary Enterprise known as the Center for the Technology of Information Analytics,<sup>22</sup> found no basis for charging the members of Pussy Riot with the commission of any crime.

Timothy Fitzgerald (2004) has already clearly described the figure of the expert on religious matters as part of “the ideological state apparatus.”<sup>23</sup> The task of this ideological apparatus is to trace a line in the interests of the state that separates religion from that to which it does not belong, thereby implementing a semblance of police control over the latter. Yet, in the example of the Pussy Riot case, we see how the figure of the expert witness has been transformed. Secular expert witnesses were needed in the age of the ascendancy of secular ideology, but in the current situation of a transition to post-secularism, the state needs a somewhat different “ideological apparatus.” This apparatus must reposition itself under the policies and strategic tasks of a “desecularized regime.” The “confessional expert witness” nicely embodies this new characteristic of the “ideological apparatus.” Indeed, it is now no longer necessary to separate religion from social subsystems that have been fundamentally isolated from it. On the contrary, the state now deems it necessary to promote the formation of acceptable post-secular hybrids.

The Pussy Riot case legitimized the presence of clear confessional bias within expert testimony. Defense attorneys spent several hours trying to prove the invalidity of the expert testimony and the

22. The Center for the Technology of Information Analytics is an organization created by the Moscow City Government and the Administration of Moscow Province. It functions in part as a legal examining body. For the Pussy Riot case, center staff prepared two expert evaluations (*Pervaia ekspertiza 2012*; *Vtoraia ekspertiza 2012*) concluding that there was no basis for a criminal investigation of the women who took part in the “Punk Prayer.”

23. Louis Althusser introduced the concept of “ideological state apparatuses” in order to provide a more precise understanding of the operational nature of systems of government coercion, which act not only through violence, but also through ideology: “the Repressive State Apparatus functions ‘by violence,’ whereas the Ideological State Apparatuses *function ‘by ideology’*” (Althusser 2001: 97).

dubiousness of the handpicked expert witnesses. For example, Mark Feygin ascertained that “the expert witness Ponkin had a connection to a certain M.N. Kuznetsov, who is representing the interests of Potankin, a plaintiff against the punk group’s actions in this trial.” Feygin provided evidence for this: “Kuznetsov was one of Ponkin’s advisors when he defended his dissertation for his Juris Doctor degree. The dissertation was entitled *The Contemporary Secular State: A Constitutional and Legal Examination*. Moreover, [Ponkin and Kuznetsov] have co-authored books entitled *The Disgraceful Discussion about Religious Education in the Secular School: Lies, Substitutions and Aggressive Xenophobia* and *On the Right to Critically Evaluate Homosexuality*” (Kostiuchenko 2012b). Judge Marina Syrova, however, did not allow herself either to doubt the expert testimony or to summon the expert witness Ponkin for clarification. Similarly, she defended the post-secular hybrid that had crystallized during the trial, not allowing the defense to sever the coupling of secular science and confessional bias — a fusion inadmissible under secularism.

## **Conclusion**

This article has examined a variety of conflicting interpretations concerning the religious-secular boundary and what we have called “post-secular hybrids.” These conflicting renditions advance alternative normative images of post-secularism, and various groups are waging a battle for the fulfillment of their particular vision. We emphasized two such normative images: the “pro-authority” and the “oppositional.” I would like to underscore once more that the issue here is not about a choice between a dangerous post-secularism and a salvific return to the previous situation of a socially differentiated society. Rather, the main choice in the current situation is between various models of post-secularism and between different forms that can and should be assumed in particular by the hybridization of religion and politics, of public order and religious norms, and of secular knowledge and confessional belonging. It is likewise a choice between different approaches to drawing the constantly contested religious-secular boundary. The logic of the post-secularism dictated by the “desecularized regime” is not the only possible logic, as is evident from the Pussy Riot case files. The trial of the women who took part in the “Punk Prayer” became an arena for the battle between the proponents of different visions of post-secularism. The conclusion

of this battle is not yet predetermined. The state, the Church and society will have to continue searching for solutions to the issues raised by the “Punk Prayer.”

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