Zoe Knox, *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia After Communism*
London and New York: Routledge Curzon, 2005. x, 257 pp.

"In highlighting the impact of religious pluralism on the Russian Orthodox Church, Zoe Knox's new book makes a valuable contribution to the study of the post Soviet experience."

The politics of religion have been underestimated as a critical task of recasting state – society relations in post Soviet Russia. Overshadowed by the radical restructuring of state institutions and the economy, Russian society was often expected to merely adapt to institutional changes mandated by the constitution or the market. Like the state and the economy, however, society has its own institutions and conventions, and many of these are strongly resistant to change. Even the most stable democratic political systems are strained by social pluralism and possess a limited capacity to simultaneously accommodate and encourage both disparate and common values. How can a post-communist society grapple with the competition and contestation of interests and ideas uncorked by regime breakdown?

In highlighting the impact of religious pluralism on the Russian Orthodox Church, Zoe Knox's new book makes a valuable contribution to the study of the post Soviet experience. Her focus on Orthodoxy and religious policy in Russia is an effective avenue to pursue the many challenges that pluralism presents to a society long steeped in monism. Knox examines the role that Orthodoxy plays in the social and political spheres, the relationship between the Russian Orthodox Church and other faiths, and also investigates internal Church dynamics. This three pronged approach allows her to dispel the misperception that the Church is a monolith and leads her to conclude that since 1991 the official church - the Moscow Patriarchate - has largely pursued its own institutional interests and has impeded the development of civil society. Yet the unofficial church – lay members and lower level clergy occasionally at odds with Church hierarchy - has promoted norms and practices (pluralism, tolerance, respect for individual rights) coherent with civil society. In this regard, Orthodoxy, rather than the Orthodox Church, possesses a "usable past" and fair prospects for strengthening civil society in Russia.

In developing her argument, the author incorporates an interdisciplinary approach and includes a wide variety of themes, from pre Soviet history to Orthodox dissent of the late Soviet period, and further to neo Slavophilism and the Russian Idea. Knox focuses also on such topics as Russian xenophobia, New Religious Movements, Orthodoxy in Russia's near abroad, theology, religious legislation, and political parties. This is a smorgasbord of analysis, drawing from excellent Russian and Western sources, and will be enticing to many different palates. Knox is to be commended for organizing her material with clarity, and contributing meaningfully to the study of contemporary Russia, Orthodoxy, and church-state relations.

Readers will need to overlook a few annoying misspellings of authors and Russian terms, and a reference to recent history that places the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 rather than 1991. A more substantive reservation with the text is that despite her stated intentions to the contrary, Knox relies on a flat construct of civil society. Her pursuit of autonomous, diverse, societal organizations

engaging in competition is a conventional pursuit that, while fruitful, ignores that in its fuller version, civil society not only insulates social organizations from the state, but also draws individuals towards common purposes and cooperation. A broader approach to civil society, which would harmonize well with the Orthodox concept of *sobornost'*, would recognize that merely focusing on rights, autonomy, and opposition, might describe the atomization of society. As responsibility and common identity are promoted, civil society is more than a balance to the state, it provides also a defense against the atomization of society. The degree to which Orthodoxy actually influences social behavior remains unexplored.

This broader notion of civil society is critical in the context of post communist societies. Former dissidents from the Communist world like Adam Michnik have identified the real challenge of transition as the development of social cooperation and common norms rather than fractured opposition. Such an emphasis highlights the tension inherent in simultaneously promoting a public philosophy and respecting the right of other groups to do the same, and questions the degree to which Orthodoxy, both in theory and practice, can be an antidote to individualism and a catalyst for cooperation. One hopes Zoe Knox might pursue such themes in future work.

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