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The Church and Politics in Russia: A Case Study of the 1996 Presidential Election

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It has become commonplace for observers of post-Soviet Russia to note the increasing role of religion in public life. Religion, and in particular the Russian Orthodox Church, appears to have political significance, and yet this significance is not easy to place in terms of its location and extent. At the most obvious level, the church has political significance through the broad-based support for Orthodoxy amongst the Russian population. Opinion polls consistently show the Russian Orthodox Church to be the most trusted public body in post-Soviet Russia. The New Russian Barometer III Survey in 1994 provided a list of 16 'public institutions' including the presidency, government, parliament, army, media, trade unions and political parties. The church outscored them all as a recipient of trust.¹ A survey conducted at the time of the summer 1996 presidential election similarly indicated that a very high proportion of respondents, some 41 per cent, 'fully trusted' the Orthodox Church, and that only 9 per cent did not trust it at all.²

Post-Soviet opinion polls have also regularly demonstrated widespread respect for religion in the broad sense in that around half of all Russian citizens in the 1990s identify themselves as 'believers'.³ Again, taking the summer of 1996 as our reference point, in one survey, conducted by the All-Russian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion, 55 per cent of respondents identified themselves as believers in some form of religion, of which 51 per cent declared themselves Russian Orthodox believers.⁴

This level of general approval of the church in contemporary Russia would appear to make the importance of religion in the political arena self-evident. If the population at large give such esteem to the Russian Orthodox Church, and readily identify themselves in such large numbers with religious belief, then surely religion must have a significant influence on the conduct of politics. Such a conclusion, however, remains unsafe and abstract. Unsafe in that indications of trust and support for given institutions do not automatically imbue them with political significance. Take, for example, the monarchy in the United Kingdom – a widely popular and respected institution, which has little day-to-day impact on the British polity. Were the monarchy to be under threat from a politically strong republican movement, then it might become a factor in electoral politics and the daily conduct of political affairs. Otherwise it is not. Similarly, automatically to assume the political significance of the church in Russia merely on the basis of opinion polls indicating trust and respect is to draw unsafe conclusions.

Furthermore, even were such a conclusion to be accepted it remains abstract, leaving us no further on in terms of assessing the *nature* of the church's political impact. Political influence can have an impact at the level of ideas, in which case the close ties between religion and nationalism complicate the task of differentiating between the two, particularly in the postcommunist era when national identity has become the ubiquitous replacement for the failed ideology of the Soviet era. On the other hand, political influence can also come at the level of institutions and political actors. Opinion polls are not good indicators of political impact at this level. Again, to make an analogy, lack of trust in the presidency as an institution coupled with an unwillingness on the part of the population at large to identify themselves as supporters of the president would not render him politically insignificant.

Clearly an assessment of the political significance of the church in Russia requires deeper analysis than simply acknowledging the increased place of religion in the public and political discourse of the post-Soviet era. This paper considers the impact of the church on the Russian polity through a consideration of the role of religion in the electoral politics of the 1996 presidential campaign. This was the first time an independent Russia had elected its leader, and Boris Yel'tsin was re-elected after a second round run-off with the communist Gennadi Zyuganov, receiving a vote of 54 per cent against his opponent's 40 per cent. In the first round there were ten candidates, half of whom failed to receive even one per cent of the vote. Apart from Yel'tsin and Zyuganov (who received first round votes of 35 and 32 per cent of the vote respectively), the other main contenders were the nationalist ex-General Aleksandr Lebed' (15 per cent), the reformist economist Grigori Yavlinsky (7 per cent) and the ultra-nationalist Vladimir Zhirinovskiy (6 per cent).

After presenting the demographic and institutional background, this paper analyses the impact of religion on the electoral campaigning, the policies of the major candidates with regard to religion, and the attitudes of religious groups towards the campaign and the candidates. The conclusion drawn is that there does not exist in Russia a 'religious vote', a constituency of voters whose beliefs predispose them to vote for particular parties and candidates or to focus on particular issues during election campaigns. Religion, however, usually in the form of the Russian Orthodox Church, nonetheless featured widely in the 1996 presidential election campaign and was seen by the major candidates as having a key role in identifying themselves to the electorate.

Demographic and Institutional Background

The statement above that in the 1990s around half of the Russian population identify themselves as believers is sweeping and leaves room for further differentiation along temporal, behavioural and demographic lines. Opinion polls show that during the last days of the Soviet system, between 1989 and 1991, about 48 per cent of the population identified themselves as Orthodox believers. Only 20 per cent identified themselves as atheists. The percentage of self-identified believers grew in the immediate post-Soviet period to about 55 per cent in 1993–94 and fell back a little to just below half of the population by 1996.⁵

To take self-identified believers as the measure of any 'religious constituency' within Russia, or indeed within any country, is to use a widely inclusive definition. A far tighter measure of religious adherence is church attendance. Here the difficulty is to define how often someone has to attend a church to be counted as a regular attender (see Table 1). If regular attendance at church (or mosque, synagogue,

Table 1. Church attendance in Russia, 1991–96 (% of those answering in each sample)

<i>Frequency of church attendance</i>	<i>1991</i>	<i>1993</i>	<i>1994</i>	<i>1996</i>
Once a month or more	5	5	7	7
Between one and several times a year	20	35	28	17
Less than once a year	–	–	21	16
Non-attenders	65	45	43	60

Sample size: 1991, 3000; 1993, 2000; 1994, 2957; 1996, 2404.

Source: *Ekonomicheskiye i sotsial'nyye peremeny: monitoring obshchestvennogo mneniya*, no. 6, November–December 1996, p. 16.

temple, etc.) is taken to mean at least once a month, then the size of what might be termed the committed religious community in Russia shrinks to around 7 per cent. There has been a fall in the number of *occasional* church attenders (several times a year) during the 1990s, and yet a rise in the number of regular attenders. The figure of 7 per cent for regular church attendance in Russia would appear to be at the upper limits of such estimates, as the daily *Nazavisimaya gazeta* reported a figure of 2.2 per cent for regular attenders in mid-1996.⁶

One possible explanation for the fall in occasional church attenders in the mid-1990s is that in the aftermath of the Soviet period church attendance was a novelty, causing a rapid growth in the curious, some of whom became regular attenders, many of whom did not. Such an explanation, however, is speculative. Other possible explanatory factors include the argument that adherence to the Orthodox Church for many represents adherence to 'the Russian idea' rather than to Christianity *per se*. Therefore when the state turns more to the West, as in 1992–93, then the Russian Orthodox Church attracts those wishing to emphasise a 'Russianness' seen as lacking in the official state discourse. Accepting this argument would make sense of the fact that in 1994–96 the number of church baptisms and weddings declined slightly at the same time as patriotic and nationalist overtones became increasingly prevalent in the political life of Russia.⁷ Alternatively, it may be that particularly troubled periods in the nation's history encourage people to seek hope and certainty in religious faith. A combination of these factors no doubt goes some way to explaining the slight decline in occasional attenders in the mid-1990s.

A further indication that self-identification as a believer provides perhaps an overly broad definition of the religious constituency in Russian politics is that only a small proportion of those polled adhere to, or even know, doctrinal specifics.⁸ What many who lend broad support to the church appear to be doing is identifying themselves with the cultural and historical specifics of Orthodoxy. In particular, as argued above, a good number are clearly identifying themselves with the 'Russianness' of the church. Attitude surveys reveal that self-identified believers are more aware of national identity and national crisis than their non-believing counterparts. There is also a greater xenophobia within this group, manifested for example in less tolerance of foreign influence or ethnic minorities.⁹

As well as making temporal and behavioural distinctions between believers and non-believers, opinion poll results also allow us to differentiate them along socio-demographic lines. Studies from the Soviet period to the present day reveal a dual social typology of believer. On the one hand, the Soviet propaganda stereotype that believers were merely 'survivals' from the past concentrated amongst the elderly

predominantly female rural populace holds some truth. Polls also show that the elderly rural populace in general holds to more nationalist views, and therefore the connection between religious belief and xenophobic nationalism is made. On the other hand, however, Soviet studies of the early 1980s showed increasing numbers of the educated urban population joining the Russian Orthodox Church in adulthood,¹⁰ and a marked propensity for non-Orthodox congregations, such as those of the Baptists and Pentecostals, to contain a large proportion of young educated urban believers.¹¹ According to a study carried out under the auspices of the Academy of Sciences amongst city dwellers in 1990 and 1991, belief in God was highest amongst the under-20s and the over-60s.¹²

Surveys in the post-Soviet period back up this perception of demographic variation, with the percentage of believers rising above the average amongst both the over-55s and the under-24s, and amongst inhabitants both of rural areas and of capital cities (Moscow and St Petersburg).¹³ A June 1997 survey in St Petersburg put the proportion of regular – that is, at least once a month – church attenders amongst ‘young people’ at the remarkably high figure of a third of those asked.¹⁴ This dual typology has also been found to be the case in recent survey research amongst Muslims in the five Islamic autonomous republics of Russia, according to a survey carried out in 1993.¹⁵

As noted above, the extent of religious belief in Russia represents only one element in any consideration of the influence of religion on the polity. Another key element, more amenable to straightforward identification, is the institutional background. Constitutionally Russia is a secular state with all religious associations separate from the state and equal before the law.¹⁶ The president is the guarantor of the Constitution. During the 1996 election campaign the Russian Orthodox Church, in its official pronouncements, took up an avowedly neutral position in line with this separation of church and state. Occasional statements by the patriarch and other leading figures compromised this neutrality a little (see later discussion).

Religion and Electoral Politics: Campaigning in the 1996 Presidential Election

Whilst discussing the role of the church in the 1996 presidential election campaign we should note that religion did not of itself constitute a major political issue during that campaign. No programme-based religious coalition analogous to the ‘Christian Right’ in the United States exists in Russia, and differences on the question of religion amongst the major candidates were minimal. In terms of the involvement of religious groups in the campaign, at the concrete level of policy proposals, specific campaigning issues and overtly religious candidacies the church was virtually absent from the field. In the 1995 Duma election, which in many ways filled the role of presidential primary, there were two parties out of 43 which could be identified as religious, namely the All-Russian Muslim Social Movement and the Christian Democratic Union–Christians of Russia bloc.¹⁷ These two groups achieved respectively 0.57 and 0.28 per cent of the vote on the party list ballot, a vote comparable with the 0.35 per cent achieved by the Association of Russian Lawyers, and below the 0.62 per cent garnered by the Beer Lovers’ Party.

Accounting for the difference between perceived importance and actual campaign involvement helps us to illuminate where the interaction between church and polity takes place in Russia today. Part of the explanation for the non-result achieved by religious electoral blocs is simply that there is no tradition of religious parties in Russian politics, and attempts to create a form of Christian Democracy on the

European model have failed.¹⁸ The more significant explanatory factor, however, is that, as argued above, the Russian Orthodox Church stands in the minds of populace and politicians alike for something other than Christianity. It stands for nation, Russia, Motherland, tradition, 'non-Westernism'. All these ideas already find ample – some would argue excessive – resonance in the political arena, as analysis of the presidential election campaign makes clear.

The concept of Orthodoxy as a symbol of Russia meant that the Russian Orthodox Church featured prominently in the campaigning during the 1996 presidential election, and – to a lesser extent – in the 1995 Duma election. In December 1995, for example, representatives from 17 parties attended a conference hosted by Patriarch Aleksii at the Danilovsky Monastery. Those present included the leader of the Communist Party (and subsequent 'runner-up' in the presidential election) Gennadi Zyuganov, the leader of the ultranationalist Liberal Democratic Party of Russia Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and the prime minister and leader of the Russia Is Our Home Party Viktor Chernomyrdin.

The readiness of such leading political figures to be seen in the presence of the patriarch and to be identified with the Russian Orthodox Church continued and increased during the presidential campaign. This engagement with the church was often expressed in the form of phraseology or symbolism. In a campaign where scarcely a candidate departed from overt adherence to some form of Russian national-patriotism and pride in the traditions of the great Russian nation then almost the ideal photo-opportunity – except in ethnically non-Russian areas – was of the candidate with an Orthodox priest. Without words, such a picture summed up 'Russianness'.

Candidates

The presidential election of June 1996 had ten first-round candidates. Some of them are of little importance in the Russian polity in general and did not say a great deal about religion during their campaigns. This paper deals with the two candidates who progressed to the second round – Boris Yel'tsin and Gennadi Zyuganov – as well as the more important first-round candidates, that is, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy and those candidates who at various points in the campaign were engaged in predictably fruitless negotiations aimed at presenting a unified 'third-force' candidate – namely, Grigori Yavlinskii, Aleksandr Lebed', Svyatoslav Fedorov and Mikhail Gorbachev. The role of the church in the campaign of these candidates will be considered at the level both of declared policy on religion and of the use of religion during the campaign.

As noted above religion was not a great issue for policy debate during the campaign. When the policy platforms of various candidates did mention religion there was little difference between them. Candidates generally claimed to be in favour of religious freedom, and often particularly emphasised the 'traditional religions' of Russia, notably Orthodoxy and Islam, with the occasional reference to Buddhism and Judaism. The election programmes of the potential 'third-force' candidates scarcely mentioned religion, with the exception of that of Aleksandr Lebed' who specifically declared himself in favour of Orthodoxy and morality, and became known for his disdain for 'western sects'.¹⁹ Zhirinovskiy similarly appealed to religion in terms of Orthodoxy and nationalism. His policy programme took a specifically anti-Western stance and promised vague 'additional advantages to the Russian Orthodox Church'. One election poster featured a picture of Zhirinovskiy arm in arm

with a senior Orthodox priest and the one word – in Russian – ‘I bless you’. While the poster thus showed the church blessing Zhirinovskiy it allowed the implication that the blessing could flow the other way, and also that the church and Zhirinovskiy together might bless the nation.

The stated policies on religion of the two candidates who progressed to the second-round run-off, Yel'tsin and Zyuganov, and their use of religion during the campaign virtually coincided. Both were frequently to be seen at church during the campaign. Both talked favourably of the influence of the Orthodox Church in Russia, and denounced the persecution of the church during the Soviet era. Both made specific appeals to the Muslim population of Russia.²⁰ Both promised religious freedom at the same time as proposing to act against religious groups from the West. And each used the church to attack the other.

Religion thus evidently occupied a similar place in the campaigns of Yel'tsin and Zyuganov, but the different situations of the two men affected the application of the religious factor. Yel'tsin had the advantage of incumbency. This worked in his favour in significant ways throughout the campaign, notably in the overwhelmingly pro-Yel'tsin media coverage, particularly on television.²¹ In relation to the use of religion in campaigning, incumbency meant that he had the better opportunities to be seen as a supporter of Orthodoxy. At official events, such as the signing of a ‘treaty of union’ between Belarus’ and the Russian Federation in April 1996, Yel'tsin would be seen with the patriarch. The rebuilding of the Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in central Moscow was also completed in time for Yel'tsin to attend a service conducted by the patriarch on Easter Sunday.

Zyuganov's use of religion in campaigning could not take such a straightforward line and was beset by complications and possible confusions. Although he is the leader of the Communist Party of the Russian Federation, Zyuganov stood in the presidential election as the candidate of the National-Patriotic Front. Being leader of the self-proclaimed successor party to the Communist Party of the Soviet Union clearly presents some difficulties in trying to campaign for any ‘religious vote’, notably in view of the 200,000 clerics killed under the communist regime and the several times higher number of believers repressed for their beliefs. Zyuganov had to fight against obvious guilt by association, which was played up by the Yel'tsin campaign strategists and the anti-Zyuganov press.²² In terms of his religion-related campaigning, however, Zyuganov could more successfully and convincingly draw on the National-Patriotic Front nature of his candidacy. There are close connections between the russophilia of the National-Patriotic Front and elements of the Russian Orthodox Church. A major theme in his campaigning, therefore, was the spiritual vacuum supposedly created by the rapid westernisation which had occurred during Yel'tsin's first term. Zyuganov talked of the need to recreate the communal environment of ‘*sobornost*’, a term with clear Orthodox connections which defines an alternative to western individualism. There were also those in both the National-Patriotic Front and the Russian Orthodox Church who emphasised the ‘messianic’ role of Russia and her unique destiny as the ‘third Rome’.

Whatever the connections between Zyuganov's nationalism and the Russian Orthodox Church, however, the population at large perceived him, and voted for him in large numbers, as the communist candidate. Some rather complex ideological gymnastics were therefore required on his part to maintain a coherent stance. Zyuganov's writings attempt to reconcile Christianity with communism and lead to his equating socialism with the Sermon on the Mount and describing the Communist Party of the Soviet Union as ‘a sort of synod’.²³

Methods

Appeals to religion during the presidential campaign most often took the form of symbolism and phraseology, used in order to play on the nationalist and traditional connotations of belief rather than to engage in policy debate. As noted above, symbolism captured in photo-opportunity can sum up attitudes and stances at a glance. For example, as well as regularly taking part in Orthodox ceremonies Yel'tsin when campaigning in Kazan' wore a skullcap to indicate respect for the Islamic population of Tatarstan. Zyuganov used symbols particularly blatantly in his pre-election rally at the Luzhniki stadium complex in Moscow. As he stood on the platform, bells were rung and the banners from the local Orthodox parish were presented to him. Minor candidates too recognised the easy symbolism of the church. In a political broadcast from the flat of Vladimir Bryntsalov, the candidate of the Russian Socialist Party who attracted 0.2 per cent of the first-round vote, the camera picked out icons on the wall and a portrait of the patriarch. The use of religious phraseology also featured regularly in the election campaign. Mikhail Gorbachev's somewhat sad and ineffectual attempt to regain power was met with either indifference or hostility. On a provincial tour he promised 'I will fight to the bitter end, even if you crucify me. I am reminded of Jesus Christ on the way to Golgotha. How he walked through the streets and people spat on him.'²⁴ Opponents such as Viktor Anpilov, whose Communists – Working Russia – for the Soviet Union received 4.5 per cent in the 1995 Duma election, likened Gorbachev to Judas Iscariot rather than Christ.

The most prevalent use of 'religious' phraseology and concepts was of a negative kind, through the attempted 'demonisation' of opponents. When it came to demonisation of his main rival, the Yel'tsin campaign had a head start, making much play of the simple connection Zyuganov = communism = atheism = terror. The pro-Yel'tsin press would cite figures for the number of clergy killed under communism, and, for example, quote Lenin's order of 25 December 1919 to shoot all those not going to work because it was St Nicholas' Day.²⁵ Zyuganov's negative use of religious concepts and phraseology attacked the 'moral genocide of the Russian people', and contained occasional hints of antisemitism.²⁶ One supporter of the National-Patriotic Front used the word-play *demokratiya-demonokratiya* to refer to Yel'tsin and the 'democrats'.²⁷ Zyuganov more literally demonised both Gorbachev and Yel'tsin during his pre-election Luzhniki rally when he cited the Book of Revelation's reference to 'the beast' giving men a mark on the forehead and hand in the last days. This reference pointed to Gorbachev, who has a large birthmark on his forehead, and Yel'tsin, who has a deformed left hand from an accident in his youth, in order to imply that Russia had been under the powers of darkness since the mid-1980s.²⁸ Similar demonisation of Yel'tsin came in a pro-Zyuganov leaflet in the form of a prayer which, couched in old-fashioned religious terminology, carried the heading 'Lord, deliver Russia from Yel'tsin'. It continued:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, do not deal with us according to our sins, but rather deal with us according to Your great mercy. And deliver our Motherland from her great misfortune, and us from the destroyer of our innermost beings, from Boris Yel'tsin, the destroyer of the great Russian power, who gave her in chains to the enemy and in disgrace to the devil, having deprived the people of their victuals, having condemned us to despondency of heart and seduction of the mind. Sweet Jesus, light up Russia with the sun of Your love and Heavenly Grace. Take away from us the ruination given to us for our sins.²⁹

The Church and Electoral Politics – the Attitude of Religious Organisations

Religion clearly played a part in the Russian presidential election campaign of June–July 1996 from the point of view of the candidates. What about the attitude of religious organisations towards the presidential election? First, the issue of participation. Some Christians would argue that the otherworldliness of faith requires believers not to participate in politics. In the presidential election in Russia the ‘True Orthodox’ took this stance, as did the author Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Generally, though, representatives of a range of religious organisations urged their members to participate in the elections and on the first-round election day itself Patriarch Aleksii urged citizens to cast their vote.³⁰

Religious organisations of all kinds encouraged participation in the elections, then; but few actually took a stance in favour of a particular candidate. The Muslim Council of Central, Northern and North-West Russia (not a particularly Islamic region) met in Yaroslavl and agreed a resolution appealing to ‘Muslims of the regions’ to vote for Boris Yel’tsin.³¹ This appeal was less than enthusiastic, however, being couched in terms of there being no credible alternative. At the same meeting an appeal was issued urging Yel’tsin to help the mainly Muslim Chechen people, against whom the regime was then waging a bloody war.

The Russian Orthodox Church, at the highest level, declined to offer overt support to any particular candidate, the patriarch declaring in May 1996 that ‘the church does not take part in political battles because it must remain open to everyone’.³² Nonetheless splits within the Orthodox Church meant that by no means all members of the hierarchy remained content with a neutral line, and even Patriarch Aleksii made the occasional partisan statement. The patriarch’s comments often referred to the need for stability, and to the dangers of returning to repression. In themselves these themes can be read as support for Yel’tsin and a warning against voting for the communist leader Zyuganov. When abroad in Tbilisi during the election campaign, Aleksii went further than usual in specifically mentioning Yel’tsin positively and warning of possible dangers if the old regime were to return to power.³³

The patriarch’s sympathies can also be discerned from an insider’s account of his meeting with Zyuganov shortly before election day. Both Zhirinovskiy and Zyuganov recognised the potential electoral advantages that an audience with the patriarch would give them, and both asked him for such an audience. Zhirinovskiy’s request was apparently refused, and at first Zyuganov met with a similar response. After further representations, however, Aleksii eventually granted Zyuganov an audience, on the condition that he come alone. There was to be no photo-opportunity, and indeed the following day’s edition of the pro-Zyuganov paper *Sovetskaya Rossiya* provides evidence of this, leading with Zyuganov’s meeting with the patriarch but having to print separate library pictures of them both.³⁴ The patriarch’s main question for Zyuganov concerned his willingness or otherwise, should he be elected president, to preserve the new post-Soviet freedom of religious choice. The communist leader is reported to have hesitated in answering.

One of the reasons for the patriarch’s apparent reluctance to grant an audience to Zyuganov may be that the latter’s connections and supporters in the Russian Orthodox Church came from the wing of the church somewhat estranged from Aleksii. Zyuganov shared much common ground with the late Metropolitan Ioann of St Petersburg and Ladoga, a nationalist with reputedly antisemitic leanings.³⁵ This split within the hierarchy of the church was evident throughout the campaigning, with many priests from the nationalist, anti-Western wing of the Russian Orthodox

Church supporting Zyuganov, and others supporting Yel'tsin. *Literaturnaya gazeta* of 28 June 1996, for example, reported that in Novosibirsk 'the division in society extends to heaven'. The pro-Yel'tsin parish priest had held a service in memory of the clergy repressed under communism, whilst *Sovetskaya Sibir'*, the regional pro-communist paper, had published the prayer against Yel'tsin's re-election used by the Zyuganov camp during the campaign (see above). Similar divisions were apparent elsewhere within the church. Archpriests Sitnikov and Shargunov debated heatedly in the press, Sitnikov taking a pro-Yel'tsin line in the reformist daily *Segodnya* and Shargunov supporting Zyuganov in the pages of the extreme nationalist *Zavtra*.³⁶ The latter's argument specifically took the line that Zyuganov should be supported not as a communist but as the leader of the national patriotic forces.³⁷ Sitnikov countered with an emphasis on the 'evils of communism' and the assertion that it was impossible to be both for and against them. Of Moscow's two pro-Orthodox radio stations, *Radonezh'* supported Zyuganov and *Tserkovno-obshchestvenny kanal* supported Yel'tsin.³⁸

Conclusions

A series of opinion polls taken after the presidential election allows a closer analysis to be made of the impact of 'religion-related' campaigning on the result of the election. Several features emerge, but, as with most opinion poll analysis, care must be taken not to assume causal factors without sufficient evidence. The need to distinguish causal factors is evident, for example, in answering from poll data the simple question as to which first-round presidential candidate had the highest percentage of self-identified believers amongst his voters. A poll taken by the respected polling organisation VTsIOM (The All-Russian Centre for Public Opinion Research) concluded that the highest percentage of believers within the vote for a single first-round candidate was 52, achieved by both the extreme nationalist Zhirinovskiy and the leading reformist Yavlinsky.³⁹ This fact cannot of course be explained simply by support attracted by these candidates for their stance on religion. Yavlinsky in particular scarcely mentioned the issue and his achievement in attracting so high a proportion of believers' votes is due rather to the fact that his support was particularly strong amongst women and in large towns, particularly Moscow and St Petersburg. Religious belief is higher than average in both of these categories.

The poll evidence available backs up the conclusions drawn from our observation of the campaign, namely that religion did not exert a strongly partisan influence in the presidential campaign. A 1994 survey on the question of religion in political life found that 50 per cent of those polled believed that 'the church has little influence on politics, daily life and the morals of the people', and that only 19 per cent believed that it had such an influence.⁴⁰ A poll in February 1996, carried out across 21 regions by the Centre for Sociological Research at Moscow State University, concluded that for three quarters of the Russian population it does not matter whether the president is a believer or not.⁴⁰ In terms of the 'believer ratio' amongst those voting for Yel'tsin and Zyuganov, the distinction made earlier between self-identified believers and regular church attenders needs to be remembered. Amongst self-identified believers, support for Yel'tsin was marginally higher than for Zyuganov, whereas their percentage of the 'non-believing' vote was identical.

Explanations for the first-round 'believer'/non-believer' difference in the Yel'tsin and Zyuganov votes are difficult to come by without resorting to generalisations. The sociologist V. B. Dubin, reporting these survey results, argued that those who

Table 2. Electoral behaviour of believers and non-believers (% of each group)

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Non-believers</i>	<i>Orthodox believers</i>
<i>First-round votes in presidential election</i>		
Yel'tsin	22	25
Zyuganov	22	22
Lebed'	9	9
Didn't vote	34	30
<i>Second-round votes in presidential election</i>		
Yel'tsin	32	36
Zyuganov	27	27
Didn't vote	35	32

Source: *Ekonomicheskoye i sotsial'nyye peremeny: monitoring obshchestvennogo mneniya*, no. 6, November–December 1996, p. 18.

identify themselves as believers for reasons as much to do with national patriotism as with faith perhaps have a cultural proclivity to support the incumbent authorities rather than to become oppositionists. Such an explanation, however, will not do in a situation where clearly a substantial proportion of believers are not politically conservative, and where the main opposition candidate to the incumbent represents the National-Patriotic Front. The most obvious conclusion to draw from Table 2 is that no 'religious constituency' exists in the sense of believers uniting to support one candidate against another. Such a conclusion is reinforced when taking a tighter definition of 'believer' and assessing the voting behaviour of those who regularly attend church (Table 3). Amongst voters who attend church once a month or more, support for Yel'tsin and Zyuganov was identical in the second round, and only marginally in favour of Yel'tsin in the first round.

Table 3. Electoral behaviour of those who participate in church life (% of each group)

<i>Indicator</i>	<i>Attends church no less than once a month</i>	<i>Attends church several times a year or less</i>	<i>Does not attend church</i>
<i>First-round votes in presidential election</i>			
Yel'tsin	27	27	22
Zyuganov	29	18	22
Lebed'	14	11	8
Didn't vote	20	30	35
<i>Second-round votes in presidential election</i>			
Yel'tsin	38	40	32
Zyuganov	38	22	27
Didn't vote	22	30	36

Source: *Ekonomicheskoye i sotsial'nyye peremeny: monitoring obshchestvennogo mneniya*, no. 6, November–December 1996, p. 18.

The presidential election of 1996 offers, then, an insight into the nature of the interaction between religion and politics in Russia today. At the macro level, religion was clearly not a decisive voting issue. In the case of regular church attenders, although religious belief certainly influenced the voting behaviour of individuals, this influence did not benefit one particular candidate but resulted in support for the full range of candidates. The political split in the Orthodox hierarchy was evidence of the fact that sincere believers on both sides of the political divide were prepared to argue their cases; and – if the polls tabulated in Table 3 are to be believed – they were equally influential amongst committed believers. Amongst the much larger category of self-identified believers, religion likewise does not appear to have been decisive as a criterion for deciding which way to cast their vote. On the one hand, if roughly half the Russian population include themselves in the ‘believer’ category, and the main candidates made an effort to appeal to them on this level, then clearly religion will have been at least a background factor. On the other hand, as argued above, self-identification as a ‘believer’ often appears to mean little more than self-identification with Russia. The trust ratings enjoyed by the Russian Orthodox Church are not shared by other religious groups.⁴² Furthermore, although half of the population might term themselves believers, half also apparently believe that ‘the church has little influence on politics, daily life and the morals of the people’, and three-quarters believe that it is of no significance whether the president is a believer or not. The lack of a clear linkage between self-identified believers and voting behaviour is evident from Table 2, which shows that those identifying themselves as ‘non-believers’ were marginally less likely to take part in the election, but that otherwise voting behaviour remained similar in both categories.

On the part of the candidates in the election, religion evidently played a role in the campaign, but this was primarily on the level of image and patriotic identification rather than policy. The use of support for Orthodoxy as a campaign strategy by most of the major candidates may partly account for the lack of any particular candidate coming anywhere near to gaining ‘the Orthodox vote’. It also demonstrated and arguably enhanced the political influence of the Russian Orthodox Church. Although for the most part the patriarch kept a nominal neutrality, his preference for Yel’tsin cannot have harmed the standing of the church in the aftermath of the election, and indeed church-state relations have become much closer since the summer of 1996. The patriarch’s freedom to refuse to see particular candidates, to dictate the terms of his meeting with Gennadi Zyuganov, and – against the wishes of President Yel’tsin – to be absent from Moscow on Victory Day likewise demonstrate the strength of the Russian Orthodox Church’s relatively independent standing today. This independence was not seriously tested at the highest level during the election campaign as for the most part the patriarch’s stance was either neutral or quietly pro-Yel’tsin. Nonetheless, the Russian Orthodox Church as an institution is clearly free enough to be vehemently anti-Yel’tsin in some quarters, without incurring the wrath of either the patriarch or the state.

Besides the Orthodox Church, other Christian denominations played virtually no role in the elections. Their adherents make up a relatively small proportion of the electorate and their political influence is correspondingly meagre.

We have seen from the analysis above that the impact of the church on political life in Russia during the 1996 presidential election took place at a level removed from specific policy formation and religious candidacies. Although this situation has changed a little by 1997, with legislation on religion becoming a political issue in itself, religion in the 1996 election campaign played a contextual rather than a

partisan or policy role. Belief was used as an identifying factor across the political spectrum, and candidates tended to merge the concepts of religion and national identity. Whatever the views of a particular candidate on economic reform or law and order, identification with the Russian Orthodox Church signified patriotism.

Notes and References

- ¹ S. White, R. Rose, I. McAllister, *How Russia Votes* (Chatham House, Chatham, NJ, 1997), pp. 52–53.
- ² B. V. Dubin, 'Pravoslaviye v sotsial'nom kontekste', *Ekonomicheskiye i sotsial'nyye pere-meny: monitoring obshchestvennogo mneniya*, no. 6, November–December 1996, p. 15.
- ³ *loc. cit.*
- ⁴ O. Savel'yev, 'Veruyem, ne vedaya dorogi k khramu', *Segodnya*, 6 June 1996.
- ⁵ Dubin, *op. cit.*, p. 15. There is a slight discrepancy between the findings of this poll and those of the poll cited earlier, Savel'yev in *Segodnya*, 6 June 1996, which gave the figure for the number of Orthodox believers as 51 per cent. Both polls were carried out by the same organisation, the All-Russian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion. The Savel'yev poll had a sample size of 1500, the Dubin poll had a sample size of 2404. The Dubin poll appears to have been carried out in the spring of 1996 and the Savel'yev poll in May 1996. It may therefore be, though this is speculative, that the emphasis on Orthodoxy in the election campaign which was in full swing by May 1996 helped to increase the number of respondents willing to term themselves Orthodox believers.
- ⁶ *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 20 June 1996. The methodology by which this figure was arrived at is not clear. It may be that the definition of 'regular attendee' was tighter than 'at least once a month', or that the figure was derived from membership statistics rather than an opinion poll.
- ⁷ Dubin, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
- ⁸ M. Wyman, *Public Opinion in Postcommunist Russia* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1997), p. 81.
- ⁹ Dubin, *op. cit.*
- ¹⁰ John Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (CUP, Cambridge, 1994), p. 87, notes a report by the state Council for Religious Affairs in 1984 showing that over the previous five years the number of adult baptisms in the Russian Orthodox Church throughout the USSR had grown by 36.8 per cent.
- ¹¹ Anderson, *op. cit.*, p. 77.
- ¹² S. B. Filatov, D. E. Furman, 'Religiya i politika v massovom soznanii', *Sotsiologicheskiye issledovaniya*, no. 7, 1992, pp. 3–12.
- ¹³ Dubin, *op. cit.*, Table 1, p. 16.
- ¹⁴ *Sankt-Peterburgskiy vedomosti*, 27 June 1997. The report featuring this finding, however, did give the impression that the 'poll' had been more of a 'vox pop' exercise than a carefully constructed survey.
- ¹⁵ S. G. Lehman, 'Islam and ethnicity in the republics of Russia', *Post-Soviet Affairs*, vol. 13, no. 1, 1997, pp. 78–103.
- ¹⁶ Article 14 of the Russian Constitution.
- ¹⁷ The campaign of the Christian Democratic Union was not helped when its leader, Vitali Savitsky, was killed in a car crash in early December 1996. Some speculated that this crash was no accident but rather a deliberate assassination carried out by opponents of Savitsky's campaign for the removal of immunity from prosecution from members of the Duma.
- ¹⁸ For discussion of these attempts see Richard Sakwa, 'Christian Democracy in Russia', *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 20, no. 2, 1992, pp. 135–70.
- ¹⁹ He notably referred to Mormons as 'filth and scum'.
- ²⁰ A pro-Yel'tsin appeal to the 'Muslim voter' appeared in *Nezavisimaya gazeta* on 1 June 1996, and an appeal by Zyuganov to the same electorate appeared in *Sovetskaya Rossiya* on 13 June 1996.

- ²¹ The European Institute for the Media monitored television coverage of the elections and concluded that the pro-Yel'tsin bias was such that it 'undermined the fairness of the election'. *The Media and the Russian Presidential Elections: Preliminary Report* (European Institute for the Media, Düsseldorf, 1996).
- ²² V. Ilyushenko, 'Kakaya tserkov' nuzhna Zyuganovu? Ta chto ne imeyet nichego obshchego s pravoslaviyem', *Literaturnaya gazeta*, no. 23, 5 June 1996, p. 11.
- ²³ *ibid.*
- ²⁴ *New York Times*, 17 May 1996.
- ²⁵ Ilyushenko, *op. cit.*
- ²⁶ Zyuganov asserted at one point that if Stalin had lived he would have saved Russia from 'cosmopolitans'.
- ²⁷ Dmitri Dudko, quoted in Ilyushenko, *op. cit.*
- ²⁸ The passage in Revelation 13:16 actually talks of *all* people being given a mark on the forehead or hand, and specifically refers to the right hand.
- ²⁹ *Zavtra*, no. 16, 1996.
- ³⁰ Interfax news agency, 16 June 1996, reported in *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts*, SU/2640 A/5, 17 June 1996.
- ³¹ T. I. Varzanova, 'Nuzhen li veruyushchim religiozny prezident?', *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 20 June 1996, p. 5.
- ³² NTV Moscow, 10 May 1996, reported in *BBC Summary of World Broadcasts* SU/2610 A/8, 13 May 1996.
- ³³ Nataliya Babasyan, 'Bog v pomoshch'', *Novoye vremya*, no. 29, 1996, p. 43.
- ³⁴ Gennadi Zyuganov, 'Ob'yedinimsya radi spaseniya', *Sovetskaya Rossiya*, 29 June 1996, p. 1.
- ³⁵ Paul D. Steeves, *Russian Orthodox Fascism after Glasnost*, paper presented to the Conference on Faith and History, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 8 October 1994.
- ³⁶ N. Sitnikov, "'U nas s nimi raznyye puti i raznyye rodiny'", *Segodnya*, 13 June 1996, p. 5.
- ³⁷ Nataliya Babasyan, 'Krest dlya kommunistov', *Novoye vremya*, no. 22, 1996, p. 13.
- ³⁸ Nataliya Babasyan, 'Bog v pomoshch''.
- ³⁹ Dubin, *op. cit.*, p. 17.
- ⁴⁰ *ibid.*, p. 16.
- ⁴¹ Varzanova, *op. cit.*
- ⁴² Wyman, *op. cit.*, p. 116.