

## Of candles, cakes and Holy Mother Russia

MOSCOW. Bearded, bright-robed priests shook holy water on food and faithful. Bandana-covered women, chanting children and a few solemn young men cupped candles as they shuffled forward. On narrow, nondescript streets, their processions glided out of nowhere, simple, pure and powerful. They carried icons in whose eyes they saw God Himself.

Russian Orthodox Christianity is back – or did it ever leave? A highly educated population here still resists God-talk. But Orthodoxy re-occupies over 23,000 Soviet-shut churches, running 620 monasteries and 91 training schools across Russian's impossible 11 time zones. It even claims a devout President Vladimir Putin -- in a Kremlin where, during 70 years of official atheism, a resentful ex-seminarian called Iosef Djugashvili destroyed several churches just within the fortress walls.

The seminarian became Josef Stalin – meaning “man of steel.” But his anti-religious fury failed to kill the Russian people's spiritual thirst. Today, the fallen idols of Marx and Lenin litter Disneyland-style statue cemeteries. Into the vacuum of belief, and amid a renaissance of all faiths, the Russian Orthodox Church has taken back its historic role. It is again the moral, theological and national-unity rampart of this anxious ex-superpower.

This past fortnight showed the official Russian church as natural companion of Russia's joys and sorrows. May 1, the old workers' holiday, was also the Orthodox Easter. Symbolically, the coincidence bridged socialist past and Christian present: as priests shook holy water over traditional *kulich* cakes and *paskha* sweets, shouting “Christ is risen!” both holidays seemed to flow together.

A mere accident of calendar? I got caught that day in a crowd of thousands of Communists protesting near Red Square. The Church's centuries-old identification with national unity comfortably met the Communists' nostalgia for the dismantled USSR. I saw one elderly lady carrying a photo of Stalin – but nearby, another held an icon of the Virgin Mary. Both, remembering war and greatness, venerated a strong, all-together Russia.

Last Monday's huge 60<sup>th</sup>-anniversary victory parade here, awash in tears of pride and tiers of medals, didn't highlight religious links. But the wild-colored, refurbished onion domes of Red Square's St. Basil's Basilica proclaimed that the Church shared Russians' victory. For after Hitler's June 1941 attack on Russia (which eventually killed over twice that year's population of Canada), Stalin the anti-clerical quickly enrolled the Church to help defend *Rodina*, the motherland. He freed jailed bishops, re-opened many churches, and – as with ancient invasions by Tartars, Poles and Swedes -- made the Church the state's powerful ally. It even financed two famed military units.

After the war, notably under “reformer” Nikita Krushchev, the Church receded to Communist Party puppet. But when the Soviet Union fell apart in December 1991, Moscow let Orthodoxy re-assume its historic role as national glue. In the mid-1990s, even as hunger stalked the streets of Moscow, politicians spent over \$200 million to rebuild, with gilded onion domes, the landmark Church of Christ the Redeemer that Stalin had demolished in 1931.

Underlining Orthodoxy's nation-cementing role, this great church's walls list the names of thousands of Russian soldiers -- who fell in 1812 defending Russia against Napoleon. State aid to restore countless other churches and ecclesiastical museums confirms new

respect for the Church's national mission. My Kremlin guide, a 40-year-old languages Ph.D. called Andrei, stood beside the wood-carved, canopied throne of Ivan the Terrible in the Cathedral of the Assumption and proudly avowed that he himself is an Old Believer, an Orthodox traditionalist.

Today, no Russian discourse comes close to the all-invasive religiosity of U.S. public life. But Russian officials routinely applaud the national church. Putin, a baptized ex-KGB agent, praised it with other faiths a few days ago while visiting Jerusalem. The Russian Foreign Ministry held an Easter reception for Patriarch Alexy II. Bishops keep close relations with armed forces and police through a special church department – an echo of the times when priests had to report deviant behavior to czarist police, even if gleaned via confession?

It would be silly to claim the Church is another branch of the state. Millions of Russians cherish its spiritual comfort; others see it only as a relic, a museum of rituals. But in shaky times, and times usually are shaky in Russia, Orthodox priests, unorthodox politicians, and even disbelievers see Orthodoxy as part of Russia's core being. Heaven aside, churchly salvation means keeping Russia – its land and its culture -- whole.

Russia is re-inventing itself and, with egregious historical blind-spots, it sees old "border lands" float away to join its erstwhile western enemies. So integrity -- implying identity and security -- is its obsession. That's why, moving at some gut level of the elusive national soul, those small processions of believers with cakes and candles and icons will continue to creep out of quiet little Russian streets.