

Statistics on Religion in Russia: The Reality behind the Figures*

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Introduction

Since perestroika religious organisations have been playing a substantial political and social role, and the size of the various religious communities has become an important political factor. Accuracy in assessing the size of religious communities is essential for proper relations between religion and society and between religion and the secular powers.

There is a general 'figures fetish' about religions. Statistics are regularly produced showing how many Orthodox, or Catholics, or Muslims there are in Russia, but people do not have a clear idea of what the figures mean or what they really represent. Meanwhile religious leaders and politicians aim to give the impression that figures of so many million, faithfully reproduced from one publication to another, represent the number of people who adhere to particular doctrines and moral codes and who support their religious leaders.

Assessing the number of adherents of a particular religion or confession is however a more ambiguous exercise than assessing the number of members of a political party, a social movement or a trade union. A positive answer to the question 'Do you support Putin?' will usually imply something qualitatively different from a positive answer to the question 'Do you support Orthodoxy?' A supporter of Putin is presumably going to vote for Putin, but without supplementary questions it is not at all clear what a supporter of Orthodoxy is going to do.

There are all kinds of theoretical criteria for belonging to a particular religion, reflecting conscious or unconscious assumptions about the particular features of various religions which are made by religious activists, scholars, politicians and journalists. There are four main methods used to assess religiosity.

The Ethnic Principle

Of all the approaches the one which produces the highest figures for religious adherence is the widely applied 'ethnic' principle. Orthodoxy, for example, is said to

*A shorter version of this article originally appeared in Russian in *Sotsiologicheskiye issledovaniya*, 6, 2005.

be the ethnic religion of the Russians, Ukrainians, Belarusians, Chuvash, Mordvinians, Karelians, Komi, Ossetians, and some of the Udmurts and Mari. Using this approach the last all-Russian census (2002) produced a figure of some 120 million Orthodox (including nearly 116 million Russians, three million Ukrainians, more than a million and a half Chuvash, some 900,000 Mordvinians, and 800,000 Belarusians).¹ Among Christians, it is not only the Orthodox who employ the ethnic principle. Archbishop Tadeusz Kondrusiewicz reckons that there are about 500,000 Catholics in Russia (Interview, 2000); on another occasion he spoke of 600,000 (Interview, 2002). These figures can only be derived on the ethnic principle. According to the 2002 census 'ethnic Catholics' in Russia comprise the following: 1547 Spaniards, 862 Italians, 707 Cubans, 45,569 Lithuanians, 73,001 Poles, 568 Slovaks and 819 French; it is also estimated that 25 to 30 per cent of Russian Germans, who total 597,212, are Catholics. There are also a significant number of Belarusians and Ukrainians in Russia who are Catholics by family tradition. We should also bear in mind the fact that a good many people who would identify themselves in a census as Russians count themselves Catholics rather than Orthodox because their families are traditionally Catholic (I have seen cases of this myself). Applying these criteria we may indeed arrive at a figure of 500–600,000. A similar situation obtains with the Lutherans, some of whose leaders apply the ethnic principle when calculating numbers. The Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Ingria (*Yevangelichesko-lyuteranskaya tserkov' Ingrii*) represents the Finnish Lutheran tradition in Russia and is based in the Finnish and Estonian population. The total number of Lutherans of the Finnish tradition in Russia is 63,000 (including 34,000 Finns and 28,000 Estonians). On the ethnic principle, the German Lutheran Church (*Nemetskaya Lyuteranskaya Tserkov'*) has about 400,000 members, or 70–75 per cent of the total number of Germans in Russia. The 2002 census shows that there are 1,130,000 Armenians in Russia. According to the ethnic principle they should all be counted as members of the Armenian Apostolic Church.

Muslim leaders apply the ethnic principle even more assiduously. The figure they usually cite is 20 million Muslims in Russia. The 2002 census gives the following figures for peoples whose religion was Islam before they became part of Russia: Adygei, 128,528; Avars, 814,473; Azeris, 621,840; Balkars, 108,426; Bashkirs, 1,673,389; Chechens, 1,360,253; Cherkess, 60,517; Dargins, 510,156; Ingush, 413,016; Kabards, 519,958; Karachai, 192,182; Kazakhs, 653,962; Kumuks, 422,409; Laks, 156,545; Lezgins, 411,535; Tabasarans, 131,785; Tajiks, 120,136; Tatars, 5,554,601; Turkmen, 33,053; Turks, 92,415; Uzbeks, 122,916. Thus even according to the ethnic principle, which allows the maximum possible figure, Muslims total only some 14 million.

Jewish leaders naturally use the ethnic principle. According to the census the number of Jews in Russia is 233,439.

Again according to the census, ethnic Buddhists in Russia comprise the following: Buryats, 445,000; Kalmyks, 174,000; Tuvinians, 243,000: not more than 900,000 in total.

The ethnic principle thus produces the following totals for Russia today: 120 million Orthodox; 600,000 Catholics; over a million Armenian Apostolic; 14 million Muslims; 230,000 Jews, and 900,000 Buddhists.

The ethnic principle produces a huge total for Orthodox and Muslims. The figures for the other religions also look imposing. What lies behind ethnic identification with a religion, however? Those who are assigned to these various religions include atheists, people who are indifferent to religious observance and who would not identify themselves as believers, and people confessing a different faith to the one assigned to

them by nationality. Atheism and non-ethnic religions are automatically excluded from the calculations.

Applying the ethnic principle means that hundreds of thousands of Old Believers, Protestants, atheists, followers of various eastern religions and people who think of themselves as secular or who are indifferent to religion are included among the Orthodox. The result as far as Catholics and Lutherans are concerned is quite absurd. As a result of emigration the number of ethnic Catholics and Lutherans is continually declining, while the number of Catholics and Lutherans among the Russians, who traditionally have no connection with these denominations, is continually rising. According to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ingria it already has more Russian parishioners than Finns and Estonians combined. Under these circumstances, what significance do figures based on the ethnic principle have? They do not even indicate how many people belong to a cultural tradition nurtured by a particular religion. The only thing they do indicate is the scale of the aspirations of religious activists, politicians and national leaders who proclaim the principle of 'one people, one faith' and aim to make it one of the basic elements in structuring the state.

Religious Self-Identification

A more substantive criterion is religious self-identification, or 'cultural' religiosity. Someone who says he or she belongs to a particular religious tradition may not necessarily subscribe to its doctrines, participate in its rituals or sacraments or be a member of one of its communities. Nevertheless the very fact that a person claims this identity says something important about his or her moral, cultural and political outlook. In this article we are simply trying to establish how many members or supporters each religion has; we are not attempting a full analysis of the specifics of the social outlook of the various confessions. Nevertheless, as an example we may cite Mchedlov's findings that those who claim to be Orthodox are more inclined to support state power, are more conscious of their Russian national identity and are more nostalgic for the days when Russia was a great power, while those who claim to be Muslims are more in favour of a patriarchal family structure (Mchedlov, 2000).

Orthodox

Over the past few years various surveys show that between 55 and 59 per cent of Russian citizens or up to 82 per cent of ethnic Russians identify themselves as Orthodox:² between 70 and 85 million people. The differences in the figures are a natural consequence of the fact that different questions may be asked,³ or of the fact that the context of the survey may incline unbelievers or waverers to identify themselves as Orthodox or not (and the same applies to Muslims, Catholics, Lutherans, Buddhists and Jews).

Armenian Apostolic

Among the Christian confessions the biggest difference between ethnic and cultural religiosity is to be found in the Armenian Apostolic Church: no survey we know of shows a statistically significant number of people identifying themselves as members of this church. Sociologists have to use very unreliable figures. Ol'ga Kaz'mina, for instance, says that the Armenian Apostolic Church has 450,000 members, but gives no evidence for this figure (Kaz'mina, 2001).

Protestants and Catholics

In various surveys Protestants and Catholics each score about 1 per cent: Protestants usually a little more, Catholics usually a little less. About a million people thus identify themselves as Catholics (between 0.5 and 1 per cent); so there are more 'cultural' Catholics than 'ethnic' Catholics. Obviously, then, some people who identify themselves as Russians also identify themselves as Catholics. In spite of all the efforts of the Russian Orthodox Church and numerous political figures to distance Russia from Catholicism, there is a small but statistically significant number of Russian citizens who identify themselves with western Christianity in its Catholic tradition, and not all of them are Poles, Germans or Lithuanians.

Protestant denominations in Russia include only one 'ethnic' denomination, Lutheranism, and all-Russian surveys do not reveal a statistically significant number of self-identifying Lutherans. On the basis of many interviews with Lutheran clergy in Russia it is our view that 'cultural' Lutherans total about 300,000: between 40 and 60 per cent of ethnic Germans (about 200,000 people), the majority of Finns and between 50,000 and 100,000 Russians and people of other nationalities who have adopted Lutheranism but who have no historical links with it. None of the other Protestant denominations in Russia has a clear connection with ethnic identity; when the 'ethnic principle' is applied in assessing religious adherence they do not exist at all. Apart from the Lutherans, the number of self-identifying Protestants ('cultural Protestants') cannot differ much from the number of Protestants who actually practise their faith, since it is only members of denominations which have played a historical role in forming the culture of a country or a nation who can identify themselves as such without being active believers. Baptists, Adventists, Pentecostals and Methodists, with at most a 120-year history in Russia, are not among the confessions which have shaped Russian culture, so the number of people saying they belong to these denominations without being active believers must be very small.

Old Believers

We should note one Christian denomination which has experienced a remarkable and dramatic decline during the last 85 years: the Old Believers. Prerevolutionary statistics show that Old Believers comprised 10 per cent of the Russian population (Vorontsova and Filatov, 2002, p. 247). Surveys in recent years reveal less than 1 per cent of the population identifying themselves as Old Believers. Old Belief has thus declined from its prerevolutionary position as a powerful religious, cultural, political and economic force to a little-noticed marginal phenomenon in Russian society today. There are not only very few practising Old Believers, but also very few descendants of Old Believers who feel a cultural and spiritual link with the faith of their ancestors.

Muslims

Various recent surveys show that the number of people identifying themselves as Muslims varies between 4 and 6 per cent (Interfaks, 2004 and VTsIOM, 2001 respectively), or between six and nine million people. In 1997 *Time* magazine gave the number of Muslims as 5.5 per cent of the Russian population, or 8.14 million people (*Izvestiya*, 2001). We do not have complete statistics for all regions and peoples in Russia, but selected figures make it clear that levels of Muslim self-identification among traditionally Muslim peoples vary widely. An all-Russian survey of city-dwellers in

1991 showed that 67 per cent of urban Tatars and 48 per cent of urban Bashkirs identified themselves as Muslims (Vorontsova and Filatov, 1993, p. 147). A survey by Furman and Kaariainen carried out in 1999 showed that 89 per cent of Tatars in Tatarstan identified themselves as Muslims (Furman and Kaariainen, 2000, p. 216). Amongst the Kabards, Cherkess and Adygei local beliefs and traditions exercise a strong influence, and Muslim rites are mingled with folk practices. The local *adat* traditions continue to play an important role as a kind of parallel religion, notably the Adygei code of morality and honour called *adyge-khabee* which is of pagan origin, and which in many circumstances takes precedence over Muslim *sharia* practices. In the villages ancient popular customs survived the whole Soviet period and have seen a strong revival in recent years. The only rite in which Muslim traditions prevail is the funeral rite, and even here Muslim rites are supplemented with pre-Muslim practices. The Kabards, Cherkess and Adygei worship pagan, Christian and Muslim deities (jinns) simultaneously. Surveys in 1999 and 2000 showed that only 35 per cent of the Adygei counted themselves as Muslims (Lyausheva, 2002, p. 151). Only the peoples of Dagestan and the Chechens and Ingush show almost unanimous adherence to Islam, at least on the level of 'cultural' religiosity. A 1998 survey among students in some higher educational institutions in Makhachkala, Dagestan, showed that 83.3 per cent identified themselves as believing Muslims (Khanbabayev, 1999, pp. 41–43).

One of the leading experts on Islam in Russia, Aleksei Malashenko, writes as follows:

The influence of Islam on the shaping of the identity of the peoples of the Caucasus has grown during the 1990s. This is particularly the case for the Chechens and Ingush and for the peoples of Dagestan, and also for the Karachai and Balkars. In Dagestan the percentage of people identifying themselves as believers has varied between 81 and 95 in the postsoviet period. In 1995 97 per cent of Chechens and 95 per cent of Ingush identified themselves as believers.

Malashenko draws particular attention to the exceptional religiosity of the Chechens: 'The Chechen is first and foremost a Muslim Chechen; today Chechen identity is inconceivable outside the context of the Muslim tradition' (Malashenko, 2001).

Jews

As we saw above, according to the latest census the number of Jews in Russia is 233,439. According to Jewish doctrine they should all adhere to the Jewish faith. However, a survey shows that as many as 25 per cent identify themselves as Christians of various denominations, that 23 per cent identify themselves as atheists or as belonging to no religion (the highest percentage in any religious grouping), and that a relatively high proportion of them – up to 2 per cent – say they are Buddhists. According to this survey only 8 per cent of Jews say they belong to the Jewish faith (Vorontsova and Filatov, 1993, p. 147): only some 20,000 people. (The rest of the respondents were 'don't knows' or did not answer the question.) A good many recent surveys show that most Russian Jews are not believers. According to the sociologist Ol'ga Kaz'mina, 'it is not easy to estimate their numbers ... A significant proportion of Russian Jews are not religious, although the number of believing Jews has risen significantly in recent years' (Kaz'mina, 2001). Nevertheless, there are good grounds for thinking that there are more than 20,000 'cultural Jews'. A hard-to-estimate

number of people who have Jewish roots give themselves a non-Jewish identity in censuses; these include some who nevertheless link themselves with the Jewish heritage. Moreover, among those who identify themselves as Jews in censuses, but who give their religion as atheist or unknown, there are groups of people who have links with the synagogue or cultural institute. It is thus very difficult to estimate the number of 'cultural Jews'; but by any definition it cannot be more than 50,000.

Buddhists

All-Russian surveys show that the number of Buddhists in Russia is not more than 1 per cent. Investigating what lies behind 'cultural Buddhism' is particularly difficult, mainly because there are no surveys of the religious adherence of the Buryats, Kalmyks and Tuvinians. Sociological surveys in one of the traditional Buddhist republics, Kalmykia, for example, show that only 60 per cent of the indigenous population (about 100,000 people) say that they are religious believers and members of a religious confession (Kitinov, 2002); and Kalmyks who are believers include not only Buddhists but Orthodox, Protestants and followers of various eastern religions. The Buryats and Tuvinians include a large number of Shamanists; some of these regard themselves as Buddhists as well, but others do not. There are no precise figures. A significant proportion of each of the three traditionally Buddhist peoples are Christians of various denominations; again, there are no precise sociological data. Meanwhile there are Buddhists among the Russians and other nationalities which are not traditionally Buddhist. In cities like Moscow, St Petersburg and Samara about 1 per cent will identify themselves as Buddhists in surveys. In the press you find only approximate figures for Buddhists in Russia, based on the 'ethnic principle': about 900,000 (Voronezhskaya, 2004; Kaz'mina, 2001). If we take into account the presence of Shamanism and Christianity among the Buryats and Tuvinians, the percentage of 'cultural Buddhists' in Buryatia and Tuva is probably about the same as the percentage of 'believers' in Kalmykia, about 60 per cent, and this means that there are about 550,000 'cultural Buddhists' in Russia.

Other Recently-Established Religions and 'New Religious Movements'

Recently-established religions include some disciplined organisations with a well-defined membership, and estimating these is relatively easy. The biggest is the Jehovah's Witnesses; in 1998 it had 255,000 members (Burdo [Bourdeaux] and Filatov, 2003, p. 448). Two other large organisations, the Society for Krishna Consciousness and the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (Mormons), each have some 10,000 members.

Estimating the number of followers of New Religious Movements (NRMs) in Russia presents the same problems as estimating the number of Buddhists, but even more so. About 20 NRMs with a tight organisational structure have between 1000 and 4000 members (Shterin, 2000, p. 161). There are also a few dozen tightly organised NRMs which are limited to particular regions, usually with only one community, and these usually have no more than 100 members.

The total number of members of tightly organised recently-established religions and NRMs is thus no more than 300,000. However, organised NRMs with an authoritarian leadership are just a drop in the 'new religious' ocean.

It is true that all kinds of occult, pagan and pseudo-Christian faiths are widespread in Russia today, but they are amorphous, eclectic and fluid, and their followers are not the kind of people to commit themselves to a disciplined organisation. These faiths are 'institutionalised' only insofar as people discuss them, read literature about them or at

most join organisations which should be called seminars or clubs rather than sects or cults. A notable phenomenon is the widespread appearance of advice and information centres which have news of the latest healer, guru or medium and distribute literature to enthusiasts' clubs. Club members listen to the latest teacher and practise meditation, then turn to the next one, because 'they all have something to offer'. The biggest coordinating centre is 'The Path to Oneself' (*'Put' k sebe*) in Moscow, run by Aleksandra Yakovleva, the daughter of the liberal journalist Yegor Yakovlev, which collaborates with over 100 clubs throughout Russia.

The most obvious and ubiquitous forms of 'nontraditional religion' are connected with health, alternative healing, diets and lifestyles. Primitivised and fragmentary eastern religions are also widespread, borrowing from Buddhism, Hinduism and yoga. The *Rerikh* movement, which appeared before perestroika, plays an important role in adapting all kinds of eastern beliefs to conditions in Russia today. It is not a structured and disciplined organisation, but takes the form of all kinds of clubs and associations. The most salient feature of the 'nontraditional religious' ideology is a pseudoscientific outlook: surveys show, for example, that 70 per cent of Russians believe in UFOs. Many believe that there are people possessed of the knowledge and power to change the whole of creation for better or worse. Pseudopsychological theories promise to give people the power to alter their souls or gain power over the environment. Over 60 per cent of Russians believe in astrology. The arrival of the 'Age of Aquarius' and the formation of a superior 'Aquarian race' are ideas which go well with expectations of the end of the world and a sense of one's individual chosenness.

The zone of religious entropy is growing all the time, and it is a self-contained system rather than a transitional stage on the way to some other religion. These groups disperse under the slightest pressure, leaving just a handful behind; but the beliefs themselves do not disappear. The battle with 'sects' conducted by the secular authorities and the Orthodox Church is thus a battle with shadows. There is a spontaneous religious revival going on in Russia, and in this context the generally low level of religious education means that the Orthodox environment is in fact providing a fertile soil for the growth of religious concepts which are far removed not only from Orthodoxy but from Christianity as a whole. This amorphous and fluid phenomenon is also marked by a lack of serious commitment: nobody is prepared to make substantial sacrifices for the sake of this faith. It is extremely doubtful whether it is possible to measure and systematise it.

Summary

To summarise, 'cultural' religiosity, or how people see their own religious identity, produces the following figures.

- Orthodox: 75–85 million
- Catholics: up to 1 million
- Protestants: 1.5–1.8 million
- Old Believers: fewer than 1.5 million
- All Christians: 85–95 million
- Muslims: 6–9 million
- Jews: up to 50,000
- Buddhists: some 550,000
- Organised recently-established religions and NRMs: up to 300,000.

Religious Observance

We need to be quite clear, however, that 'cultural' religiosity (religious self-identification) is a matter of conceptual positioning, but that it says nothing about actual religious observance. Self-identification does not mean that a given person subscribes to the doctrines of the given religion or follows the relevant religious practices.

Surveys and the evidence from clergy show that the number of people subscribing to all the doctrines and following all the required observances in any given religion is extremely small. The question arises: what is the minimum level of religious observance and practice which qualifies a 'believer' to count as an active and committed member of a faith? In recent years there has been an ongoing debate on this issue as far as the Orthodox are concerned, and it is a debate which could equally well be applied to members of all other faiths. Paradoxically, perhaps, Orthodox writers tend to seek the broadest definition of 'Orthodoxy', often ignoring traditional church criteria, while secular writers maintain that these broad criteria render the term 'Orthodox' meaningless if, for example, someone who does not believe in the Crucifixion or Resurrection, who does not pray and who does not receive the sacraments can be counted Orthodox.

There have been a large number of opinion polls on this subject in recent years. Let us look at the results of one of the most authoritative of them. Responses obtained by Furman throw light on what actually lies behind a declared 'belief in God': 38 per cent of 'believers' see God as a person; 40 per cent see God as a 'life force'; 45 per cent believe in the immortality of the soul; 20 per cent believe in the resurrection of the dead; 52 per cent believe in heaven; 46 per cent believe in hell. At the same time, 30 per cent of 'believers' believe in the transmigration of souls and 41 per cent in astrology. Research in 1991 revealed that 6 per cent of people went to church at least once a month; in 1996 the figure was 7 per cent, and 18 per cent for those who said they were believers. Research in the period from 1990 to 1992 gave figures of 9–10 per cent, and 21 per cent for those who said they were believers.⁴

The analysts of the results of the 1996 survey attempted to identify a group of more or less 'serious' or 'genuine' believers, whom they called 'traditional believers'. These were those respondents who a) gave a positive response to the question 'Do you believe in God?' (47 per cent of those questioned), b) identified themselves as believers and Orthodox (33 per cent, as compared with 3 per cent saying they belonged to other religions and 64 per cent 'don't know'), c) saw God as a person rather than a force (15 per cent), and d) said they prayed frequently (13 per cent). The total of 'traditional believers' obtained in this way by Furman was 4 per cent.⁵ When he examined this figure more closely, however, Furman found the 'Orthodoxy' of even these respondents rather dubious. Only 65 per cent of them believed in eternal life and 44 per cent in the resurrection of the dead, while 29 per cent of them believed in astrology and 41 per cent in the transmigration of souls. Any stricter criteria for inclusion in the category 'traditional believer' than those already applied would clearly have reduced the percentage virtually to zero.

Orthodox

Yuliya Sinelina has argued strongly that the results of sociological surveys purporting to show the level of Orthodox religiosity should be rejected on principle (Sinelina, 2001). Her reasoning is that the population is theologically uneducated and that

people are therefore unable to express or even recognise their own personal religious experience in theological terms.

Let us consider dogma (concepts of God, eternal life, the resurrection of the dead, heaven, hell) and knowledge of the Bible and prayers. It is interesting to speculate how many Orthodox believers prerevolutionary surveys of religiosity would have shown if the questions had been on these topics. Official statistics produced in 1897 showed that 100 per cent of the population were religious believers; of these 69.9 per cent were Orthodox. The criterion was not an individual's convictions, but his or her formal and legal membership of a faith by birth and by baptism or similar rituals in non-Christian faiths. Other evidence suggests, however, that in the late nineteenth century a large proportion of the peasantry had a completely pagan conception of God. This was the inevitable consequence of Synodal policy on the religious education of the peasants. They did not read the Bible, because most of them were illiterate and in any case there was no complete Russian translation of the Bible until 1875. Konstantin Pobedonostsev, the Chief Procurator of the Synod, conveyed to the clergy his view that 'theology' was not of the essence of 'Russian Orthodoxy' – that is, the 'simple' national faith of the Russian people – and that the 'simple people' would be saved without theology and were more reliable than the overweeningly inquisitive intelligentsia. Faith thus sank to the level of unaccountable feelings and pious inclinations. For Pobedonostsev the religious life of the people, left alone in its ignorance, was a mystery and an enigma:

'You ask yourself, "where does it come from?"', but when you try to get to the source, there is nothing to be found. Our clergy engage only rarely in teaching; they serve in church and perform the rituals. The Bible does not exist for illiterate people; all they have are church services and some prayers handed on from parents to children, and these are the only link between the individual and the church.

'In some places which are really off the beaten track you discover that the people understand nothing at all, neither the words of the service, nor even the "Our Father", which they often recite with bits left out and bits added, making nonsense of it. (Georges Florovsky thought that a high proportion of ordinary people did this while praying – Yu. S.) And yet, in all these uneducated minds ... somehow an altar is set up to the Unknown God. When death comes, these people, to whom nobody has ever spoken about God, open the door to him as to a familiar and long-awaited guest. They literally give their souls to God.' (Pobedonostsev subscribes to the view that the truth is reached not by reason but by faith, 'which stands higher than all theoretical formulae and rational deductions'. The most precious thing for a human being is disclosed in the depths of the spirit.) Here we have a glimpse of late-nineteenth-century religiosity, unexpectedly uniting illiterate peasants and a highly educated man ...

In my view this situation illustrates how little sociologists conducting surveys know about church teachings. We can say that their questions about belief in specific things are wrongly posed ... the very concept of belief in certain specific things allows for various interpretations and carries a weight of multiple meanings, which leads to confusion and imprecision in analysing survey results. (Sinelina, 2001, pp. 23–24)

Sinelina's arguments and the quotation from Pobedonostsev sound poetic and mystical. However, they do show that before the Revolution Russia was not a very Christian country, and that it was hard to determine what Russians actually believed in.

Sinelina also points out that regularity of churchgoing among Orthodox believers in Russia is determined by objective factors which have little to do with religiosity.

Let us look at the question of churchgoing and taking communion. First we should note that the number of functioning churches in our country leaves a lot to be desired. In many fair-sized industrial cities in the Moscow region either there are no churches at all or they are a long way out of town . . . The most common situation is that in any given city there will be just one or two small functioning churches. When there are no churches in a town or village, people have to travel. We need to take into account factors such as the large distances between centres of population, whether there is transport, the cost of transport (especially in recent years), and the standard of living in the eastern part of the country. In these circumstances it is difficult to go to church more often than once a month. A recent trip by bishops on the Yenisei River revealed that people in some remote towns and villages do not see a priest for years. In general there is a shortage of priests . . . (Sineline, 2001, p. 25)

What is more,

In Russia several generations have grown up ignorant of the fact that believers go to church on Sunday. We need to remember that for decades people have been trained out of the habits of churchgoing, taking communion, confessing, observing morning and evening rituals: at first churchgoing was a mortal danger, and then it was still dangerous if you wanted to lead a quiet life. Only pensioners went to church, and people looked on them condescendingly; or else people who were capable of fearlessly challenging the system, and there were not many of them . . . It is hard to ignore the influence of stereotypes about how people ought to lead their daily lives. (Sineline, 2001, p. 28)

Sinelina does not take account, however, of published figures showing that the number of practising Orthodox believers has risen rather than fallen. The Ministry of the Interior calculates that in recent years between 0.5 and 2 per cent of the population of large cities have been attending Easter church services (Mitrokhin, 2004, p. 40). These figures cast doubt on the accuracy of answers to survey questions about frequency of church attendance.

Meanwhile Mitrokhin draws attention to another phenomenon which ought to make researchers wary of counting as an Orthodox believer everyone who attends church.

Some of the people who regularly participate in church sacraments regard them as medicine for physical rather than spiritual illnesses. They are seeking healing (or 'protection of their bodies'), and they add mass support to various church initiatives such as pilgrimages, church processions, veneration of icons and relics and taking holy waters.

Mitrokhin notes that many of these people see Orthodox sacraments and rituals as a kind of magic; they are not Orthodox believers and have no interest in the Orthodox faith as such (Mitrokhin, 2004, p. 39).

It is evident, then, that the Orthodox religiosity of Russians today is so amorphous, so organisationally, dogmatically and ideologically unstructured, that any criteria for measuring it and any figures obtained about it are essentially imprecise. Most 'Orthodox believers' are Orthodox believers from one point of view but not from another. Depending on how strict one's categories are, one can say that between 2 and 10 per cent of the population, between 3 and 15 million people, are practising Orthodox.

Similar difficulties arise in assessing the number of practising members of other ethnic Christian confessions and non-Christian faiths. The problem is aggravated by the fact that any all-Russian sample captures too few members of these various religions, so that analysts do not pick them out, or else if they do pick them out their small number throws doubt on the reliability of the findings.

Muslims

There are just a few results, mainly from regional surveys, which seem to shed some light on the situation as far as Muslims are concerned. Musina has collected figures which show that 8.4 per cent of urban Tatars pray at home, while 4.3 per cent of them attend the mosque (Musina, 1997, p. 89). Furman finds that 20 per cent of the Tatars in Tatarstan are practising Muslims (Furman and Kaariainen, 2000, pp. 216–18). According to the results of surveys carried out for the republican government of Karacheyevo-Cherkessia, and kindly sent to me by the plenipotentiary for religious affairs there, Yevgeni Kratov, no more than 10 per cent of the Karachai and Cherkess are practising Muslims. Sociologists find that some of the highest levels of Muslim religiosity are to be found among the peoples of Dagestan. Applying the strictest criteria as to the fulfilment of Muslim rituals and knowledge of the Quran, however, Enver Kisriyev concludes that 'only 20 per cent of the adult Muslim population of Dagestan, that is about 200,000 people' are 'practising Muslims' (Kisriyev, 2000). The results of the 1998 sociological survey among students at higher educational institutions in Makhachkala, quoted earlier, do indeed seem to show that people claiming to be Muslims exhibit different levels of religious practice. Only 28 per cent of those questioned were able to say whether they were Sunni or Shiite. In answer to the question 'What are the five basic Muslim religious obligations, and how many of them do you fulfil?' none of the students mentioned either the belief that there is one god or *zakat* (giving alms), only 16 per cent mentioned *namaz* (prayer five times a day), 19.3 per cent remembered fasting, and 1.4 per cent the *haj* (pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina) (Khanbabayev, 1999, pp. 41–43). However, it is clear that if 'practising' Muslims includes those who only irregularly attend the mosque or participate in prayers then the figure is a good deal higher than 20 per cent of the population of Dagestan. A significant percentage of other peoples of the Caucasus also mentioned the obligation to take part in Muslim rituals: 36 per cent of Chechens, 34 per cent of Avars, 43 per cent of Dargins and 28 per cent of Ingush (Malashenko, 2001).

There are no similar statistical data for the other 'Muslim', 'Lutheran', 'Catholic' or 'Buddhist' nationalities. Let us therefore turn now to another method of calculating the number of believers: official statistics on the number of registered religious organisations.

The Number of Registered Religious Organisations

Official statistics can help to shed general light on the situation. According to the Russian Ministry of Justice, the following totals of religious organisations were registered as of 1 January 2004 (Sostav, 2004):

Russian Orthodox: 10,767
 Old Believers: 267
 Catholics: 235
 Armenian Apostolic: 57

 Pentecostals: 1460
 Baptists and Evangelicals: 1571
 Seventh-Day Adventists: 620
 Lutherans: 202 (including 119 German Lutheran (YeLTs))
 Methodists: 98
 All Protestants: 4232

 Jews: 256
 Muslims: 3397 (1700 in Dagestan)
 Buddhists: 180

If all religions had the same relationship to their churches, communities or parishes it would be a simple matter of arithmetic to correlate the number of practising believers with the number of registered organisations. However, this is not the case.

First, the various religions have varying attitudes to the registration of their local organisations; and the secular authorities register some without difficulty while placing obstacles in the way of others.

The Russian Orthodox Church is always eager to register its organisations even when they are in the formation stage (which often takes a long time). The number of actually functioning Orthodox religious organisations is probably between 2 and 5 per cent less than the registered total.

The Old Believers traditionally do not regard registration as essential, and some concords (*soglasiya*) reject registration in principle. The real number of Old Believer organisations is 2.5 to 3 times larger than the number registered (but most of them are very small).

The Catholics often experience difficulties in registering their organisations. Functioning parishes are often not registered for years after they come into existence. What is more, the Catholics often do not register their organisations in small towns or villages where there is no resident priest and where the community is served by a visiting priest from elsewhere. In 2004 there were between 400 and 450 Catholic parishes in Russia, registered and unregistered.

The Protestants, or more accurately the Pentecostals and the Baptists/Evangelicals, have for various reasons the highest number of unregistered congregations. The secular authorities are not generally positively disposed towards Protestants and are not in a hurry to register them. At the same time, a large number of Protestant denominations reject registration on principle (including the Council of Churches of the Evangelical Christians-Baptists (*Sovet tserkvei yevangel'skikh khristian baptistov*), with something under 2000 congregations, and the Pentecostal United Church of Christians of Evangelical Faith (*Ob'yedinennaya tserkov' khristian very yevangel'skoi*), with some 500 congregations). Registered Pentecostal congregations (and to a lesser

extent those of other Protestant denominations) usually have an unregistered branch, often with its own pastor. Even the Pentecostal and Baptist headquarters do not have full details of these branch organisations, and nobody knows how many there are. In our view the real number of functioning Protestant communities is probably between 8000 and 9000.

Calculating the number of Muslim communities is even more problematic. In most parts of Russia communities belonging to official Muslim organisations easily gain registration. The two main Muslim organisations, the Council of Muftis (*Sovet muftiyev*) and the Central Spiritual Directorate for Muslims in Russia (*Tsentral'noye dukhovnoye upravleniye musul'man Rossii* (TsDUMR)), are in competition with each other and each wants to show that it is bigger, so each will often register communities in small centres of population where there is neither an imam nor a building for worship. It is questionable whether all these communities can be said to be 'functioning'. Meanwhile, in the North Caucasus the secular authorities are afraid of Muslim extremism, and often refuse to register Muslim organisations; some of them are really infused with radical ideas and do not want to register. There are a large number of unregistered Muslim communities in Chechnya (and to a lesser extent in Dagestan and Ingushetia). This is not always because they are radical: a patriarchal Muslim village society often simply sees no need for registration. Taking all these factors into consideration, we estimate that there are some 4000 registered and unregistered Muslim organisations in Russia (more than the Ministry of Justice says there are in the North Caucasus, fewer in the rest of Russia).

Jewish organisations have no difficulty in registering, and the figure given by the Ministry of Justice is accurate.

As far as Buddhist organisations are concerned, difficulties arise because Buddhism does not require its adherents to manifest their faith in regular practice. People may have a Buddhist religious consciousness without any connection with a Buddhist community. At the same time, it would be wrong to count all visitors to the datsans as Buddhists because Orthodox Russians and those who practise Shamanism also go there in order to leave written prayers for healing or for deceased relatives. Meanwhile Dharma centres, which are small religious groups which do not require registration, are usually not registered at all. In our view there is no way of calculating the number of Buddhists on the basis of the number of registered organisations.

So what conclusions can in fact be drawn about the number of practising believers of various kinds on the basis of statistics about 'local religious organisations'?

Catholic clergy have a duty to nurture a well-defined membership in each parish, distinct from, and of course much smaller than, the number of those who sometimes attend church. Only rarely do these congregations exceed 500; exceptions would be Vladivostok, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk, Perm', Orenburg: not more than 20 large congregations in the whole of Russia. Parishes which have been functioning in big cities for 10 to 15 years normally have congregations of between 200 and 500. The great majority of Catholic parishes, however, have between 20 and 200 members. If we apply the same liberal criteria as we applied to the Orthodox in assessing the number of practising Catholics, then we shall have to include a proportion of those who sometimes attend Catholic services without being members of a particular parish. On this basis, the total number of practising Catholics is between 60,000 and 200,000.

The Old Believers have only a handful of large congregations. Most of them consist of no more than 50 people. The total number of practising Old Believers is therefore between 50,000 and 80,000.

The number of practising Protestants is directly related to the number of congregations, since apart from the Lutherans, who are a relatively small minority among the Protestants, most Protestants are not connected to their faith through cultural tradition. A member of a Protestant church has to meet several selection criteria: he or she has to subscribe to certain basic doctrines and attend church services, and will share certain cultural and political positions with his or her fellow-believers. Most Evangelical churches have a clearly-defined membership. We estimate that there are between 8000 and 9000 Protestant congregations (see above). Membership numbers vary widely, between 20 and 2000–5000, but in our view the estimate by Konstantin Bendas of the Russian United Union of Christians of the Evangelical Faith (*Rossiiskiy ob'yedinennyi soyuz khristian very yevangel'skoi* (ROSKhVYe)) that 'the average Protestant community has about 300 members' (Blagovest, 2004) is reasonably accurate, if a little high. The total number of practising Protestants in Russia is thus something over 1.5 million (of whom at least 60 per cent are Pentecostals).

In assessing the number of practising Jews we need to bear in mind the fact that the prevailing tendency is for Jews to identify with their national faith, but that this does not necessarily involve knowledge of doctrine, observance of rituals or recognising spiritual leaders. Rabbi Pinkhas Gol'dshmidt estimates that about 70,000 Jews, or 30 per cent of the total, are involved in one way or another with the activity of Jewish cultural organisations. The number of those who believe in God, and follow Jewish religious principles in their everyday life, must be much smaller. We estimate it at between 30,000 and 40,000.

In estimating the number of practising Muslims we need to look at two regions separately: the North Caucasus and the rest of Russia. There are fundamental differences between them.

In the North Caucasus there are more than 2500 Muslim communities, most of them in Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia. They are typically larger than Muslim communities elsewhere, and show a greater commitment to the faith, especially in rural districts. Applying liberal criteria to the indigenous population of Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia we estimate that 70 to 80 per cent of them should be counted as practising Muslims. The figure will be much smaller for Kabardino-Balkaria, Karachayev-Cherkessia and Adygeia: between 20 and 30 per cent. The total number of practising Muslims in the North Caucasus is thus about 2 million.

In the Volga region and among the Tatars and Bashkirs elsewhere in Russia, and also among the Azeri immigrants in Russia, the level of secularisation is much lower than among the Russians. This is confirmed by the (patchy) data from surveys and indirectly by statistics on the number of Muslim communities. Between 10 and 15 per cent of 'ethnic Muslims' in Russia outside the North Caucasus are practising Muslims: some 800,000 people.

We can thus summarise the numbers of practising believers as follows:

Orthodox: 3–15 million
 Old Believers: 50–80,000
 Catholics: 60–200,000
 Protestants: over 1.5 million
 Jews: 30,000
 Muslims: up to 2.8 million
 Buddhists: up to 500,000

Members of organised recently-established religions and NRMs: up to 300,000.

Conclusion

Our attempt to establish the real number of religious believers in Russia shows how inadequate secular and religious statistics and the results of surveys can be in helping to achieve accuracy. We believe, however, that we have achieved a broadly correct picture, which will be confirmed as more data are accumulated.

The significance of the religious factor in a secular society, where for most people faith has become just a cultural symbol, is relatively small. In political and social life it is 'ethnic' religious leaders who are prominent. Political and religious leaders tend to see statistics on believers as reflecting the influence of churches and Muslim and Buddhist organisations, and figures quoted in the press are often designed to boost the prestige of these leaders. In this context it is very important to understand what lies behind noisy claims of 'millions of followers'. The very concept of a believer belonging to an ethnic religion has many layers. Most Russians, Jews, Tuvinians, Tatars or Adygei will recognise their links with a historical faith, but most will not feel any religious obligation as a result. Attending services and subscribing to creeds are not basic characteristics of people identifying themselves as adherents of traditional religions (although of course they are of some).

If we distance ourselves from abstract conceptions of the place of 'traditional' religions in Russian society and focus on the membership of the other religions, we note that the usually quoted statistics are not keeping pace with the growth of Protestantism or with the fluctuations in the NRMs. Apologists for the 'traditional' religions and journalists are usually silent about the vigorous growth and social influence of Protestantism. By contrast the growth and influence of NRMs, and particularly those dubbed 'sects', are greatly exaggerated in the press and by Orthodox specialists.

Meanwhile the true picture of religion in Russia in the wake of the missionary boom of the early 1990s should modify our understanding of what values millions of Russian citizens actually adhere to and enable us to understand the social and political position of adherents of the various religions. For example, the role of traditional religious organisations in social and political life does not always correspond to what their leaders would like to expect from their 'followers'. Russian society has a right to know what exactly current concepts such as 'Orthodox citizen' or 'Muslim umma' actually mean. Religious statistics, like economic statistics, are all too often used as weapons in ideological and political struggle. Realistic religious statistics ought to help to make the social, political and cultural significance of religious organisations and the position of their leaders more comprehensible for the Russian public in general.

Notes

- 1 All population statistics in this article come from this census (Vserossiiskiy, 2002).
- 2 These percentages come respectively from: Mchedlov, 2000; Mitrokhin, 2004, p. 38; and Kaariainen and Furman, 2000a, p. 16.
- 3 The question 'Are you an Orthodox believer?', for example, is difficult for someone to answer who knows that he is Orthodox but is not sure if he is a believer.
- 4 In sociological surveys in the West the simplest and commonest way of assessing the number of believers is to ask the question 'Did you go to church last Sunday?' (and not to ask the

question in the weeks following Easter or Christmas). This question is no longer asked in surveys in Russia since the number of positive replies has been very small. The question now asked is 'Do you go to church at least once a month?' This produces between 5 and 10 per cent positive responses.

- 5 Kaariainen and Furman, 2000a, pp. 16–24. We should note that a good many other surveys produce a higher figure for 'Orthodox believers', but never more than 10 per cent.

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(Translated from the Russian by Philip Walters)