

Religion and Culture Web Forum

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Response to “Pussy Riot, the Media and Church-State Relations in Russia Today”

by Katja Richters

The “punk prayer” staged by the performance group, Pussy Riot, in Moscow’s Cathedral of Christ the Savior, and the trial and international outcry that it provoked, raises the question as to just how secular Russian society is. What prompted this group of young women to voice their worldly dissatisfaction in a sacred place by praying to the Virgin Mary to remove Putin from public office? In other words, why do these punk performers reach for religious symbolism to express their political views?

Katja Richters offers a competent analysis of the series of events surrounding the 60-second punk performance and the posting of the mixed and edited YouTube clip that gave it such fame. Perhaps more than anything else, the Orthodox ideal of “*symphonia*,” or harmony as a guiding principle of the symbiotic relationship between the Eastern Christian Church and the state, gives insight as to why the women chose a cathedral for their political protest.¹ In a seminal document released in 2000, “The Basis of the Social Conception of the Russian Orthodox Church,” the Church acknowledges its leading role in society to promote peace, charity, and public morality through the guidance it offers to the military, media, educational

¹ For an elaboration on how this ideal is put into practice, see <http://regions.ru/news/2194403/> (accessed 16 November 2012).

system and other social institutions.² This ideal of harmony between church and state dates back to the Byzantine Empire when ecclesiastical and civil law were indivisible.

Arguably inherent in Pussy Riot's punk prayer is a challenge to the very validity of *symphonia*.³ The Cathedral of Christ the Savior was destroyed in a Soviet campaign of atheist fervor in 1931 and then rebuilt beginning in the 1990s at enormous public expense and amidst tremendous controversy. So the state has used the Cathedral more than once for its own political purposes to facilitate a change in ideological orientation. On a certain level, it is logical for the women to choose the politically-charged cathedral as their site for a protest against Putin's usurpation and abuse of power. "Symphonically," the Pussy Riot performers are holding the Church accountable for the shortcomings of the state just as the state judicial system equates this political protest with "religious hatred." Richters rightly points out that not all clergy and believers are comfortable with the state's use of the Church "as a shield to cover up their authoritarian restrictions" in this instance and with the symphonic ideal more broadly.

² The entire document can be found at <http://www.mospat.ru/en/documents/social-concepts/> (accessed 16 November 2012).

³ For an analysis of other artistic challenges, see Zoe Knox, "Religious Freedom in Russia: The Putin Years" in Mark D. Steinberg and Catherine Wanner, eds., *Religion, Morality and Community in Post-Soviet Societies*. (Bloomington: Woodrow Wilson Center Press and Indiana University Press, 2008).

Nonetheless, one of the factors that makes this interdependence possible is that the Russian Orthodox Church sees its temporal and geographic purview as all of “eternal Holy Rus’.” Judge Marina Syrova asserted that the victims of Pussy Riot’s “hooliganism” are “the Orthodox everywhere for all time.”⁴ The widespread relevance of the Church purportedly to all Russians, if not in a religious then certainly in a moral or cultural sense, combined with its historic relationship to the state, make the Orthodox Church, more so than the Catholic or Protestant churches elsewhere in Europe, far more likely to be selected as a target of political protest.

Interestingly, Pussy Riot is not the only feminist group to launch a political protest that also takes aim at the Orthodox Church. In Ukraine, Russia’s neighbor to the south, a feminist group known as FEMEN has also drawn considerable media attention, in part because of their staunch support for the women of Pussy Riot.⁵ The FEMEN group uses tactics of “sextremism,” meaning performing street demonstrations topless in a spirit of non-violent aggression against what they see as the patriarchal triad of dictatorship, the sex industry, and the Church, each of which, FEMEN contends, strives to control women’s bodies. In a show of solidarity with Pussy Riot, topless FEMEN activists staged a “Trash Prayer” in which they used a chainsaw to cut down a large wooden cross in Kyiv, which was originally reported to have been a memorial to the victims of communism, but turned out to have been

⁴ <http://secularright.org/SR/wordpress/tag/russian-orthodoxy/> (accessed 16 November 2012).

⁵ See www.femen.org for more information on the group, their political views and the novel means by which they have chosen to advance them. (accessed 16 November 2012).

a cross erected to show where a future Ukrainian Byzantine-rite Catholic church will be built.⁶ The point was to draw attention to the “Mafioso conspiracy between church and state.”⁷ This suggests that Pussy Riot might be part of a larger, highly radicalized, feminist critique of power, which inevitably includes the Church, given its new-found status in the halls of power in post-Soviet society.

How Secular is the Russian State?

The principle of secularism, which, as Richters notes, is endorsed in the Russian Constitution, guarantees the state will provide a significant enough degree of monitoring of the public sphere so as to restrict any one religious group or groups from impinging on the rights of others. How is the principle of secularism applied in Russia? The 1997 law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, along with recognizing “the special role of Orthodoxy in the history of Russia and in the establishment and development of its spirituality and culture,” also guarantees specific rights to four designated traditional faith groups, which, along with Orthodoxy, include Islam, Buddhism and Judaism.⁸ Other rights, responsibilities, and restrictions are allotted to faith groups deemed “non-traditional.” This two-tiered system of judicial rights, when considered in conjunction with Pussy Riot’s

⁶ See <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2012/11/femen-ukraines-topless-warriors/265624/> (accessed 28 November 2012). The cross overlooked the main boulevard of the city. It is unclear to me if they specifically meant to target the Ukrainian Byzantine-rite Catholic Church or not.

⁷ See <http://rt.com/news/femen-cross-pussy-riot-930/> for a video, photos and commentary on this “Trash Prayer.” (accessed 16 November 2012).

⁸ A full translation of this legislation can be found at <http://www2.stetson.edu/~psteeves/relnews/freedomofconscienceeng.html> (accessed 16 November 2012).

punk prayer, highlights the extent to which it is still unclear whether Russia wants to be an Orthodox country with religious minorities or a pluralist country that acknowledges and protects multiconfessionalism.

Pussy Riot's actions also suggest that the line separating the public and the private spheres concerning religion and politics is particularly porous. Since 1991 religion has gone quite public and has indeed become politics by other means. Perhaps more than anything, the punk performers with their balaclavas, electric guitars, and prostrations are calling for a new form of secularism that will include a firmer, more deliberate delineation between the spheres of the state and the church. In a country, however, that is emerging from 74 years of state-led promotion of atheism and waves of antireligious campaigns notable for their destruction of human life as well as sacred space, the public and political reaction in Russia to political discontent expressed in terms of religion is still one of caution.