

Getting Russia Right

by John A. Bernbaum

Ten years. Ten months. Ten weeks. Ten days. The years 1989, 1990, and 1991 witnessed the culmination of an incredible acceleration of revolutionary events in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. What took ten years in Poland, ten months in Czechoslovakia, ten weeks in East Germany, took only ten days in Romania. The Marxist regimes in these satellite states of the USSR collapsed in an amazing sequence that no one anticipated.¹

Then, in December 1991, the Soviet Union itself, the imperial power that previously controlled these Eastern European states, dissolved into fifteen republics with barely any blood shed. These years, these events, will go down in history as seminal years, hinge years in the course of world developments.²

The catastrophic nature of those events in the former Soviet Union is hard to comprehend and, as time passes, the full scale of these dramatic changes are often forgotten. A cartoon by Mike Peters of the *Dayton Daily News*, later reprinted in *The Washington Post*, captured the character of the revolutionary changes in the former Soviet Union. The cartoon portrayed a conversation between a Soviet astronaut and an old Babushka (grandmother). The exchange went as follows: The astronaut says, “Comrade, I’ve been in space for a year. It’s good to be back in Leningrad.” The babushka corrects him: “Sorry, Leningrad is out. This is now St. Petersburg.” The shocked astronaut replies, “Leningrad out? But Lenin is the father of Communism.” The babushka again corrects him: “Sorry, Communism is out. We are now capitalists.” The astronaut can’t believe it and says, “Capitalists! But how could Gorbachev allow this to happen?” The babushka explains, “Sorry, Gorbachev is out. He was overthrown by the hard-liners.” The astronaut asks confusedly, “You mean the hard-liners are in charge?” The babushka responds, “No, the hard-liners are out. And Yeltsin took over.” The astronaut says, “You mean Yeltsin is the head of the Soviet Union?” The babushka corrects him a last time saying, “No, the Soviet Union is out too.” The astronaut yells, “No Soviet Union! Quick, alert the Warsaw Pact!” The babushka shakes her head and says, “We need to talk.”

In this chapter I argue that a deep religious illiteracy on the part of American diplomatic and academic observers, and western observers generally, not only prevented them from foreseeing the collapse of the U.S.S.R. but also from rightly diagnosing its causes and prescribing the remedies called for in its aftermath. It is beyond the scope of the chapter to speculate on how U.S. foreign policy might have followed a different path had its leading practitioners acquired any real grasp of the role of culture and religion in the life and death of the Soviet Union. But if my account of that role is anywhere near the mark, this chapter will lend additional support to the claim that both practical diplomacy and academic International Relations omit religion from their field of vision at their peril. The chapter also attempts a second goal: not only to call for a greater reckoning with the empirical reality of religion on the part of diplomats and scholars but also – in the same vein as the chapters by Daryl Charles and Daniel Philpot – to point towards substantive

Christian principles of statecraft which might suitably inform American policy towards Russia in the future.

A Faulty Diagnosis

The radical changes that took place in Russia were unique phenomena in modern history and they were completely unanticipated by Western scholars. The massive Soviet Empire unraveled and the Union of Soviet Socialist States imploded – not as the result of a war or even of revolution in the streets.

Conventional wisdom did not prepare us for these events. In 1983, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, one of Washington’s leading think tanks, published a book entitled *After Brezhnev*. The volume contained the results of an intense eighteen-month research effort by thirty-five scholars. Their task was to sum up all the available knowledge on the Soviet Union and the central issues that Soviet society faced. Here was their conclusion: “All of us agree that there is no likelihood whatsoever that the Soviet Union will become a political democracy or that it will collapse in the foreseeable future.”³

Hedrick Smith’s popular book, *The Russians*, also got it wrong. When he followed this book issued in 1976 with its companion, *The New Russians*, published in 1990, he admitted his mistake: “I left Russia sixteen years ago thinking that fundamental change was impossible. And I wrote that in my book *The Russians*. The decline and stagnation that sank into place for the next decade, into the mid-eighties, seemed to confirm this judgment. Soviet politics appeared as frozen as the Siberian tundra. As it turned out, of course, I was wrong.”⁴

It is hard to fault Western scholars for not seeing these dramatic events coming, since almost no one did; but what is troubling is that once they occurred, they were consistently misdiagnosed.

Why did Communism fail and what caused the complete collapse of the former Soviet Union? Western scholars have answered the question in several different ways. One group basically believes that Mikhail Gorbachev should get most of the credit. Robert G. Kaiser, *The Washington Post* correspondent stationed in Moscow during these critical years of *perestroika*, put it this way: “In just over five years, Mikhail Gorbachev transformed the world. He turned his own country upside down. He woke a sleeping giant, the people of the Soviet Union, and gave them freedoms they had never dreamed of. He tossed away the Soviet Empire; he ended the Cold War. These are the most astounding historical developments that any of us are likely to experience.”⁵

Other Western scholars, mostly conservatives, give President Ronald Reagan the credit. Although Reagan was not the catalyst for the revolutions of 1989, they would argue that he created conditions which proved indispensable for these events to occur. Advocates of this perspective argue that his rhetoric about “the evil empire” was powerful and laid bare the cruelty of the Soviet regime. Reagan’s policies of exporting democracy, supporting anti-Communist resistance movements around the world, and the Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI) were all critical factors that undermined the Marxist regime in Moscow.⁶

A third group of Western scholars argues that the reasons for Communism's failure are primarily economic. The technological and managerial sluggishness of the Soviet economy brought the entire system to a grinding halt by the mid-1980s and Gorbachev could read the handwriting on the wall. The pressing need to overhaul the Soviet economy and to dismantle the centralized planning functions controlled by the Communist Party is credited by many observers as the source of the revolution. No one, not even Gorbachev, expected the whole system to unravel. It was the reform of socialism, not its demise, which the Communist Party leadership was after.⁷

The vast majority of Western analysts have focused their attention on political and economic causes for the collapse of Communism. In the aftermath of Communism, what Vaclav Havel calls "the post-Communism nightmare," this same pre-occupation with the political and economic spheres dominates the writings of foreign policy elites in the West.

Unfortunately, analysis which ignores the moral and spiritual dimensions of Communism's failure is scholarship done with one eye closed. Political and economic factors are important in understanding Communism's collapse, but they do not tell the whole story. There are missing dimensions in their critiques which most foreign policy analysts fail to see.

To illustrate this point, essays by two of the best known scholars of modern Russia are worth exploring. Zbigniew Brzezinski's book, *The Grand Failure: The Birth and Death of Communism in the Twentieth Century*, is one of the few studies published before 1989 which discussed the explicit overthrow of the Communism regime as one of four possible options. Few scholars were brave enough to even imagine this!

It is interesting to note that in Brzezinski's entire book, there are only four references to religion and only a few passing references to the "moral roots" of Soviet society. His list of the ten dynamics of disunion highlights economic factors, political pressures, ethnic forces and foreign policy concerns.⁸ Clearly these are all of significance, but there is much more to the story.

The same limited perspective is evident in Richard Pipes' essay, "The Soviet Union Adrift," which appeared in the *Foreign Affairs* journal in early 1991. The distinguished Harvard professor described the Soviet Union as a "thoroughly decrepit structure," and then analyzed the Soviet crisis. Although he noted that the most visible manifestation of this crisis was economic, in his judgment the "root problem" is political. He then discussed the "vertical conflicts" between conservatives and democrats and the "horizontal conflicts" between the center in Moscow and the republics.⁹ While his essay offered many helpful insights, his analysis was essentially confined to the political and economic spheres, including the issue of ethnic conflict.

The failure of Marxism-Leninism actually resulted in five revolutions which were unfolded simultaneously, a phenomena unique in modern history. First, there was the political revolution, which resulted from the people's rejection of the Communist Party as the sole ruler of their state and the related emergence of new political factions. This led to a dismantling of the one-party political regime and the creation of free elections for the presidency and the parliament (Duma). Second, there was an economic revolution, which resulted from Gorbachev's decision to restructure the economy and remove the restrictive controls of the centralized

planning bureaucracy. Socialism gave way to free market initiatives and radical changes followed quickly. Third, there was an imperial-military revolution in which Russia voluntarily gave up its empire in Eastern Europe and dissolved into fifteen independent republics. These decisions to release satellite states and move back Russia's borders to their 18th century position without being forced to do so by military defeat was truly remarkable. In addition, Gorbachev agreed to reduce the size of Russia's impressive nuclear arsenal and dramatically reduce the size of its standing army.

Foreign policy analysts have focused all of their attention on these three spheres where revolutionary changes were taking place in Russian society. But they missed two other revolutionary spheres. The fourth was a social revolution, a dramatic domestic upheaval, in which all of the supporting mechanisms for families and communities collapsed, such as Young Pioneers and their summer camps. "Houses of culture," often owned and operated by industrial plants, were abandoned when these plants lost their state-supported subsidies. Many families who relied on these camps and cultural centers to assist them in the child-raising years were now without any external support. The fifth and final revolution was a moral and spiritual one which was intimately related to the other four revolutions. It is this revolution that foreign policy elites have largely missed. After all, it is hard to see everything with one eye closed.

Because analyses in the West are mostly done by secular-minded scholars, for whom religion is unimportant and transcendent values of little interest,¹⁰ it is not surprising that this moral and spiritual crisis is overlooked. Within the U. S. government, especially among Foreign Service officers, where a "genteel secularity" is the default position, American diplomacy and intelligence is at an immense disadvantage. There is a "tone deafness" in the foreign policy establishment that fails to recognize the fact that for the overwhelming majority of humanity, religious conviction provides the story line through which life's meaning is read.¹¹

What is surprising, however, is that these moral and spiritual factors are overlooked even when Russian leaders involved in the drama made references to them. In Mikhail Gorbachev's bestseller, *Perestroika*, he discusses the reasons for his and his colleagues' "new thinking" related to the re-structuring of the Soviet Union. He describes how Communist Party leaders in the late 1970s "began to realize that the country began to lose momentum;" a kind of "braking mechanism" had formed affecting social and economic development. In addition to economic stagnation and deadlock, Gorbachev identifies the "gradual erosion of the ideological and moral values of our people." He notes how a "breach had formed between word and deed" which caused a "decay" in public morals.¹²

To the author of *Perestroika*, the challenge was clear: to re-structure Soviet society, including its moral life. In his own words, Gorbachev made this point: "Today our main job is to lift the individual spiritually, respecting his inner world and giving him moral strength and help. . . . Perestroika means the elimination from society of the distortions of socialist ethics, the consistent implementation of the principles of social justice. It means the unity of words and deeds, rights and duties."¹³ Gorbachev was describing a moral and spiritual revolution.

During his visit to the Vatican in 1989, Gorbachev again made his views explicit: He said, “We need spiritual values, we need a revolution of the mind. This is the only way toward a new culture and new politics that can meet the challenge of our time. We have changed our attitude toward some matters – such as religion – that, admittedly, we used to treat in a simplistic manner. Now we not only proceed from the assumption that no one should interfere in matters of the individual’s conscience; we also say that the moral values that religion generated and embodied for centuries can help us in the work of renewal in our country.”¹⁴

Gorbachev obviously was not blind to the moral and ethical crisis of Marxism-Leninism. Neither were his colleagues. From the many examples which I could choose, I will pick only one. Fyodor Burlatsky, one of the leading democratic reformers in the Soviet Union, a man chosen by Gorbachev in 1987 to head the new Soviet Public Commission for International Cooperation on Humanitarian Problems and Human Rights, put it this way: “The Soviet Union has to be a free country where everyone can pray to his or her own god. In fact, religion has to play a role in our return to elementary moral values. There have been so many crimes and so much corruption in our history, nobody knows what the foundation of morality is anymore.”¹⁵

Most Western scholars fail to see that a moral and spiritual revolution preceded and, in fact, made possible the political and economic revolutions of 1989-1991. The prestigious *Foreign Affairs* journal published 21 articles concerning these events in the first two years after the fall of the Iron Curtain; only three articles even mentioned the role of the church or the moral and cultural revolutions which occurred, while focusing largely on political, economic and ethnic factors. The same blindness is evident in other leading journals such as *Foreign Policy*, *World Politics*, or *The National Interest*.

Throughout Eastern Europe and the former Soviet Union, clerical and lay leaders prepared the way for the dramatic, nonviolent changes which occurred. Pope John Paul II was a great inspiration to many people and countless Christians active in human rights groups and humanitarian organizations helped to build the groundswell of support that eventually led to democratic change. George Weigel has eloquently captured this insight with these words: “The Revolution of 1989 was, at its heart, a triumphant revolution of the human spirit; an expression of the final revolution, and of the transcendent nature of human aspiration.”¹⁶

Scholars should have seen the moral and spiritual dimensions of the anti-Communist revolutions not only because of explicit comments and writings of Eastern European and Russian leaders active in these movements, but also because the evidence was readily available in published literature and the popular media. A moral and spiritual revolution had been underway for years, stimulating the consciences of many and giving them a basis for hope that their repressive regimes would be overthrown. Despite one of the most systematic persecutions that religious communities have experienced in modern times, religious faith in the USSR was not destroyed, but showed signs of vibrancy and renewal during the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁷

In my many trips to Russia in the early 1990s, I often asked Russian university students what their favorite books were. One book stood out with no challenger in sight – Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita*. I know a number of Russian

students who have read this book 20-25 times. This brilliant novel, written in 1940 but not published until 1967 because of the opposition of Soviet censors, creatively weaves together three stories.

The first is a love story about an author, named “The Master,” and his girlfriend, Margarita. The second is a delightful satire on life in Moscow in the 1930s, in which a professor of black magic (who is Satan portrayed as Professor Woland) causes havoc through his supernatural powers; the third story deals with the encounter between Jesus and Pilate leading up and including Jesus’ brutal crucifixion. This book was read by thousands of Russian students and intelligentsia during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s.

A brief summary of the principal message in *The Master and Margarita* would be this: Only a fool believes there is no God. The brilliance of Bulgakov, writing under the repressive censorship of the Stalinist period, is that he used Satan’s testimony to prove the existence of God. The book demonstrates the power of moral and spiritual ideas, often ignored by Western scholars, which prepared the ground for the political and economic changes that followed.

There are many other examples in the creative arts and in mass media which illustrate the basic crisis that Marxist-Leninist ideology was going through. Films were one of the major influences at work during the 1980s in this moral and spiritual revolution. For example, the film *Repentance* is a powerful surrealist allegory of the Stalinist terror and the cult of Stalin. The film was written in the early 1980s and produced by Tengiz Abuladze in 1984, but was not released until 1986, two years after Gorbachev came to power. Its appearance caused a political earthquake.

The essential moral lesson of the film is graphically depicted in its final scene when an old woman appears at the window of a cake-maker’s home and asks “Is this the road to the church? Does this road lead to the church?” The cake-maker replies, “This is Varlam Street [the street named after the movie’s dictator, who is clearly Stalin]. It will not take you to a church.” As the old woman walks away, she says “Then what’s the use of it? What good is a road if it does not lead to a church?”

Misdiagnosis Leads to the Wrong Cure

It should not be a surprise that a misdiagnosis leads to a faulty or insufficient cure. Western foreign policy elites clearly understood the dramatic changes in the political and economic institutions of the former Soviet Union – the collapse of the one-party state and its centralized economic planning bureaucracy, but they failed to understand how these revolutionary changes were caused in large part by the corrosive deterioration in the moral and ethical values of Soviet society.

Foreign aid programs from the West, especially from the United States, were superficial responses that failed to address deeper cultural issues. Seminars on the mechanics of the free market or how to organize political parties did not prove helpful in these traumatic days of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Helping Russians replace Soviet-style economic and political institutions with structures that were more Western was short-sighted. Seventy years of Communism did serious damage to the moral and cultural foundations of Russian society and the depth of this damage was not fully understood in the West.

Michael Novak argues that the practice of democratic capitalism has been informed by presuppositions and values that are essential to the development of its political and economic structures. There are core values that are needed to form the foundation of a liberal, pluralistic culture upon which democratic political and economic institutions can be built. Without these core values, such as trust, integrity, and accountability, democratic capitalism can not be developed. The success of democratic capitalism is based on the inherently greater moral and spiritual foundation of its underlying social system that is grounded in respect for the rights of the individual as a human being created in God's image.¹⁸

The euphoria that followed the collapse of the Soviet Union in December 1991 blinded many Western elites, as well as Russian officials, to the difficult realities that lay ahead. The collapse of the Soviet economy and the support network for families that it subsidized left the vast majority of Russians in desperate straits. The ruble collapsed twice in the 1990s and the entire savings of most families evaporated. The breakdown of political authority that accompanied Boris Yeltsin's second term as President opened up the door for widespread corruption and massive theft of the country's natural resources by unscrupulous oligarchs. To the average Russian, the words "democracy" and "capitalism" were soon correlated with anarchy, exploitation, and lack of concern for the vulnerable.

Rebuilding Russian society from the rubble of the Soviet regime was no easy task and this task was made even more complex by failure to understand the need to address the deep cultural and moral issues that were at stake. Atomized Soviet society, in which structures were formed to prevent individuals from working together, required a massive change-of-mindset. People needed to be encouraged that the days of fear and terror were over and rebuilding society required their full participation. Trust needed to be restored in a society where it had been destroyed. Speaking the truth needed to be practiced in a society where "double-talk" was a way of life, a way to survive the grasp of the KGB.

Restoring integrity and developing truthfulness, critical moral values that underlie democratic capitalism, requires cultural change in the post-Communist world, since these values were lost under Soviet leadership, as Gorbachev and his advisors realized. Western foreign policy elites failed to see how cultural institutions, including the churches, could play a much more important role in this process were they given the opportunity and the support needed.

Richard Pipes has highlighted the fact that Russians long for stability, especially after the upheavals of the 1990s, and that part of the legacy of the Soviet experience involves no sense of community and no trust of government. Because there has not been a clean break with its totalitarian past, Pipes also argues that this creates additional obstacles in the path of the rebuilding of a healthy society.¹⁹

What has emerged in Russia in the last decade is a vibrant free market economy, one of the fastest growing economies in the world, but the moral values that should form the foundation for this economy are not yet in place. As a result, corruption is rampant and serves as a "brake" on what would be an even more dynamic economy. Russians have become consumers, but not yet citizens.²⁰

In recent years a group of scholars have emerged who are studying the issue of how culture shapes society. The Culture Matters Research Project at the Fletcher

School at Tufts University has brought together large groups of development experts that are agreed that culture, not politics, determines the success of a society, but that politics can change a culture when it addresses deeper moral and ethical issues.²¹ Unfortunately these analysts were not engaged in the post-Communist transition in Russia.

These scholars have studied how “progress-prone” worldviews are different than “progress-resistant” worldviews and their analyses involved societies in every part of the world, not just among the least developed nations. Their studies concluded that a “progress-resistant” worldview involves the following characteristics: a sense of irrationality that is prone to fatalism or utopianism; a belief that wealth is a gift of fate or chance; a conviction that personal advancement only comes through the “right connections;” group identity is more important than the individual; punctuality and saving is discouraged; and, a high degree of mistrust beyond one’s family or clan.²² In my experience working in Russia since 1980, most, if not all, of these characteristics are evident in Russian society. In fact, it could be argued that these characteristics are connected to a related discussion about Russians’ “DNA.”²³ These are important cultural and moral issues that need to be addressed, since they are clearly a part of the legacy of the Soviet experience. People do not quickly shed cultural patterns that are deeply ingrained in a society, especially over three generations.

Democracy, as we have experienced it in the West, involves both individual freedom and popular sovereignty – rule by the people, as Michael Mandelbaum has noted. Freedom or liberty has a long pedigree, dating back to the days of ancient Greece and Rome. Religious liberty grew out of the Reformation in the 16th century and later political freedom followed, which included free speech, free assembly and the right to political participation. Political sovereignty emerged later and became a universal value in the second half of the 20th century.²⁴

What we are learning today is that putting the principle of liberty into practice is very difficult because it requires institutions, such as functioning legislatures, legal systems with independent judges, honest police and truthful lawyers and prosecutors. Operating these kinds of institutions requires some highly specialized skills and – more importantly – a firm grounding in moral values. In addition to the basic belief in the value of each individual and that individual’s human dignity, there is also the belief that social and civil life needs to be protected from state interference.

Mandelbaum has argued that the skills and values required to create conditions of liberty and freedom “can not be called into existence by fiat any more than it is possible for an individual to master the techniques of basketball or ballet without extensive training.” It is his judgment that the relevant unit of time “for creating the social conditions conducive to liberty is, at a minimum, a generation.”²⁵

A Constructive Role for Religion in Post-Communist Russia

Although religion is often viewed by foreign policy elites as a source of conflict or as a marginal phenomena that does not deserve serious analysis, it should play a constructive role in helping us understand the complex transitions underway in the post-Communist world. It can also offer positive responses. We have already

discussed how secularist foreign policy elites misdiagnosed the radical changes in Russia by not seeing the deeper moral and cultural changes at work, so it should be evident that understanding the role of religion in Russian society helps to provide a fuller, more accurate analysis of the five simultaneous revolutions that traumatized the former Soviet Union.

Seeing the full picture, not just focused on developments in the economic and political spheres, is the first contribution that religion can make to foreign policy issues. As the events of the last few decades have demonstrated – most notably the Iranian revolution, the rise of the Solidarity movement in Poland, and the September 11, 2001 attacks, ignoring the role that religion plays in the global context is shortsighted and can be dangerous.²⁶

But a religious perspective also offers helpful insights and guidelines that can positively inform and shape policies relevant to the rebuilding of a society that has experienced the collapse of Communism. For all faith traditions grounded in Judeo-Christian values, there are key religious principles that are applicable and constructive. Two key Biblical verses come to mind. The first is Micah 6:8 – “To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God” which is a response to the question “What does the Lord require of you?” The second is the Golden Rule – “So in everything, do to others what you would have them do to you” (Matthew 7:12).

Exercising Humility

The principle of exercising humility would be a good place to begin. Too many times we have witnessed Western analysts telling Russians how they should rebuild their society with an arrogance that offends their listeners. We do not have all the answers, we have not lived through the trauma that Russians have personally experienced, yet too often the advice from the West has been given in a condescending spirit. A faith perspective begins with the conviction that offers to assist others in distress must be made humbly and sensitively. Here is where the Golden Rule can help: how would we like to be treated by another nation’s leaders whose success we would like to match? Being treated with respect is an important first principle.

Rather than telling Russians that they need “to become like us,” a wiser, humbler approach would be to help them rediscover positive attributes in their country’s past and then adapt modernization to these traditional cultural attributes. Nicolai Petro has tracked the post-1989 development of the Novgorod region, situated near St. Petersburg, which has been atypically successful both in consolidating democratic institutions and promoting economic development. Leaders in the Novgorod region re-defined reform by calling for people to return to the values of the region’s more prosperous past, when it was a center of trade in medieval times, rather than trying to impose reforms “from the outside.”²⁷

Another practical way of exercising humility in international relations is for Western diplomats to openly acknowledge that the influences from their countries on Russia are both good and bad. For example, rather than always emphasizing the virtues and strengths of the “American system,” it would be wise to also acknowledge that the pornography, sexual mores and violence that are so much a part of our

popular culture can be destructive. For these abuses of freedom, we can at least apologize.

Demonstrating Mercy

A commitment to demonstrate mercy, especially toward the vulnerable, is another constructive principle that a faith perspective contributes. The call for “shock therapy” that Western advisors encouraged Russian reformers to implement, without adequate concern for a “social net,” illustrates how a misguided policy can cause unintended consequences that are harmful in the long run. The decisions to implement “shock therapy” caused pain and trauma for millions of Russians and subsequently alienated them from what they understood to be democracy and freedom.²⁸ Many Russians asked themselves: Is this what democracy and liberty means? People lose everything – all of their life savings, their jobs, their support networks – while others steal the nation’s resources and become extremely wealthy because of their former Communist Party connections and corrupt practices? Where is mercy and compassion in this situation? Who cares about those who are especially vulnerable, like the elderly, the sick, and the developmentally challenged?

Prioritizing mercy would mean dramatically changing how the West relates to the rebuilding process in Russia. Instead of focusing almost exclusively on preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and combating terrorism, which are important goals, a faith perspective would also highlight the critical need to provide protection for those who are most vulnerable when radical reforms are needed. By restoring the moral and ethical foundation of Russian society, as well as instituting major economic and political reforms, the security and protection of common people would receive greater attention.

After the damage inflicted by three generations of Communist leadership, encouraging the development of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) – especially churches, mosques and synagogues – is a wise policy that is often not a priority for Western foreign policy advisors. Places of worship have extensive grassroots networks which can reach people in ways that governmental agencies can not. In post-Communist Russia, the church is the most trusted institution in society. Its credibility is far greater than that of any government agency, the media, the police, or the army.²⁹ In the Russian context, where Christianity has over 1,000 years of history, forming partnerships with Russian Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant churches is a wise move. The same is true with Islamic mosques. These institutions, with their extensive networks across the eleven time zones in the Russian Federation, are worthy allies in the effort to restore the moral and ethical values so badly needed in the rebuilding process. The reality is that NGOs, working with the full range of churches and religious groups, are already active in numerous humanitarian programs, including work with orphans, the developmentally challenged, and HIV/AIDS patients. They are doing works of mercy that never get reported in the Western press and they are often doing their work without any federal support, either Western or Russian. Policymakers need to realize that much creative activity in places like Russia is underway and hundreds, if not thousands, of volunteers are actively engaged in these humanitarian programs. If Russia is to develop as a democratic and free

market entity, built on an open, pluralistic societal base, NGOs – and especially the churches – have a pivotal role to play as agents of mercy.

Doing Justice

Another constructive role that religion can play in policy formulation is its emphasis on doing justice, a commandment that is repeatedly emphasized in the Judeo-Christian tradition. Doing justice is different than demonstrating mercy; mercy involves helping those who are victims and who are vulnerable, reaching out in compassion to help the truly needy. Doing justice in the Judeo-Christian tradition involves changing the structures of society that create injustice and oppression. In the well-known story of the Good Samaritan, the response of the foreigner to the injured victim of highway robbery was an act of mercy. An appropriate act of justice would involve creating safety on the highway from Jerusalem to Jericho so that robbers no longer could take advantage of innocent travelers.

In the Christian and Jewish traditions, doing justice involves creating “right relationships” in society. It also means especially protecting the vulnerable; in Biblical terms these would be “the widow, the orphan, and the foreigner” – those categories of people who were defenseless, who lacked an advocate. A religious perspective puts the focus of public policy on justice issues since these faith traditions understand that “the political community exists to uphold public justice for all.”³⁰

This focus on the poor, on those at the bottom of the social ladder, is an important way in which religion can encourage a shift in priorities. “Without justice there can be no peace” – this Biblical theme needs to be emphasized to policymakers who often are inclined to partner with the wealthy at the expense of all others. In Russia, the plight of the poor has been given a low priority since the collapse of Communism. Only in the last few years has attention been paid to their plight and the churches in Russia have played an important role in emphasizing the needs of the poor.

According to government statistics, 13.5 percent of the Russian population currently lives in poverty. While this is an improvement over the beginning of 2005, when this number was 24.5 percent, it still represents a large number of Russians – 20 million -- who are suffering when the country’s economy is booming and its federal reserves are one of the largest in the world. In Russia as a whole, the income disparity between the 10 percent richest and 10 percent poorest was 16.8 times in 2007.³¹ Again, religion has a helpful role to play in shaping public policy and building a healthy, vibrant domestic society where no one is left out.

Supporting Religious Freedom

As Thomas Farr’s chapter has convincingly demonstrated, in a world that is profoundly religious, analysts and policymakers need to understand the critical importance of faith worldwide. Religion is not just important because it can sometimes lead to violence; religion can also support and expand liberty. If democracy is to endure, we must protect religious freedom and harness its resources for the common good.³² In America’s experience, religious freedom has often been

referred to as the “first freedom.” Freedom of conscience, freedom of religion, is viewed in our society as a basic human right. It is important for policymakers to understand that social science research has demonstrated that nations which promote and protect religious freedom also have a significantly higher level of socio-economic well-being.³³ This is not an accidental correlation.

Research has shown that religious freedom generates competition among different faiths and this leads to increased religious participation, which in turn results in larger numbers of religious groups who produce tangible benefits for society, such as programs in literacy, vocational training, marital and bereavement counseling, and poverty relief.³⁴

It was this realization, among others, that drove Mikhail Gorbachev to sever the link between Marxism-Leninism and atheism and support the new “Law on Freedom of Conscience,” issued in 1990. Soviet religious policy dramatically shifted from conflictual to cooperative; religion was no longer viewed as an enemy to be combated, but rather a potential ally in the struggle for reform. Gorbachev and his leadership team came to the conclusion that religious institutions were encouraging their members to be loyal, hard-working, and peaceful, and he could win their support for his reforms by expanding their freedom to worship as they pleased.³⁵

Recently, Russian political leaders have expressed similar sentiments, after years in which there was a reversion back to governmental support primarily for the Russian Orthodox Church as the “first among equals.” An official from President Dmitri Medvedev’s office recently visited the headquarters of the Russian Baptist Church in Moscow and commented that, in his twenty years of working with Baptists, he found them always willing to help and he discussed a possible “social partnership” with them to combat substance abuse. The Vice Chairman of the Federation Council also called on Russian Baptists to help deal with “psychological problems” evident in Russian society and noted “Nothing will be accomplished without hard work – and Baptists know how to work.”³⁶

Support for religious freedom and its ancillary benefits is another practical way in which a faith perspective can constructively inform and shape foreign policy. Making this a priority, rather than just a marginal activity, would positively nurture the rebuilding process in the post-Communist world. The 2007 Pew Global Attitudes Survey highlighted the fact that 84% to 98% of the people surveyed in thirty-four countries said they wanted to be able to exercise their freedom freely; less than 2% disagreed.³⁷ Religious freedom is much more than the right not to be persecuted for one’s faith or the right to worship as one pleases in private. Religious liberty protects human dignity and helps to build civil society.³⁸ Knowing that religious freedom – and therefore religious competition within a country – is a sign of a nation’s health, support for it deserves much greater attention by diplomats and policymakers.

Seeing Religion as Social Capital

Scholars have recently paid more attention to another aspect related to the building of civil society that involves religion. In studying social capital formation, which can be viewed as a set of moral resources that lead to increased cooperation among individuals, scholars have noted that religious institutions are often the

principal shapers of cultural values and practices that affect how politics operates in a society. In America's development, civic associations, especially churches, not only protected individual liberty from the coercive powers of the state, they also mitigated against the dangers of excessive individualism. These private associations contributed substantially to the "common good."³⁹

Religious social capital, as opposed to other forms of social capital derived from secular associations, is distinctive in the West. For example, "nearly half of all associational memberships in America are church-related, half of all philanthropy is religious in character, and half of all volunteering occurs in a religious context."⁴⁰ Religion can also contribute to the foundation of democratic society by shaping the character and virtues of its citizens. In addition, religious organizations have a history of giving "a voice to the voiceless."⁴¹

Concluding Thoughts

Because foreign policy scholars and practitioners have not taken religion seriously, the results have handicapped the ability of the West to understand what is occurring in different regions of the world, to best support positive change, or to anticipate possible scenarios that could relate to global security. The case of post-Communist Russia illustrates this. A faulty diagnosis of why Communism collapsed led to a series of foreign policy decisions that did not adequately help the Russians to rebuild their society. The ethical and moral foundations of Russian society had given way, as Gorbachev and his leadership team observed, but Western consultants and advisors never understood this and therefore paid little attention to it.

How do you rebuild political and economic systems when the moral base of society has disintegrated and there is no trust in any institutions or in anyone except close family members? After seventy years of Marxism-Leninism, with its faulty anthropology which viewed men and women as solely economic beings and its years of terror and oppression, cultural change is needed. However, trying to impose political and economic systems "from the outside" has never worked, as the Culture Matters Research Project has made clear. It is only when the leaders within a society conclude that some traditional values and attitudes are obstacles to creating democratic governance and social justice that substantial reform can occur.⁴² When progress-resistant values are prevalent in a society like Russia, they can be changed and religion is one of the key factors in making these deep cultural changes. We can no longer afford an American foreign policy that is characterized by a "genteel secularity," a foreign policy that ignores religion or minimizes its constructive role in international affairs, as this case study of Russia demonstrates.

Chapter 6 - Notes

¹ For an eye-witness account of the revolutions of 1989 in Eastern Europe, see Timothy Garton Ash's *The Magic Lantern: The Revolutions of 1989 Witnessed in Warsaw, Budapest, Berlin and Prague* (New York: Random House, 1990). See also John A. Bernbaum, "Revolution '89: The Spiritual Dimension," *The Christian Science Monitor* (August 15, 1990).

² One of the best descriptions of the collapse of the Soviet Union is David Remnick's *Lenin's Tomb: The Last Days of the Soviet Empire* (New York: Random House, 1993). The first sentence of James Billington's book *Russia Transformed: Breakthrough to Hope* (New York: The Free Press, 1992) reads as follows: "The events of August 1991 in Moscow may in time be recognized to have been the most important single political happening of the second half of the twentieth century" (p. 3).

³ Robert F. Byrnes, *After Brezhnev: Sources of Soviet Conduct in the 1980s* (Washington, D.C.: CSIS, 1983), xvi.

⁴ Hedrick Smith, *The New Russians* (New York: Random House, 1990), xvi. Smith's earlier book was *The Russians* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1976).

⁵ Robert G. Kaiser, "Gorbachev: Triumph and Failure," *Foreign Affairs* (Spring 1991), 160.

⁶ Many of the books written about the collapse of Communism by Western journalists stationed in Russia focus largely on the importance of American political leadership in undermining the Soviet regime. For example, Fred Coleman's book, *The Decline and Fall of the Soviet Empire* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1996), puts it this way: "American leadership of NATO was a truly outstanding performance by presidents from both parties, from Truman to Reagan The overall U.S. policy cannot be faulted. It was right, and it worked in bringing the Soviet threat to an end" (p. 210).

⁷ An example of this analysis would be Anders Aslund's book, *How Russia Became a Market Economy* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution, 1995). In response to the question "Why did the Soviet Union collapse?," Aslund wrote "In the early 1980s, a basic problem was that economic growth had slowed significantly. Economic petrification raised the question of the Soviet system's long-term viability. . . . The severity of the acute financial crisis of 1991 can hardly be exaggerated. . . . When Gorbachev finally stepped down as President of the Soviet Union in December 1991, he left behind a country in a state of utter and complete collapse" (pp. 50-52).

⁸ Zbigniew Brzezinski, *The Grand Failure: The Birth and Death of Communism in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1989).

⁹ Richard Pipes, "The Soviet Union Adrift," *Foreign Affairs – America and the World 1990/1991*, 70-87.

- ¹⁰ Two significant studies have been published that address this issue. The first is *Religion: The Missing Dimension of Statecraft*, edited by Douglas Johnson and Cynthia Sampson (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) and the second is *Bringing Religion into International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) by Jonathan Fox and Shmuel Sandler.
- ¹¹ George Weigel, *Faith, Reason, and the War Against Jihadism* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 14.
- ¹² Mikhail Gorbachev, *Perestroika: New Thinking for Our Country and the World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1987), 18-22.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 30 and 35.
- ¹⁴ *Time Magazine* (December 11, 1989), 37.
- ¹⁵ *Voices of Glasnost: Interviews with Gorbachev's Reformers*, edited by Stephen F. Cohen and Katrina Vanden Heuvel (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1990), 191.
- ¹⁶ George Weigel, *The Final Revolution: The Resistance Church and the Collapse of Communism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 34.
- ¹⁷ For an overview of various religious communities during the Soviet regime, see the following: *Candle in the Wind: Religion in the Soviet Union*, edited by Eugene B. Shirley, Jr., and Michael Rowe (Washington, D.C., Ethics and Public Policy Center, 1989) and Barbara Von Der Heydt, *Candles Behind the Wall: Heroes of the Peaceful Revolution That Shattered Communism* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993).
- ¹⁸ Michael Novak, *The Spirit of Democratic Capitalism* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982), 31-48.
- ¹⁹ Richard Pipes, "Putin & Co.: What Is to Be Done?" *Commentary* (May 2008), 30-36.
- ²⁰ Dmitri Trenin, "Reading Russia Right," *Carnegie Endowment Policy Brief* (October 2005), 5.
- ²¹ *Culture Matters: How Values Shape Human Progress*, edited by Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington (New York: Basic Books, 2000).
- ²² Lawrence E. Harrison, "The Culture Club: Exploring the Central Liberal Truth," *The National Interest* (Spring 2006), 97.
- ²³ For a series of essays on Russians' "DNA," see my "Reflections on Russia" -- "Fear of Invasion" (August 2006), "Lack of Trust" (September 2006), "Fear of Anarchy" (March 2007), "Giantism" (April 2007), "Deep-Seated Spirituality" (May 2007) and "Unsettled Identity" (June 2007); these "Reflections" can be located at www.racu.org/Reflections.

²⁴ Michael Mandelbaum, "Democracy Without America: The Spontaneous Spread of Freedom," *Foreign Affairs* (September-October 2007), 121-122.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁶ Scott M. Thomas, *The Global Resurgence of Religion and the Transformation of International Relations* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 1-12.

²⁷ Lawrence E. Harrison, *The Central Liberal Truth* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 152-153.

²⁸ For a description of Russia's experience with "shock therapy," see Marshall I. Goldman's *Lost Opportunity: What Has Made Economic Reform in Russia So Difficult?* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1996), 94-121. The impact of these dramatic economic reforms on the Russian people is analyzed in a study by Bertram Silverman and Murray Yanowitch entitled *New Rich, New Poor, New Russia* (Armonk, New York: M. E. Sharpe, 2000).

²⁹ Vladimir Shlapentokh, "Trust in Public Institutions in Russia: The Lowest in the World," *Johnson's Russia List #9186* (June 28, 2005). Shlapentokh notes that "the church, with its 43 percent trust rating, is the most trusted institution in the country aside from Putin as a personality. . . . Russians look to the church not so much as a repository of their religious feelings, but as an institution that can play a positive role in society" (p. 9).

³⁰ James W. Skillen, *In Pursuit of Justice* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2004), 11.

³¹ "20 Million Live in Poverty in Russia," *Kommersant* (May 15, 2008), reprinted in *Johnson's Russia List #2008-96* (May 15, 2008).

³² Thomas F. Farr, "Diplomacy in an Age of Faith," *Foreign Affairs* (March-April 2008), 110-111.

³³ Brian J. Grim, "Religious Freedom: Good For What Ails Us," *The Review of Faith and International Affairs* (Summer 2008), 1-3.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4-5.

³⁵ John Anderson, *Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 137-141.

³⁶ William Yoder, "Cooperation is the Order of the Day," *Press Release*, Russian Union of Evangelical Christians-Baptists (June 21, 2008).

³⁷ Grim, *ibid.*, 3.

³⁸ Farr, *ibid.*, 124.

³⁹ Corwin Smidt (editor), *Religion as Social Capital: Producing the Common Good* (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2003), 1-6.

⁴⁰ R. D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 66.

⁴¹ Smidt, *ibid.*, 216-221.

⁴² Harrison, *The Central Liberal Truth*, xiv.