

will happen to the Church, and we will have no resources to control the outcome. While some commentators and participants in the conference have expressed the desire only to see a peaceful Council come to pass, in the hope that its mere occurrence will herald a renewal of Orthodox witness in the modern world, I hold out for the Holy Spirit to bring about something far

greater—genuine conversations about hard questions, which do not degenerate into apologetics, politicking, and character defamation. That hope is perhaps for now too great, considering the restriction of the 1976 agenda. So what are we to make of next year’s Council? I shall leave the last word to Metropolitan Kallistos: “Don’t expect too much—if it happens...” ✱

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#### STATE OF AFFAIRS

## Religion and Politics in Russia: an Insider’s View

**Xenia Loutchenko interviewed by Christopher Stroop**

*The prominent Russian journalist and commentator on religion and society Xenia Loutchenko and I sat down over coffee at a Moscow cafe on May 8, 2015. During our interview, we discussed the meaning of Christian politics; religion and politics in Putin’s Russia; her work unpacking connections between American and Russian social conservatives, including a former Fox News employee’s work on a far right Russian Christian media project; and what she would like American audiences to know about the*

*state of Russia’s predominant Church. The author of Mothers: Priest’s Wives on Themselves and Their Lives (Matushki: Zheny sviashchennikov o zhizni i sebe, [Nikeia: 2015]), Loutchenko is a regular contributor to the independent Orthodox Christian media outlet Pravmir (Orthodox World), which publishes a limited quantity of its material in English, and a contributor to liberal Russian news outlets such as Colta. I have translated the interview from Russian and edited it for length and clarity.*

**Christopher Stroop:** Xenia, thank you for agreeing to this interview. I certainly want to talk about our mutual interest in the collaborative efforts of ideologically oriented American and Russian religious conservatives, a topic we've both written about, but first I'd just like to invite you to say a bit about yourself and your career. Why did you decide to write about religion, and what are your current and future plans?

**Xenia Loutchenko:** Why did I choose to write about religion? Well, you could say that in part it was accidental. It was the 1990s, when everything was very different here. The Church was also very different. I was an Orthodox Christian, but not particularly active. I studied in the Journalism Faculty at Lomonosov Moscow State University; there was a study group dedicated to religious journalism, but I only went to a few of its individual seminars, which were led by Fr. Georgy Chistyakov, a disciple of Fr. Alexander Men. I had an instructor named Maria Lukina—she taught specialized courses on religion and media. I started to write a course paper for her and got interested in just finding out what was out there in terms of Orthodox Christian media, I interned for a television project, and I just ended up going in this direction. At a time before most people realized the significance of the Internet, for a while I became the sole academic expert on how the Russian Orthodox Church was utilizing new technology, although this is no longer the primary focus of my work. I'm now more interested in people. I've ended up working on gender, although I didn't originally plan to, and I continue to do work that could be described as personal narratives, oral history.

**CS:** Is there such a thing as liberal Orthodox Christianity in Russia, and do you consider yourself a liberal Orthodox Christian?

**XL:** You know, it's a strange time, because now there's this impulse for everyone to divide themselves into two camps, liberals and conservatives. But liberalism, it seems to me, concerns one's political views, whereas Christianity is about faith. These are distinct categories. I'm not a big fan of these labels, but politically, within contemporary Russian reality, I can of course count myself among the liberals.

**CS:** And within the Church, I suppose, it's complicated.

**XL:** Well, if we get back to the original meaning of the term, then all Christians are liberals, because we have a Gospel that proclaims freedom, freedom of choice, the dignity of the individual.

**CS:** But nevertheless there are a lot of Christians who want to discipline other people's behavior. Are Christians really for the freedom of all?

**XL:** Well, in my understanding that's a perversion of the Gospel's teaching. You can only control your own decisions. If we take the teaching of the Savior to go into all the world and preach the Gospel, etc., literally, then that means you should tell people about Christ, about choosing that path, but not do things the other way around, first establish prohibitions, and then say that's Christ.

**CS:** So you're saying that religion and politics should be completely separate things?



**XL:** No. But what's called political Orthodoxy in Russia today is an absolute caricature and has nothing in common with normal politics; we don't have normal political processes. This "battle for traditional values" in Russia is contrived, it's PR.

**CS:** So what is a genuine Christian politics? What does that look like?

**XL:** Well, people will participate in political processes in accordance with their convictions. Some European politicians, also some from South America, Catholics, they work for the passage of laws that support the poor, provide a social safety net for the have-nots. They're for a return to humaneness in politics, wanting to make sure that first of all people's needs are met, and then we can talk about the interests of the state, the interests of the nation, etc. That's Christian politics.

**CS:** All right then, let's go ahead and talk a bit about Russian and American religious conservatives. In the English-language press in recent years there's been a lot of discussion of the exporting or globalization of the American culture wars, that is, battles for so-called "traditional" and "family" values. The connections between

Russians and Americans in this respect actually go deeper into history than most people know. For example, Cole Parke of Political Research Associates has taken note of the influence of the Russian sociologist Pitirim Sorokin on the founder of the World Congress of Families, Allan Carlson. Parke also points out the influence of other Russians on Carlson; the influence here is not one-sided. How would you assess the current situation? What have Russian culture warriors borrowed from Americans? And what might you be able to say about influence in the other direction?

**XL:** In terms of connections, in the early '90s, when the Russian anti-abortion movement began, there was heavy American influence, our entire pro-life discourse is connected with America—we got films, materials, in Russian translation. There was the Life Center, associated with Fr. Maxim Obukhov—they started this whole program about abortion, they worked with Protestant organizations. And then later, as this whole rhetoric of traditional values gained popularity, the current head of Russian Railways, Vladimir Yakunin, he created the forum "Dialogue of Civilizations" [currently co-chaired by the Packey J. Dee Professor in the Departments of Philosophy and Political Science at the University of Notre Dame, Fred Dallmayr – C.S.], which has been taking place on Rhodes for more than ten years, where he gathers retired and active European and American politicians and social actors. To use an analogy, it's sort of like a traditionalist version of the Soviet exportation of Communism. It's a right-wing International. I can't say anything definitive about this, but there also seems to be financial influence from the Russian side. Marine Le Pen received a loan from Russia, for example.

**CS:** So the goal for these sorts of Russian initiatives is to influence European and American politics, yes?

**XL:** Yes, and I see that in Europe it's very successful. We shouldn't underestimate this, because Putin is loved in Europe. Many Italians love him, for example. There's also a serious split in the contemporary Russian diaspora. A significant proportion is very pro-Russian, pro-Putin, but it seems that this is partially connected with the overly zealous anti-Russian views of the Western press, its frequent use of unverified information. It's very aggressive, and this creates a natural desire on the part of those with Russian roots to respond defensively.

**CS:** To get back to Russian society, you've said that these culture warring efforts, including those undertaken in collaboration with Americans and Europeans, are by and large "PR," but are they really so superficial? If you look at the results of public opinion surveys, for example, you can see that by some measures homophobic attitudes have increased in Russia since 2012. These efforts do get some results, don't they?

**XL:** Of course they do. I don't mean to say that these organizations are ineffective, the techniques they've imported, particularly from America, in terms of political lobbying and activism, can be very effective. The kinds of techniques that far right American Christians have introduced in Uganda, for example, are also being used by our politicians, such as [Elena] Mizulina and [Irina Yarovaya]. But what I mean when I say these efforts are PR is that the people who are making them here don't themselves believe in what they're doing. Most of our politicians who are screaming

about patriotism, their children live in Europe. This is why the sanctions actually seriously bother them. They all get health care abroad.

**CS:** To get back to connections between Russia and America, did you read Pat Buchanan's article, "Whose Side Is God on Now?"

**XL:** Yes. I don't systematically read everything in the Western press, but Buchanan is well known, and I did glance through that piece.

**CS:** Well, the general idea here is that some far right American conservatives are really drawn to Putin—they praise him, for example, for actively opposing the LGBTQ community. There was this interesting moment after Putin signed the law banning so-called "propaganda" of so-called "non-traditional" relationships in 2012. This legislative initiative made a big impression on American religious conservatives, and not a few of them praised Putin for it. There's this myth that some still insist that he's going to save "Christian civilization."

**XL:** When it comes to American and European right-wing actors placing big hopes on Putin, I don't know, it's very strange, because generally American conservatives have been largely anti-Russian. I also find it funny to read all the time that "Christian civilization" is threatened by gay men and lesbians. It's some kind of absurd joke. And yet serious people, people with higher education, with postgraduate degrees, politicians, they can talk about this seriously for hours. These people themselves ought to go to a psychiatrist. As if sexual ethics could bring down civilization. It's nonsense. But of all these "cannibalistic" Russian laws, that one that troubles me

the most personally is the Dima Yakovlev Law. This is real cannibalism, when you see the terrible conditions in which these children are living in orphanages, how they suffer without access to proper health care. And when it comes to the issue of adoption, it's absolutely clear that America is one of the global leaders, in terms of society's attitude toward adoption, in terms of the social support that adopted children get. We ought to thank Americans who adopt for helping us save these children, and for the fact that they can love them, while some people here can't. Sure there have been a few horror stories, but so many happen here as well, nothing can completely prevent that. I can't admire the man who signed this ban into law.

**CS:** That law is of course not popular with American religious conservatives.

**XL:** So you see how they selectively love Putin.

**CS:** Well at this point things with Russia are more complicated for the American religious right than they were in 2012. It seems to me that 2014 was a kind of turning point; after all, in light of Russia's annexation of Crimea, the World Congress of Families was forced to withdraw its official sponsorship from the September 2014 international Forum on Large Families and the Future of Humanity that took place in the Kremlin and the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. As a result of the Ukraine crisis, for the most part prominent American religious conservatives have dumped Putin. Of course, not all of them were behind him in the first place, and there are also exceptions.

**XL:** Yes, the interests of American conservative "imperialists" are now

completely at odds with the interest of Russian conservative "imperialists," who really remain essentially Soviet in terms of their ideology. The methods are the same, as well as the cynicism. They've now replaced Communism with Orthodox Christianity, but it's still the same Soviet consciousness. Of course, if American conservatives had known more about the realities of life in the Soviet Union, they'd have also found a lot to admire. It was always said that there was no sex in the USSR. For some time there were tough restrictions on divorce, which was controlled by the Party; the USSR defended the family; we had a medal for Heroic Mothers. Homosexuality was against the law.

**CS:** Let's talk a bit specifically about Konstantin Malofeev [he has been called "God's Oligarch"—C.S.] and his project Tsargrad TV, which has been described as having the ambition to become a sort of Russian Orthodox Fox News, and your work on Malofeev's collaboration with the former Fox News employee Jack Hanick. You followed that up with an interview with Hanick, who objected to your suggestion that he was involved with the ideological aspects of Tsargrad TV, even though we know he participated in a roundtable in Russia involving Malofeev and the National Organization for Marriage's Brian Brown, in which he asserted that God had called Russia to defend traditional values. Do you find his insistence that he is not involved in the ideological aspects of Tsargrad TV convincing? And how would you assess Tsargrad TV itself? Is Hanick still working on the project?

**XL:** I don't know 100 percent, but it seems that he still is. Regarding whether he influences the project's politics, it's hard to say. For one thing,

he's an American who doesn't speak Russian at all, and for that reason there are certain realities that he just can't grasp, certain detailed aspects of the work over which he clearly can't have influence. On the other hand, it's clear that the content produced for Tsargrad TV doesn't cause him any qualms. I don't know, but I suppose that he is probably paid very well. The quality of the content shows that quite a bit has been invested in Tsargrad TV, and they had to convince Hanick to move from America to Russia. But on the other hand, they didn't find him accidentally or randomly. However he got introduced to the project, its politics doesn't seem to run counter to his own convictions.

**CS:** Okay, last question. What would be the one thing you would want to pass along to Western readers either about Orthodox Christianity in general or the Russian Orthodox Church in particular? What should contempo-

rary Americans know about the religious situation in Russia?

**XL:** Hmm, if they want to learn about Orthodoxy, Americans ought to read their own Fr. Alexander Schmemmann. I think that will be more or less enough for them to get acquainted with an Orthodox view of the world, Orthodox views on the Church, life, the liturgy, the Gospel. As far as life in Russia goes, it's important to understand that Russian Orthodox Christianity is quite diverse; that, like many things in Russia, it's difficult to describe, because as soon as you come up with a general rule, you think of a bunch of exceptions. But this is why it's inaccurate to form judgments about Russian Orthodoxy based on the official picture. It'd be much more productive to learn about the lives of individual people or what priests do at the local level—of course there's a wide variety of things going on, it's a big, interesting world that rhetoric can't begin to fully capture. ✪

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