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## **Religious Freedom as a Marker of Modernity: The Imperial Bequest**

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*Representing a translation of the keynote address delivered at the international conference “The Varieties of Russian Modernity II: Religion, State, and Approaches to Pluralism in Russian Contexts,” this article relates some of the key findings of Werth’s recent monograph, The Tsar’s Foreign Faiths: Toleration and the Fate of Religious Freedom in Imperial Russia (Oxford University Press, 2014). It posits that religious freedom represents one major marker of modernity and goes on to recount the complex process by which religious freedom appeared in the years leading up to World War I. The presentation first briefly considers the Muscovite inheritance and the conception of religious toleration that resulted from that historical experience. It then discusses toleration in the imperial period, treating it as a matter of both practice and ideology. It finally examines the difficult and incomplete transition in Russia from “religious toleration” to “freedom of conscience.” The presentation demonstrates that just as modernity itself appeared gradually and with much contradiction, so too the development of religious freedom in Russia was beset by tensions and competing imperatives that complicated its progress.*

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THE goal of our conference, as I understand it, is to explore the relationship between a series of key concepts: religion, secularism, and modernity. There are many ways to approach such an exploration, something clearly underscored by the diversity of the papers on offer. I myself would like to approach it through a consideration of the problem of religious freedom in Russia, a problem central to my most recently published book. I propose that the scope and extent of religious freedom in a given society represents an important marker of modernity — not the only marker, of course, but an important one.

In developing this proposition, I find it worthwhile to make two points immediately. First, in my view the very idea of modernity is in some sense connected with the principle of secularism. Of course, I do not wish to be too categorical in making this point. Recent scholarship has amply demonstrated that religion does not disappear in a modern society, but to a substantial degree adapts to the conditions of modernity. Faith and veneration are often transformed rather than eliminated as a result of urbanization and the emergence of more complex social structures. Believers have proved perfectly capable of deploying particular aspects of modernity (technology, improved mobility, etc.) for the strengthening of their faith. I do not deny any of this, and the conference's papers suggest that these connections will be among our topics of conversation in the days ahead. Yet for all that, I propose that we can connect "modernity" to a certain "exit" of religion from the historical stage, in the sense that in the conditions of modernity religion does not occupy the same critical place that it did earlier as a foundation for politics, social organization, personal status, and the definition of collective identity; and in the sense that the supernatural, even as it remains important for some people, nonetheless no longer provides an all-encompassing explanation of the world.

Second, as I see it "modernity" also features a certain triumph of the individual over the collective. To simplify (perhaps too radically), the premodern person is deeply embedded in the community; his or her individuality is dissolved in the collective and to some degree is perhaps even negated. To a much greater degree the modern person has the possibility of self-definition, to depart from the collective (both literally and figuratively), to create an identity for him- or herself distinct from ancestors and relatives, and to defy ascription to one or another collective group. I am quite aware that this is a very simplified picture, but I do believe that if we speak in grand and general terms it is defensible.

So how does all of this relate to the issue of religious freedom? For one, religious freedom becomes more possible when (or to the extent that) religion no longer becomes a fundamental condition for determining the organization of society, the character of the state, the way of conceptualizing human diversity, and the determination of laws pertaining to marriage, inheritance, and so on. Secondly, religious freedom creates a certain crucial foundation for manifesting individuality. In its fullest form, it authorizes each person to identify her or his own relationship to God — or to reject the existence of the latter entirely — without any consequences for his or her civil life or legal status.

All of these considerations impel me to consider the path by which religious freedom appeared over the course of the imperial period of Russia's history. My supposition is not that *complete* religious freedom had appeared in Russia by the end of the tsarist period. Aside from the difficulty of defining what “complete” religious freedom would actually look like, it is clear that even on the eve of the Great War there were significant restrictions on religious life in imperial Russia. I should also clarify that for the most part my discussion here does not address the sectarian tradition within Orthodoxy (e.g., Old Believers and similar religious dissenters), but rather Russia's so-called “foreign faiths”—the country's various recognized non-Orthodox religions, whose adherents constituted roughly 30 percent of the empire's population by the imperial census of 1897.

My presentation will proceed in the following fashion. I will first say a few words about the Muscovite inheritance and about the conception of religious toleration that resulted from that historical experience. I will then discuss religious toleration in the imperial period, as a matter of both practice and ideology. Thereafter I will discuss the difficult and incomplete transition in Russia from “religious toleration” (*veroterpimost'*) to “freedom of conscience” (*svoboda sovesti*). This account will demonstrate, I think, that just as modernity itself appeared gradually and with much contradiction, so too the development of religious freedom in Russia was beset by tensions and competing imperatives that complicated its progress.

## **The Muscovite Inheritance**

On the Muscovite period one could in fact say a great deal, but I would like to offer the fairly straightforward thesis that a distinct tradition of religious toleration appeared in Muscovy and the early stages of the empire. It is of course true that one can point to various examples of

religious intolerance and even violence rooted in religious difference: the xenophobic statements of certain Orthodox bishops; mass conversions secured by elements of violence and coercion; the refusal to allow Jews into the country or the determination to expel them from it, and so on. Yet at the same time the very fact of Muscovy's considerable religious diversity (especially in the eastern and southeastern borderlands) created the conditions for a distinct kind of religious toleration in practice. To the extent that there was no effort in Muscovy, as far as I am aware, actually to develop a clear concept of religious toleration as such, one may even speak about the presence of religious toleration without a specific consciousness of it. For example, most people at the time seem to have accepted the basic proposition that every people (*narod*) had its own faith that was entirely appropriate to it. One can see this even in the way that religions were sometimes named: the "Tatar faith" (Islam), the "Russian faith" (Orthodoxy), the "German faith" (Lutheranism), and so on. Even in the nineteenth century one encounters references to the idea of the "natural faith" (*prirodnaiia vera*) of one or another community. I would venture to say that Muscovite authorities were more concerned about — and more hostile towards — "heresy" within the Orthodox community than they were about the adherents of other confessions.

Beyond this, two important circumstances eventually compelled state authorities not only to effectuate religious toleration in practice (as it were, unconsciously), but also to articulate that ideal more explicitly. In the first instance, I have in mind efforts of the tsarist autocracy to attract foreigners to Russia in light of their knowledge and expertise. Such foreigners, whether technical experts or farmers, demanded certain guarantees for the inviolability of their faith before resettling to Russia. And despite some resistance from the Orthodox Church, state authorities in many cases proved willing to oblige. An excellent example of this is the decree of Peter I in 1702, designed to attract foreigners with expertise to Russia. Among other things the decree declared: "By the power given to Us by the Almighty, We have no desire to compel the human conscience, and We readily grant to each Christian the responsibility of caring for his soul's bliss" (Preobrazhenskii 1997: 536). I will add here that "mixed marriages" involving an Orthodox spouse marrying a non-Orthodox one also became legal at about the same time for essentially the same reason.

The second circumstance leading to more explicit statements about toleration concerns the annexation of new territories where the population was primarily non-Orthodox. The late Muscovite and early im-

perial period were of course times of tremendous territorial expansion, and to a growing degree the annexations in question involved populations that confessed non-Orthodox religions. Such annexations were a good deal easier to effectuate and were less likely to produce strife when the tsarist state openly granted new subjects the right to confess their historical faiths and refrained from the application of coercion to their spiritual affairs. Thus in declarations announcing the annexation of many territories — the Baltic provinces, partitioned Poland, Crimea, and so on — one encounters explicit recognition of non-Orthodox faiths and promises not to encroach on their beliefs.

These practical considerations — the need to recruit foreigners and imperial expansion — were reinforced by a series of ideological developments in the second half of the eighteenth century and the first part of the nineteenth. These included cameralism (the ideal of the *Polizeistaat*), the Enlightenment, the “mysticism” and ecumenism that characterized the reign of Alexander I, and finally the famous triad of Minister of Education Sergei Uvarov. (Even the final of these — Orthodoxy, autocracy, nationality [*Pravoslavie, samoderzhavie, narodnost*] — actually placed its emphasis more on *traditional* religion than on Orthodoxy as such; the concern was that a religion — it did not matter so fundamentally which one from the standpoint of doctrine — had deep historical roots in a given community.) These, then, were the ingredients of the tradition of religious toleration that developed in early modern Russia — initially without much consciousness about the matter, and later in a more explicitly articulated fashion.

I will turn in a moment to the issue of religious toleration as an ideology of the tsarist regime, but before doing so, I would like to make three points about the situation that I just described and that formed a crucial element of life in Russia until the middle of the nineteenth century. First, the toleration of which I speak did not constitute full religious freedom by any stretch. There remained numerous restrictions on non-Orthodox proselytism, certain forms of marriage, conversion from one religion to another, and so on. One could say that religious toleration in that early modern sense granted a certain degree of freedom to entire faiths and churches, but not to individual believers as such. On the contrary, in the best traditions of the *Polizeistaat*, tsarist religious toleration presumed the subordination of each imperial subject to clerical authority, which was itself in turn recognized by the autocracy and regulated by its laws and decrees. In short, there is little basis here to speak of the right of subjects to determine their own religious identity. Second, this religious toleration by no means signified

the equality of all religions in Russia. On the contrary, aside from a brief period during the so-called Dual Ministry (1817–24), the Orthodox Church consistently retained its “ruling and predominant” status, which otherwise remained unquestioned. Finally, in my view the early modern Russian tradition of religious toleration was based on practical considerations to a much greater degree than it was on moral ones. One is indeed struck by the largely utilitarian character of proclamations of even prominent figures of the European Enlightenment. Consider Montesquieu, who at one point wrote “[t]hat it is not so much the Truth or Falsity of a Doctrine which renders it useful or pernicious to Men in civil Government, as the Use or Abuse of it” (Montesquieu 1949: 38). In this regard Russian tsars and tsarinas were excellent students of the *philosophes*. In other words, religious toleration was at this point not so much a value or principle in its own right as it was an instrument of rule.

### **Toleration as Practice and Ideology**

The last observation leads, in turn, to two others. First, precisely because toleration represented an instrument for ruling the country, its contours remained vague. Its precise meaning depended a good deal on the concrete situation at hand, and there was little effort to provide a concrete articulation of its nature. To my knowledge, the expression did not appear in the empire’s Fundamental Law (*Osnovnoi zakon*) or even in the statutes on the foreign confessions in the Law Digest (*Svod zakonov*), though there were a few references to it elsewhere in the Digest. In effect, the presumption seems to have been that the meaning of religious toleration was somehow self-evident or could be derived from the specific situation to which it might apply.

And yet at the same time — and this is the second point — this concept gradually became part of the identity of the tsarist regime. By this I mean that tsarist statesmen and their allies in the public convinced themselves that “religious toleration” was a core characteristic of Russia and its history; and that Russia granted its non-Orthodox confessions an appropriate degree of religious freedom — that is, liberty consistent with the historical conditions that had appeared over the decades and centuries. In this context I cannot resist citing an example of the term’s usage from the 1806 *Dictionary of the Academy of Sciences*: “Before all others, Russia alone may boast of its religious toleration” (*Slovar’ Akademii* 1806: 1046). Many commentators likewise insisted that religious toleration had a long history in Russia. Thus one author

remarked in 1826, “Russia has always distinguished itself before all states by its sensible and prudent religious toleration” (A. L. 1826: 260, 263). Officials in general tried to prevent situations that would produce “justified censure” (*spravedlivye narekaniia*) in response to the government’s violation of toleration. And in specific situations non-Orthodox subjects themselves referred to this principle in their attempts to secure the expansion of religious freedom on their behalf. To take just one example, in 1875 two dissident Mennonites in Saratov province wrote to the governor with a request that they be exempted from military service with the following appeal: “We dare to think that Your Excellency, as a representative of our enlightened age, will stand up for the idea of religious toleration” (GASO f. 1, op. 1, d. 2429, ll. 73–73 ob., petitions of Wilhelm Weber and Johannes Permlauer, 07.02.1878). In short, “religious toleration” became an important element in the dialogue between the state and its non-Orthodox subjects.

In this sense, we may say that toleration became a part of the ideology of the tsarist regime. It became a principle that lent the regime greater legitimacy (at the very least in its own eyes) and that distinguished Russia from Western countries, which had experienced a good deal more religious conflict in their history than had Russia. Thus if “religious toleration” initially served primarily as an *instrument* of rule, with time it did gradually acquire the status of a principle that guided the regime in its actions — not always and not consistently, to be sure, but nonetheless at times.

Two brief examples may illustrate this last point. In 1856, when the governor of Tauride Province proposed the imposition of restrictions on the right of Crimean Tatars to perform pilgrimage to Mecca, the Ministry of State Properties responded that the Hajj represented “one of the most important religious rituals” for Muslims and that “any limitation in this regard would not be in accord with the spirit of religious toleration, by which the Russian government has always distinguished itself” (RGIA, f. 383, op. 19, d. 24874, l. 5, minister of state properties V. A. Sheremet’ev to interior ministry, 07.11.1856). In another example, Orthodox missionaries in the Volga region sought to destroy structures erected for pagan veneration on the grounds that some of the local population was formally Orthodox. But the Ministry of Interior remarked that attempts to prevent Pagans — that is, non-Russians who had not been formally baptized into Orthodoxy — from performing their religious rites were “in some measure inconsistent with our rules on religious toleration” (GAKO, f. 237, op. 151, d. 2064, l. 34, interior ministry as recounted by local bishop, ca. 1849). To an extent at least, then, the

principle of religious toleration did restrain the regime from certain violations of the religious freedom of its subjects. To be sure, toleration did not constitute full religious freedom. Commentators frequently underscored various limits of toleration, while officials sometimes emphasized that one or another non-Orthodox faith was “merely” (*lish’*) tolerated, in this way emphasizing the limited character of its freedom and its subordination to Orthodoxy in the empire’s hierarchy of confessions. For confessions that had previously been predominant in a given territory — for example Lutheranism in the Baltic provinces and Catholicism in the Kingdom of Poland — recognition as only a “tolerated” faith represented a downgrading of sorts.

Moreover, in time the degree of religious freedom in Russia began to look inadequate in comparison to what obtained in other countries of Europe. True, the situation in those other European countries was far from ideal, and the process by which religious freedom expanded there was complicated and involved backtracking as well as movement forward. The *Kulturkampf* in Germany, the position of non-Catholic communities in Spain, France’s Islamic policy in Algeria, the position of Orthodox believers in Hapsburg Transylvania — all of these cases show that Europe was not a paradise of religious liberty. But for all that, if there were deviations and a degree of atavism, nonetheless European countries managed gradually in the nineteenth century to expand religious freedom and to eliminate various restrictions and forms of discrimination based on confessional difference. Moreover, the concept of “religious toleration” in Europe gradually gave way to the idea of “freedom of conscience,” according to which religious freedom represented not a privilege bestowed by the state but rather a natural right existing independently of it. From this standpoint, the state represented not the *source* of religious freedom but rather its *guarantor*. And the freedom in question pertained not so much to entire churches or communities but rather to individual subjects or citizens. Against this background, the degree of religious freedom in Russia appeared less impressive.

### **From “Religious Toleration” to “Freedom of Conscience” (An Incomplete Transition)**

How, then, should we describe that development of religious freedom in the last half-century or so of the tsarist regime? In my view, we may identify two contrasting tendencies that simultaneously drew Russia in different directions — one backward and one forward. The first ten-



dency was defined by those factors that imposed further restrictions on religious life in Russia or at least prevented the expansion of religious freedom; the second tendency involved those factors that promoted such expansion. At least until 1905, and to a degree after that as well, these two tendencies coexisted in a rough equilibrium, which brought Russia to an impasse in its religious policy by the early twentieth century. It was only the revolutionary crisis of 1905 that broke this impasse. Let us consider each of these tendencies in greater detail.

In the case of the first tendency, the principal factor in question was the national question. One of the main “limits on religious toleration,” about which statesmen and commentators spoke with some frequency, was the proposition that under no circumstances should toleration extend to any “political” manifestation of religion. This included any intrusion of clergy into the “politics” (the governing of the country), any forms of piety that supposedly pursued “political” goals, any actions of spiritual institutions that could be regarded as an encroachment on the prerogatives of the emperor and his bureaucracy. Officials regarded such instances as a kind of blasphemy — a perversion of spiritual values — and as an assault on autocratic power. From this perspective the government not only had the right to deny the sanction of toleration to such actions, but also the duty to interfere in the affairs of that church or community in order to set things right. Of course the autocracy itself used religion for its own political goals (though it rarely spoke of its actions in those terms), but after all it did have, by its own conception, a monopoly on the legitimate right to engage in politics. Clergies certainly did not have that right.

But if in one sense this principle — the non-interference of religious institutions in “politics” — was fairly straightforward, the situation became a good deal more complicated in the context of rising nationalism. The concept of “natural faith” — the tight connection between faith and ethnicity — meant that religious rituals, confessional institutions, the actions of clergies, and so on, acquired “political” significance with ever greater frequency as nationalist aspirations grew. Likewise, the autocracy’s own efforts to deal with the national question in Russia, for example by promoting “Russification” (*obrusenie*), compelled it to intrude with ever greater frequency into the spiritual affairs of the “foreign confessions,” for example by imposing regulations on parish schools and requiring the use of Russian in confessional administration. The January Insurrection of 1863 in the Kingdom of Poland and the western provinces occupied a particular place in this process, but the dynamic in question appeared in other cases as well — in

the Volga region, in relations with the Armenian Church, and so on. In other words, in the context of rising nationalism the close connection between faith and ethnicity could not fail to affect the conception of religious freedom. The principle of “religious toleration” instructed the government not to interfere in the spiritual affairs of its subjects; but in the context of rising national consciousness — non-Russian and Russian alike — the autocracy could afford such an approach only if it was willing to ignore the interests of the Russian nationality. The essence of the matter was clearly articulated by Aleksei Vladimirov, an active participant in the introduction of the Russian language into Catholic religious services in the western provinces in the 1870s–80s. As he wrote in 1881, sensing an approaching declaration of “freedom of conscience” in Russia (something that happened only in 1905), “The state cannot grant freedom of conscience — that is, the right of each person to transfer by his own will from one church to another, and the right of each church to engage in propaganda, to acquire for itself as many new members as it can — in such a place where millions of subjects are alienated from their nationality by an *alien liturgical language* and where, consequently, each new member acquired by that church will be a direct loss for the state’s core nationality” (Vladimirov 1881: 371–72). Thus separating faith from nationalism was essentially impossible and, as a result, the question of religious freedom was constantly under the influence of attempts to define and defend national interests, the result frequently being the limitation of the religious rights of non-Orthodox believers. In short, the development of nationalism combined with the concept of “natural faiths” to serve as a brake on the expansion of religious freedom in Russia.

But as already noted, there was also a second tendency, one that pulled Russia in a different direction. Here I would point to three principal factors serving to produce this tendency. The first took the form of growing activism on the part of believers in Russia, both Orthodox and non-Orthodox. True, some people in Russia began to incline towards unbelief and even atheism, but others now aspired to more conscious and active participation in the confession of the faith of their ancestors, while still others engaged in various forms of religious innovation. Some adopted confessions that were non-traditional to Russia — the Baptist faith, Methodism, and so on. Others transferred to other recognized confessions, thus repudiating the faith of their ancestors, and in some cases people even created new religions in order to satisfy their spiritual longings. In all these cases, believers sought to define their relationship to God more consciously. (This was

even true, albeit in a negative sense, in the case of unbelief and atheism.) The question accordingly arose: Was Russia's confessional system — based as it was on suppositions about “natural” faiths, on the custodial role of the state over religious affairs, and on the absence of any mechanism for the recognition of new faiths — really in a position to deal with this dynamic religious situation? And was it not possible that the existing limitations on the religious life of non-Orthodox believers (and even Orthodox ones) constituted a reason for the appearance of unbelief and atheism, since many subjects found it impossible to satisfy their spiritual longings fully? What really was worse: heterodoxy or atheism? As the twentieth century approached, the tsarist regime was compelled to grapple with these questions.

The second factor pushing the regime to expand religious freedom was an intellectual one and concerned the appearance and development of more robust conceptions of religious freedom. We noted already that in Europe “religious toleration” was giving way gradually to the ideal of “freedom of conscience.” The latter idea also began to occupy its place in Russian discourse, first in the 1860s and then again, with even greater force, on the eve of the Revolution of 1905. Most strikingly, by the early twentieth century this ideal was being invoked not only by the liberal intelligentsia but also by conservative circles and by defenders of the regime.

A third factor, finally, was the problem of chronic “apostasy” from Orthodoxy. By the end of the nineteenth century there were various groups of people who had been converted to Orthodoxy in the past but now sought to return to the religion of their ancestors. These were Tatar converts from the eighteenth century whose descendants aspired to confess Islam legally; former Greek Catholics (“Uniates”) who had been forcibly “reunited” with Orthodoxy (especially the communities in the Kingdom of Poland, “reunited” in 1875) and now wished to be Roman Catholics; and finally Latvians and Estonians in the Baltic provinces who had abandoned Lutheranism in the 1840s for material incentives and now desired to return to that faith. By the laws of the empire, neither the converts themselves (if they were still alive) nor their descendants could leave Orthodoxy legally. The presence of such large numbers of “apostates” and “recalcitrants” — they numbered in the tens if not hundreds of thousands — created all kinds of practical complications and eventually a certain moral malaise among administrators. On both practical and ethical grounds, then, there were good reasons to embark on a reform of Russia's religious order.

## Conclusion

Such a reform indeed began in 1905, when “freedom of conscience” appeared in the October Manifesto and became the touchstone for debates about this issue in the era of the State Duma. Russia’s religious order was substantially liberalized, and yet even so significant contradictions within it remained. In its last decade the autocracy proved unable to decide whether it preferred to close ranks with all traditional religions for the purposes of combatting liberalism and radicalism, or whether it made more sense to close ranks with the Orthodox Church and the forces of Russian nationalism against heterodoxy and non-Russians. Unable to choose definitely between the two, the tsarist regime hesitated and wavered in its last decade. This wavering, I would propose, was itself a reflection of the fact that modernity, far from providing a coherent list of measures and projects to be implemented, placed uneven pressures on old regimes like the tsarist one and in fact pushed them in different directions at once. Even today, these tensions seem still only partially resolved, and post-Soviet Russia’s embrace of certain attributes of the old tsarist confessional order signals the continued need to study the imperial past.

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