

How the Mighty Have Fallen
7/16/06
Rev. Peter Foss

So...I think while traveling in Russia... I found the recipe for growing a church! You just follow the method of Vladimir the First, Grand Prince of Kiev. Vladimir, no fool apparently, knew that the pagan religions of the various Russian tribes would be divisive. So, he sent out his scouts on a fact-finding mission to discover the best religion out there. They reported back on the Christianity found in Europe and the Byzantine Empire, on the Islamic faith of the Arab world and even Judaism, which was found in the independent state of Khazar.

Vladimir made the final call on which religion would hold sway. Islam was quickly dismissed. Can you guess why? They prohibited the consumption of alcohol. As Vladimir noted, "Drinking is the joy of the Russes." Judaism was rejected because the Jews were a displaced people and he saw no need in adopting them. Coincidentally, both religions forbid the eating of Pork, a Russian staple!

Which left Christianity. The Western Catholic Church was centered in Rome, while the Eastern Orthodox Church was Byzantine and selected a Patriarch to rule rather than a Pope. When Vladimir discovered that the Catholic Church, through its Pope, claimed authority over all kings and princes, he chose the Orthodox Church, because it made no such claim. It didn't hurt either that those reporting back to him described the Byzantine churches as more splendid than anything they had ever seen.

So Vladimir did what people did back then. He married the sister of the Byzantine Emperor in 988 AD. The pre-condition for the nuptials included that Vladimir be baptized and the Orthodox Church be adopted as the State Religion. If a church depended on membership, this church was off to a good beginning. Vladimir had all the residents of Kiev baptized with him. Nor did it stop there! The Russians adopted the dogma and liturgy of the Orthodox Church; it supported the tradition of painting beautiful icons as a decorative feature in the churches as well as a means of instruction. The icons told the story of Christ's church in pictures, which was essential because few of the peasants could read. As was true in the Byzantine Empire, the architecture of the churches was also copied. Huge buildings in the shape of a cross with a single dome. Although here the Russians did apply their own creative instinct to the church, adding domes, many of them onion shaped; and glorious, bright colors, inside and out, which made the visit to the church a truly memorable and sacred experience for any worshipper.

Much of what I have just told you is recounted by Phillip Ryan in Cruise the Passage of Peter the Great, the tour book we received before our trip and were asked to read. It's over 200 pages long and needless to say I didn't read a word of it before the trip. That was quite foolish of me, because much of our sightseeing was evidence surely of the church's impact upon Russia, its people and the landscape. Although there are other churches now representing protestant as well as the Catholic, Islamic and Jewish faith traditions, certainly the onion domed Orthodox Churches are what you notice. Throughout St. Petersburg and Moscow, these structures tower over the earth. We stopped at many of them, to take pictures of the onion domes, to marvel at the icons inside (many original) and to simply take in the artistic splendor. And we saw them as we cruised the rivers – the high point in any village, close to shore for all to see. Some even, half submerged in water from the flooding of land so that canals and wider waterways could be built. A task mostly undertaken by Stalin.

We learned bits of history about the church as we sailed and from the cruise guide, which I have now spent quite a bit of time reading to prepare for this morning. First, and perhaps most important, the missionaries who first came from the Byzantine Empire to spread the Orthodox religion warned the people against the Catholic Church. Over time, a mistrust built up that served to keep Russia in the dark, so to speak. The culture of the west was shunned. Literature and philosophy, eventually the Reformation and the Renaissance...Russia was out of the loop. The Byzantine influence shut out what was shaping the rest of the world.

Peter the Great was the first to see the value of western ideas and culture. Having traveled widely himself and seen much of what was lacking in Russia, he tried to actually build a European city in Russia. St. Petersburg, named not after himself but Peter, Christ's disciple. St. Petersburg replaced Moscow as the capital in 1712, not long after Peter seized the land from the Swedish people. European influence? He brought in French and Italian architects. They built palaces modeled after Versailles. With many canals, some thought it to be like Venice. Because Peter thought Russian culture backward, he made the men wear short western coats and the women to appear at public functions in tight-waisted, deeply cut gowns, as were worn by the French. He went so far as to demand that men shave off their beards to appear more European! Can you believe that? He even helped clip the beards of the nobility himself! Well, he was not universally liked. But he was very powerful!

To me, this major initiative by Peter and then Catherine the Great, to live as the West did, was typical of how Russia rebelled against itself. Unhappy with the lack of western influence and years behind where European countries had advanced to, Peter tried to transform Russia. The Orthodox Church tried to hold its ground against him and counter the changes, but he simply demoted the Patriarch so he had no authority and appointed a civil administrator to run the church. Years later, in 1917, the revolution occurred that would transform Russia into a communist society. Likewise, the revolution (though much different in nature) was the result of Russia, so long a Tsarist society, being years behind more modern forms of government that had grown out of other rebellious movements of the people.

Secondly, we learned that the church did have a great impact on peasant life. Certainly if the icon is created to tell the story of faith to the uneducated peasant, the emphasis is not on raising their level of existence. The people generally remained poor. While the Tsars encouraged a more educated elite, the people generally were miserably poor and simply put up with one tyrannical ruler after the next. The church helped the peasant population in their poverty, ministering to them, but they also (many think) contributed to a passive character. The land had been occupied by Mongols and Germans, and then the absolute rule of the Tsars. The church taught that Christians should obey the earthly rulers, no matter how unjust! To bear all trials with a certain detachment and good cheer. It was God's will and nothing could be done. Grin and Bear it!

If I was a peasant...and Ivan the Terrible decreed that he ruled "by the authority of God," and I saw the church towering over the landscape in opulent splendor, eventually I might begin to wonder about the order of things. Those that did, of course, were put to death or exile in Siberia. By 1917, it was only that the situation of the Tsars was so weakened that they were overthrown with hardly a fight. Marx wrote then, as we know, that religion was "an opiate of the masses," and I can see why he wrote those words. The perception, no matter what the truth behind the scenes, had to be that the Orthodox Church lived to endorse the rule of the Tsars. The church was considered part of the elitist society and so was condemned.

However, as I see it, when communism under Lenin and Stalin began to rule in 1917, the church virtually was handed a second chance. I am sure that sounds strange, but persecution can certainly lead to renewal. Communism declared that "religion was" a part of "the accursed past" and a sign of the "old world" that must be destroyed. Presumed to be a part of Tsarist Russia and an enemy of the new proletariat, it is true that thousands of churches were ravaged or destroyed. The destruction of Russian art was clearly tragic. The heritage that was maintained by the churches also fell to the new regime. One Soviet magazine wrote an account: "Monasteries disappeared, bells ceased to ring, churches became deserted, and a great sadness filled the people's hearts. But they did not dare to raise their voices in protest."

Ironically, Stalin actually allowed some churches to open during the Second World War, but only because he desired to increase the sense of patriotism. Otherwise, he was single-minded in his desire to rid the land of religion. Naturally, we were taken to the Church of the Redeemer in Moscow. Finished in 1833 to commemorate the deliverance of Russia from Napoleon, Stalin had it blown up in 1931. It was so large – it had a gilded dome rising 338 feet, making it the tallest building in the city at that time. It had room for 10,000 worshippers. Stalin intended to build a skyscraper in its place, over 1,000 feet high. However the ground was too soft so a huge swimming pool was built there instead. The Cathedral was rebuilt, from original designs, between 1994 and 1997 at a cost of \$200 million US dollars. It has become a symbol of the future, the church resurgent once again and of the inherent spirituality of a people who had often been oppressed. It was a sign that the heritage of the people was not to be buried, but held in respect. That the future would depend on learning from their tragic past.

Earlier I asked you a few questions. One more. What percent of Russians, do you guess, believe in a God or higher power? 70% That would indicate to me that another change has led to another Russia. Vladimir Putin himself has been seen making the sign of the cross and he has written about matters of personal faith. That would not have happened when I was growing up. No Communist Party member was to have a religious affiliation. The churches were made over by Stalin and Lenin, if indeed they were left standing, into warehouses. Then many became and still are museums. The ones we visited were generally the tourist attractions and crowds of people from around the world were crammed into the massive chambers, still opulent with icons, mosaics and gold leaf. They are a true treasure of the country.

I have the feeling from our trip that the people, especially the young, are reclaiming their history. Of course, we were with Tour Guides who were certainly educated in their past. But they also seemed to take great pride in their history. The nasty politics, the men and women of valor, the wars with Napoleon and Germany especially. St. Petersburg survived a 900 day siege by Hitler's forces in the 2nd World War. They speak as if the siege was yesterday. Statues are everywhere and they seem to know who everyone is from Pushkin to Stalin. Nothing is hidden anymore. You can even mention the Gulags without fear of retribution.

There seems to be great pride in the country and its heritage. Maybe the fact that they have simply survived. When half your land is frozen ground, it must be disheartening. Although we did not see worship as we experience it here, services are again being held and people are free to attend. It must be very different than our worship. Orthodox liturgy. Icons and mosaics. You stand for the entire service! That's different enough. Part of the church's resurgence is certainly due to human nature and the need we all have to look beyond ourselves. The other part? We were told that credit must be given to the Babushkas – who retold the stories long after many had thought they were buried and forgotten.