DIRECTOR'S REVIEW: Reclaiming the Sacred
2005-2006 Kennan Institute Annual Report
By Blair Ruble
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Madina Mosque, Kazan. Tatarstan. (William C. Brumfield)
Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul, Kazan, Tatarstan. (William C. Brumfield)

Just a few months after the Soviet Union collapsed, a leading “Sovietologist” was invited by a group of even more distinguished Soviet-hands to imagine the “table of power” in the Kremlin a decade-and-a-half hence. Who would be at that table? The leaders of various democratic political parties? Women? Business leaders who competed with equal deftness with their western counterparts on the great global markets that would surely rule the world?

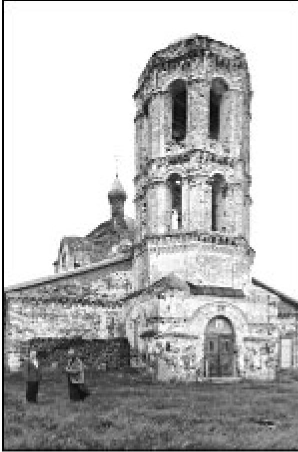
The speaker began by observing that how people gathered around the table would be as important as who they were. Would members of this elite be elected? Alternatively, would they find their way to power via personal networks? Would they all be ethnic Russians or would there be a place at the table for representatives of other nationalities? Would women be in the room? Continuing on, he suggested that while the process was unclear, undoubtedly some of those present would be wearing expensive business suits, others would be wearing the uniforms of various security and military forces, and others still would don clerical garb.

The audience audibly gasped, and spent the evening trying to explain to the discussion leader that there would be no clerical garb at the Russian table of power. The Soviet Union had been an atheistic society and state, one that had been thoroughly secularized. In addition, the forces of a burgeoning global economy would propel others to the fore. Despite the role that religion might come to play in the private lives of individual Russian citizens, several in the room argued, there would be no public institutionalized religiosity in the former Soviet Union.

Whatever aspects of Russian reality were illuminated that evening nearly fifteen years ago, even more light was shed on mainstream Washington, D.C. think-tanks. One simply did not speak of religion in polite company, especially when engaging in political analysis.

How different the world—and Washington—seems today.

Since the fall of communism in Russia, Ukraine, and other countries once part of the Soviet Union, religious affiliations and identities have experienced a rapid resurgence.


Church of the Intercession, Polianki, Tatarstan. (William C. Brumfield)

Religion emerged as an affiliation of growing prominence against the post-1991 background of new state formation, local authoritarianism, concerns over the meanings of democracy as well as the ethics of the new economy, and—in far too many instances—of poverty and war. An increasing number of people today look through the framework of religion in order to understand the world around them. In a region in flux, questions of religion are related to—though are by no means limited by—issues of national and international security. In fact, it is fair to say that religion touches upon all spheres of social, political, and cultural life, and its resurgence has profoundly affected the definition and shaping of broader social movements as well as individual behaviors.

The religions practiced in this region differ from one another in important ways: their rituals are diverse, their customs and laws vary, their senses of sacredness are defined and elaborated through different social settings and different civilizational narratives. There are times in history when these differences between and among religions appear to set the stage for (and, indeed, impel) the great conflicts of the day. And yet, it is also fair to say that the world's religions share a great deal. In their essence, each and every one of them offers moral templates for followers. In times of danger and trouble, they offer sense, meaning, and solace. They provide for life-paths that contain dignity. In looking at their sacred books, it is clear that they encourage order and lawfulness and offer ways for believers to learn the habits of altruism.

Within such countries as Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus, there are vast and varied examples of how religion in its many facets is becoming central to social, cultural, and political life. In some cases, religious practices prove to be part of what could be called a new cultural dynamism, one that responds to shifting social reality. For example, over the past couple of years, mullahs in Tatarstan have begun to read their sermons in Russian rather than in Tatar. They have done so in response to the arrival of increasingly large numbers of migrants from the Caucasus region who are seeking religious sustenance in the language they share with local clergy: Russian. Some observers of this phenomenon detect an increasing radicalization of the content of local sermons, so that Russian may in fact become the language of Islamic Fundamentalism in the Central Volga. At the same time, because the sermons are in Russian, they offer a new, wider access to the sacred texts of Islam—a process which can serve to demystify Islam for Russians, an important step on the way to growing tolerance.

In another example, the new Mayor of Kyiv—Leonid Chernovetsky—was an unexpected candidate and an even more surprising electoral victor given his religious affiliation. Chernovetsky is a follower of Pastor Sunday Adelaja, a Nigerian Pentecostal minister who has built up a congregation in Kyiv's left-bank neighborhoods that is said to now total 25,000.

New Mosque, Vakhitov Street, Chistopol, Tatarstan. (William C. Brumfield)

Within the thorny question of church/state relations in the region, several interesting configurations have developed. For example, the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church is lobbying for the introduction of religious training in Russian public schools. At the same time, the Patriarchate praises the separation of church and state in neighboring Ukraine. In Belarus, a new law on religious freedom (first thought of as a counterpoint to the post-Soviet state atheism still in effect in the country), has forced many followers of minority religions outside of the frame of the law, simply because they meet in private homes. In the Northern Caucasus, one of the most culturally and linguistically diverse regions in the world, Islam is playing a role that leads both to stability and to radicalization. It is practiced not only by a small but devastating group of rebel warriors and "black widows," but mostly by men and women hoping to quietly re-familiarize themselves with a religion long closed to them.

It is clear that religion, through a variety of institutions and confessions, has become a vital and vibrant force in the region. The dynamism of religion—manifested in the growth of some movements, the variety of new means for engaging the "public good," and innovative ways of grappling with post-Soviet chaos— stands in startling contrast to an ever more visible return of a peculiar kind of *political* "stability" that comforts so many throughout the former Soviet Union. As counter-intuitive as it may seem, religion is a creative force in the post-Soviet space. Indeed, unlike local political systems and elites, religious institutions and leaders often respond far more quickly to the profound changes taking place in how people live their lives. Money matters; security is scarce; people feel that their future is uncertain. Political leaders who somehow echo the past might be reassuring. Nonetheless, many are turning to religious belief for answers.

During the Cold War, Westerners barely thought to study religion in the Soviet Union. It was, after all, an atheistic state and, in any case, the questions that interested students of the region clearly clustered around themes of high politics and international relations. When the Soviet state collapsed, scholars had unprecedented chances to sort through the many sides of life that had been left out of the scholarship examining the Soviet Union. Still, we in the West who try to understand and explain the region often seem much more comfortable talking about the "vertical of power," oligarchs, and parliamentary negotiations than considering the content of Islamic and Pentecostal sermons. Consequently, like many voters in the region, observers often fall back on well-worn notions of what places like Russia and Ukraine seem to be about. While Putin and an emerging "Putin System," as well as Yushchenko and his "grand compromise" with Yanukovych, are undoubtedly worthy of attention—indeed, the Kennan Institute has devoted considerable programming this past year to both—they do not tell the entire story of either Russia or Ukraine. In fact, the political may be the least dynamic aspect of post-Soviet life.

Dormition Monastery, Cathedral of Dormition & Bell Tower, South View, Staritsa, Tver Oblast. (William C. Brumfield)

The Kennan Institute has been developing programming to initiate a serious analytic conversation in Washington, the United States, and the West more generally about the complex place of religion, religious belief, and religious institutions in the contemporary life of Russia, Ukraine and the entire region. During the 2005-2006 program year, for example, the Kennan Institute hosted a workshop designed to serve as a forum in which scholars from a variety of disciplines could examine in depth the question of the role of religion in the region today.

Drawing from their wealth of field experience, several anthropologists, historians, and a political scientist together examined the role of morality, community, and religion after Communism. Papers presented at the workshop, led by anthropologist Catherine Wanner (Pennsylvania State University) and historian Mark Steinberg (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign), will be published in a book titled *Reclaiming the Sacred: Morality, Community, and Religion after Communism*.

Log Church of the Ascension, Northwest View, Torzhok, Tver oblast. (William C. Brumfield)

The Kennan Institute also hosted a conference on "Religion in Russian Society: State Policy, Regional Challenges, and Individual Rights." Sponsored by the Henry M. Jackson Foundation, and featuring scholarship and policy work on Russia, Ukraine, the Caucasus, and Central Asia, the discussion was aimed at bringing high level question of state policy together with the fact of religious diversity on the ground.

The Kennan Kyiv Project held a seminar on "Inter-confessional Relations in Eastern Ukraine," featuring both scholars of religion and religious clergy. The Kennan Institute in Washington, D.C. featured several scholars of religion in its speaker series of noon discussions, seminars, and lectures. Anatoly Krasikov, writing in the *Vestnik Instituta Kennana v Rossii*—the Kennan Moscow Project's periodical—outlined the development of freedom of religion in the Russian Federation.

Programs such as these represent the continuation of an institutional priority several years in the making, namely that these issues matter in the region. From conferences and talks on the relationship between Orthodoxy and civil society, to programs on the role of Islam in Central Asia, the Kennan Institute has been striving to give religion the serious, deep consideration it deserves.

Aside from individual lectures, seminars, and conferences, there has been a trend that we have perceived: more and more enlightening scholarship coming out of the region examines religion as it engages broader historical, cultural, sociological, and demographic questions. I am particularly glad that several scholars in the 2006-2007 incoming class at the Kennan Institute work on various aspects of the problem of religion in the region, including anthropologist Douglas Rogers, historians Scott Kenworthy and Kate Brown, and political scientists Irina Papkov, Sebastien Peyrouse, and Scott Radnitz. We look forward to many fruitful discussions in the year ahead.

When the Kennan Institute was founded 32 years ago, it may have been hard for some of the finest scholars of the Soviet Union to imagine a time such as this, when the region was actively reinventing itself in important ways, especially along cultural and religious lines. Even if conflicts in the region appear to cluster around religious indexes and identities, it is crucial to remember in these dynamic and sometimes very troubled times that religion and the fact of religious diversity can play a positive role in individual minds, hearts, and communities. It seems crucial to pay respect to that positive function as we strive to understand this vast, rich, and complex region.

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