Russians in the grip of a religious revolution

Letter from Russia

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One hundred million Russians celebrated Orthodox Christmas on January 7. After 74 years of official condemnation, religion in Russia is booming. "Bog" (Russian for God), it seems, is back.

Over tea, Irina Boiko says: "It certainly wasn't allowed, but my grandmother did it anyway." She shows me the tarnished silver crucifix that she now wears around her neck, and recalls how one day in 1951 her grandmother had her christened in secret. "We were taught atheism at school, but I always had faith deep down. At university Marxism and Soviet Ideology were compulsory. I even did well in these subjects! Maybe I believed in both."

Although she is not a regular churchgoer, and is partial to a heady mix of Siberian superstition and Orthodox belief, Irina is typical of the growing number of Russians who are turning to religion. For many, faith fills the values vacuum left by the collapse of totalitarian ideology. For others, disillusioned with their country's newfound "democracy" and all it has failed to deliver, religion offers a refuge. After years of imposed belief, religions of all kinds are beginning to find a voice amid today's reality of corrupt and ineffectual government, financial crisis and unstoppable crime.

According to the All Russian Centre for the Study of Social Opinion, 53% of people regard themselves as sincere believers, while only 34% deny the existence of some kind of god. In Moscow religious services are held daily in 267 churches and other places of worship, and throughout the country young people make up 20% of congregations.

This religious reawakening is manifesting itself above all through Russian Orthodox Christianity. In the past few years christenings, church weddings and Orthodox funerals have enjoyed soaring popularity, and Russians are beginning to celebrate Christmas and Easter as religious festivals enthusiastically again.

Some critics complain that people are simply attracted to the glittering and mysterious ceremony of the Orthodox church. "It's an escape from today's tough, unglamorous and increasingly uncertain life," says theatre director Yuri Gvozdikov. "People enjoy all the superficial trappings of church; the drama of it lifts them out of their everyday lives."

Certainly for some rich New Russians, religion seems no less of a fashion accessory than the ostentatious gold crucifixes that are increasingly de rigueur. Mafia bosses, their polished wives in tow, attend services at Moscow's most popular churches — there, like many others, to see and be seen. Politicians who used to be staunchly atheist communists swell the ranks of "New Believers".

For the average Russian, though, religion is approached with more sincerity. The number of people openly acknowledging their faith has risen dramatically in the past 10 years. So has the choice of faith. Just as the market economy has brought the consumer a previously unimaginable array of products, the post-communist Russian searching for faith can choose the brand of belief that suits best.

In the early 90s Western missionaries and evangelical preachers flooded into the former Soviet Union. Russians were becoming anything from Seventh Day Adventists to Baptists to Baha'is. Secretive sects also had a field day. Aum Shinrikyo — the poison gas attackers on Tokyo's subway — had a bigger following in Russia than in Japan.

Sociologists believe that the unbending leadership and the iron discipline demanded of the members of such cults fulfilled the psychological needs of many survivors of the failed Soviet ideology.

But by the mid-90s the activities of sects had become a hot political issue. Orthodoxy had been good enough for most Russians for centuries; why now should imported beliefs usurp it? In 1997 President Boris Yeltsin passed a controversial law forbidding the propagation of foreign faiths on Russian soil.

Other aspects of Russian spiritualism are harder to suppress. The past decade has seen a burgeoning interest in the occult. Clairvoyance, astrology, sorcery and interpretation of dreams are booming industries. In the countryside some older people seem never to have abandoned their pre-Christian gods. Now blended with Orthodoxy, such ancient beliefs are resurfacing. An elderly Russian in the Siberian countryside may refer to her rustically painted wooden icons as her *bogi* (gods).

Some people say the Russian consciousness has always been inclined to paganism. East of the Urals votive altars festooned in fluttering prayer rags and mounded with offerings of sugar and money are a frequent sight. Further east the shamanistic religions of Evenkia and Buryatia are slowly making a comeback. Even some ethnic Russians visit shamans for spiritual guidance. Although its monasteries were destroyed and their lamas "liquidated", Buddhism too is resurfacing in the southeast.

Some traditional prejudices still remain. Muslims and Jews still have it hardest of all. The former are referred to as "blacks" and "bandits", and are the target of generalised hatered fuelled by the Chechen war. Jews are accused of conspiracy, money laundering and unspecified villainy. Someone, after all, has to play scapegoat.