

Article

American Conservatives and the Allure of Post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy

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Abstract: This article explores the growing affinity for the post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church by far-right Orthodox converts in the United States, highlighting how the spiritual draw to the faith is caught up in the globalizing politics of traditionalism and a transnational, ideological reimagining of the American culture wars. Employing ethnographic fieldwork from the rural United States and digital qualitative research, this study situates the post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church in the international flows of conservatism focused on reclaiming social morals and traditional religiosity. In doing so, this article sheds light on how the post-Soviet Orthodox Church is viewed politically by a growing contingent of American religious and political actors who are turning to Russian Orthodoxy and Putin's government during this New Cold War moment of tension between the United States and Russia. I argue that the allure of the post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church for conservatives in the West offers us a window into how the institution is situated imaginatively within transnational politics, thereby providing us insights into the rapidly transforming culture wars fomenting globally.

Keywords: Russian Orthodoxy; American religion; culture wars; politics; radicalism; far right; transnationalism; conservatism; conversion; digital media



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1. Introduction

In 2007, under the sharp gaze of President Vladimir Putin, the Moscow Patriarchate (MP), headed by then Patriarch Alexey II, signed documents of reconciliation with Metropolitan Laurus, the hierarch of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside of Russia (ROCOR), a diasporic satellite of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) that had not been in canonical communion with its former ecclesiastical hub for nearly eighty years.¹ A historic moment of global transformation in the fragmented body of contemporary Russian Orthodoxy, the event signaled something more than just the reunion of two Christian factions—it heralded the growing global power of the post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church that was and is intimately linked to Russian state power, to Vladimir Putin's Kremlin. Since the end of the Soviet Union and the social transformation of Russian life, scholars of religion have begun to track the so-called revival of the ROC, particularly under the leadership of Patriarch Kirill. The successor of Patriarch Alexey II, Kirill took up the mantle of Church leadership in early 2009 and has seemingly become focused on creating a politicized, post-Soviet form of Orthodoxy that is both attuned to digital, global flows of (dis)information and at the same time reticent to step out of the shadow of its prerevolutionary self (Stähle 2021). As the post-Soviet ROC began to expand in power and scope within Russia, particularly in the 2010s, Patriarch Kirill, alongside President Vladimir Putin with his Russkiy Mir initiative, looked outward to points on the globe where they might spread the religious and nationalistic ideals of Russian life. One such place was the United States, where American citizens converting to ROCOR also began to embrace the ROC and the political ideals of Putin's New Russia (Riccardi-Swartz 2022; Walker 2018).

This article explores the embrace of the post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church by far-right Orthodox converts in the United States, highlighting how the emotive draw to the faith is often caught up with the globalizing politics of traditionalism and an ideological

reimagining of the American culture wars. Employing ethnographic fieldwork and digital qualitative research, this article sheds light on how the post-Soviet Church is viewed politically by a growing contingent of conservative American actors, particularly during this New Cold War moment of tension between the United States and Russia that was made even more visible during the Putin–Trump era. While scholars have begun to examine the sociopolitical transformations and connections between the post-Soviet ROC and the Russian state, particularly through Putin’s United Russia party and his philosophical engagement with the work of Aleksandr Dugin, little research has been done on how Russian Orthodoxy and politics are embraced outside of the geographical area of Russia (Gessen 2017; Skladanowski and Borzecki 2020). I argue that the Western religious far right interest in and engagement of the post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church, along with conservative Russian social politics, offers us a window into how the institution is positioned in particular transnational political imaginaries, thereby allowing us insights into the rapidly transforming culture wars fomenting globally.

In order to understand the importance of the post-Soviet ROC for a growing contingent of Christian conservatives in the United States, I draw on data from anthropological fieldwork I engaged in from 2017–2018 in rural Appalachia with a ROCOR convert community. I also nod to the extended qualitative digital research I have been engaged with since 2017 that explores the social media worlds of ROCOR adherents, focusing on their understandings of post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy and contemporary Russian politics. In the summer of 2018, Russian Orthodoxy celebrated the 1030th anniversary of the Christianization of Kievan Rus’. On St. (Prince) Vladimir’s feast day that year, I was conducting fieldwork with a ROCOR community in West Virginia. During the course of the commemorative services celebrating the life of St. Vladimir that weekend, community members nodded to Putin’s public display of religious piety as he, along with two Orthodox patriarchs, honored the saint under the shadow of his statue. Two years prior, Putin stood beside the statue, proclaiming that the saint had laid the moral foundation that would help contemporary Russia “confront modern challenges and threats” (Kremlin 2016). One interlocutor noted that as a politician honoring a religious figure, Putin’s actions were unique to post-Soviet Russia and something that would not happen in the United States. By and large, the community I worked with had a religio-political preoccupation with Putin that was expressed in a variety of ways, including suggesting the Russian president should invade the United States and that he was somehow spiritually connected to the lineage of Tsar Nicholas II, a saint in Russian Orthodoxy. These forms of political speech regarding Russian politics and faith were normative in the community I worked with in Appalachia. Monks, priests, and lay members alike saw Putin as a figure for social moral transformation despite “pro-Western people in power in Russia” (interview with author, 9 May 2018). This type of sociopolitical worldbuilding work on the part of some Western conservative converts is seemingly aided by the ways in which religion and politics are marketed by both the ROC and the Kremlin.

Conversion, as anthropologist Kalyani Devaki Menon reminds us, is always political (Menon 2003). The political dimensions of conversion are surely at play as far-right Americans select to align themselves with ROCOR and the ROC. This is not to say, of course, that all American converts to Russian Orthodoxy are conservative traditionalists looking for political salvation outside of American democracy. However, many, especially those who specifically seek out affiliation with ROCOR, do indeed fall under those categorizations. By traditionalist, I am not referring to a theological adherence to the Tradition of Orthodox Christianity, but rather the inclination towards a philosophical project espoused by Rene Guénon, and also by Aleksandr Dugin, Julius Evola, and others that have roots in radical right politics (Shekhovtsov and Umland 2009).² Those with whom I have worked, however, were not just conservatives or traditionalists in the lineage of Guénon—they were far right. With the shift from the right to the far right, many American conservatives, including Orthodox Christians in Appalachia, have become disillusioned with the American political project and democratic governance. This ideological shift has both political and theological

elements, which is why it is important to understand the allure of the post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church for these non-Slavic, American ideologues.

The post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church is a product of its political environment, and it bears the scars and wounds of the Soviet period that are often manifested in its urgent desire to regain public moral authority and governmental solidarity. It is a religious institution emerging from decades of political persecution, and it is bent on reclaiming some type of social authority and power, for however long it might last. At the same time, however, as John and Carol Garrard note, “The church’s revitalization presented a blizzard of moral, intellectual, and financial problems, some the legacy of the Soviet past and others the detritus of the tsars” (Garrard and Garrard 2008, p. xii). The memories of oppression and fears over future persecution may have pushed the ROC to become something unrecognizable to its former self. Scott Kenworthy and Alexander Agadjanian have noted that the domination of the post-Soviet ROC has overwhelmingly created “political, legal, and cultural problems,” particularly in terms of religious pluralism and supporting the authoritarian actions of the Russian government (Kenworthy and Agadjanian 2021, pp. 282–85). Scholars have gestured to the idea that Putin’s continued political ascendancy and the transformation of the ROC’s social standing under current Patriarch Kirill have not only revived the Church after its public marginalization for the much of the twentieth century, they have also seemingly created a new type of Russian Orthodoxy that is global in its geopolitical emphasis. Since perestroika, but particularly under Vladimir Putin’s multiple tenures in office, the ROC has regained a place of social and political prominence in Russia. Marcel van Herpen has argued that the Russian Orthodox Church may well be a weapon employed by the Kremlin to expand Russia’s soft power outside of its geographical boundaries (van Herpen 2015).

The emphasis on reviving the ROC, both in Russian conservative circles and in American ROCOR convert communities, rests in the hope of an even more intimate relationship between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Kremlin. Many Orthodox converts with whom I have worked question if the revival of the ROC and Putin’s social support of public religiosity is a potential foreshadowing of contemporary symphonia—the dual control of church and state (Stoeckl 2010). Popular far-right ROCOR converts in American social media worlds, such as Michael Sisco, a current West Virginia candidate for the United States House of Representatives, have suggested the Byzantine and subsequent Russian forms of symphonia might be guides for the removal of democratic authority in the United States and a shift to monarchic governance (Sisco 2019). Within Russia, radical pro-monarchist groups, such as the Russian Imperial Movement, along with philosopher Aleksandr Dugin, have suggested that the installation of a monarchy would tighten the patriarchal structures of Russian power (Laruelle 2019; Suslov 2016).

Given the emphasis in the ROC to support the prerevolutionary forms of Russian religion and politics, it is not surprising that the institution seems to encourage state and social interests in patriarchal, authoritarian forms of governance. The mid-2000s saw an increased focus by the ROC on nostalgic forms of memory making that supported the work of radical conservatives aimed at renewing prerevolutionary, tsarist forms of monarchic power, including the Center for Dynamic Conservatism (Laruelle and Karnysheva 2020). Laruelle and Karnysheva also remind us that while the Moscow Patriarchate is publicly reticent to proclaim what type of government should be in control of Russia, it did promote a government steeped in an Orthodox worldview in its 2000 Social Doctrines document (Laruelle and Karnysheva 2020). The emphasis on promoting Orthodox culture, practice, and belief, political and socially, comes in spite of the fact that regular church attendance still remains low. However, as high numbers of Russians begin to (re)claim Orthodoxy as their religion, aided by the benevolent support of the Duma, the Church has grown not only its institutional power and global reach but also its image as a moral compass, guiding post-Soviet Russians back to the nationalistic religiosity that once consumed most of Russia, and offering American conservatives a way forward (Benovska 2020). One young convert monk with whom I worked in Appalachia noted that Americans “really want to look and

see Russia and Putin as these great saviors, you know, the people who are defending the faith, even what it means to be a basic human being" (interview with author, 9 May 2018).

In many respects, at least for American conservatives with whom I spoke, the Russian Orthodox Church has become the social moral face of Putin's continued regime, with the church and state seemingly locked in a reciprocal exchange of power and privilege. This provocatively close alignment between the increasingly autocratic, authoritarian, and some scholars argue, fascist politics of Putin, and the socially conservative and anti-Western Russian Orthodox Church has become as point of interest for far-right actors outside of Russia. The World Congress of Families (WCF), Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, and other conservative ecumenical movements have found in the post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church, and with conservative Russians, social solidarity through moral comradery, even if they disagree theologically (Shishkov 2017). The international interest in the cozy relationship between church and state draws our attention to the globalized nature of the culture wars and the types of theo-political ideologies that seemingly have appeal among far-right political groups throughout Europe and the United States (Polyakova 2014; Posner 2020). Within the United States, and particularly in my field site, this appeal has taken on a nostalgic form of religious politicization among American converts to ROCOR; one that sees the post-Soviet ROC as the hopeful heir and reviver of prerevolutionary Orthodoxy and its political bedfellows.

2. ROCOR: The Prerevolutionary Incubator

ROCOR, a diasporic Russian Orthodox group founded in the wake of the Soviet Union's religious reforms, ascribes to a mechanics of purity and preservation that has continued, even after its reunification with the Moscow Patriarchate in 2007. The 1917 revolution and the subsequent assassinations of Tsar Nicholas II and his nuclear family, were foundational events that would shape both the geographical movement and sociopolitical ethos of what would become ROCOR in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. As Soviet policies began to encroach on the ROC's institutions, practices, and authority, often in a totalizing way, Church administration began to focus on ways of preserving the faith through its migrating members extending out into Europe and the United States as telescopic extensions of the main ecclesiastical body (Hämmerli [2014] 2016). In 1920, then Patriarch Tikhon issued an edict that provided temporary administrative reorganizing if local Church bodies found themselves without sufficient connections to the waning "High Church Authority", as St. John Maximovitch termed it (Maximovitch 1997). Finding themselves outside of Soviet power, the exiled members utilized the edict to find religious safety in Eastern Europe and the United States. When Patriarch Tikhon was arrested in 1922 and the administrative structures of the ROC were dismantled, the bishops abroad again looked to the edict as the written authority to create a synod that they believed, it seems, would still be under the Russian Church (Service 2005). In the mid-1920s, Metropolitan Sergius urged the Russian Church Abroad to bolster their own internal supports, before showing political support for the Soviet Union, a move that early leaders of ROCOR seemingly saw as a divine sign to create a distinct governing ecclesiastical body (Maximovitch 1997). In 1927, the Russian Church Abroad unilaterally broke ties with Moscow, creating an Orthodox organization nostalgically fixed on prerevolutionary Orthodoxy as the template for the moral future of Russia.

During the early, foundational years of ROCOR, Church leadership wrestled with what it meant to be a church of the diaspora. Canonically separated from the Moscow Patriarchate, it became, in many respects, an incubator of prerevolutionary Russian Orthodoxy and its sociopolitical trappings. Crystalizing much of Russian Orthodox liturgy, culture, and ethos prior to 1917, ROCOR's anticipatory agenda was one of preserving the Church in diaspora unchanging in order to someday re-missionize the former Soviet Union. As ROCOR members built their faith community from the ground up in the United States, institutions such as Holy Trinity Monastery and Seminary in Jordanville, New York, and the Holy Virgin Cathedral in San Francisco, California, became sites of Russian

religious culture and heritage preservation that have continued legacy work since the early-to-mid twentieth century. Over time, key figures, namely St. John Maximovitch and Father Seraphim Rose, became instrumental in reshaping the missionizing focus of ROCOR, with the latter writing English language materials that have become some of the key texts for radically conservative Orthodox Christians in the United States. ROCOR of the late twentieth century was one that recognized it was no longer needed by the ROC as a heritage revitalizer. The subsequent reunification of the MP with ROCOR in 2007, arguably one of the most important events in the contemporary history of Russian Orthodoxy, revealed both the social alignment and cultural differences between the two institutions, while also laying bare the global power dynamics at play.

The reemergence of a conciliatory agreement between the two bodies of Russian Orthodoxy had both religious and political dimensions. After years of crystalizing prerevolutionary Orthodoxy with the hopes of returning the faith to the homeland after the end of Soviet power, ROCOR began to reimagine its institutional role as the Russian Orthodox Church began to expand and gain power in the mid-to-late twentieth century. With no return mission in sight, ROCOR began take more seriously its local mission fields, especially the United States. This shift was reified, it seems, by the signing of the documents of reunification in 2007 with the Moscow Patriarchate, for it signaled not only an ecclesiastical realignment: it also acknowledged that the ROC was the mother ship to which the satellite of ROCOR was once again attached. By the late 2010s and the early 2020s, ROCOR was once again seen internally as a Church of preservation and purity, but this time it was on the part of contemporary converts who found a religious respite in the faith. Aligned with the Moscow Patriarchate, focused on home missions rather than those abroad, ROCOR was (and is) a religious community steeped not just in tradition but seemingly traditionalism—something that appealed to far-right actors looking for a strident form of religiosity removed from what they understood to be the usual trappings of American conservative politics.

3. American Converts to Russian Orthodoxy

Because Orthodox Christians in the United States are a minority Christian tradition, it is often easy, perhaps too easy, for scholars to overlook their global significance. The increase of American converts who have no Russian heritage to ROCOR is striking. Generally hailing from evangelical Protestant or Roman Catholic backgrounds, contemporary converts often bring with them ideologies from their prior religious affiliations and homes. ROCOR of the early twentieth century was not convert friendly; indeed, at that point, the Russian Church Abroad was still dealing with the effects of the 1917 Revolution, the shifts in religious leadership, and how, in the United States, to navigate the American religious landscape as a minority form of Christianity. At the same time, however, scholars have noted that conversions did take place and they were aided by ROCOR's English Department ([Sarkisian 2019](#)). Yet, it was not until the mid-to-late twentieth century that we see conversions to ROCOR becoming more popular, especially with the public influence of Fr. Seraphim (Eugene) Rose and his monastic brotherhood in Platina, California. Rose converted to Orthodoxy in the 1960s, and his charisma, academic training, and English-language writing were part of his popularity both in the United States and in the waning Soviet Union, according to Rose's official biographer Monk Damascene Christensen ([Christensen 1993](#)).

While conversions to ROCOR occurred throughout the twentieth century, they increased in the twenty-first century, especially in the mid-to-late 2010s. In the United States, converts to ROCOR, in light of the 2007 reunification, consider themselves to be part of the diasporic body of the ROC. The group with whom I worked in Appalachia was just such a community. Founded by a convert and his Russian wife in the early 2000s, the community consisted of a men's monastery and a neighboring parish, separated by a few miles of mountainous terrain. In 2017–2018, during the year I spent with the community, the monastery was considered the largest English-speaking Russian Orthodox monastery

in existence. With approximately thirty members in the brotherhood and a few lay members, it was a vibrant and growing community almost entirely composed of converts. The parish, which was formed as dependency of the monastery, was led and attended by converts mainly; it averaged anywhere from thirty to sixty attendees for a Sunday morning service. Converts most assuredly were drawn to Orthodoxy because of its demanding spiritual practices, theological mysticism, rich sensory cultures, and deep liturgical praxis. In addition to each person having their own theological or spiritual reasons for converting and self-selecting ROCOR as their spiritual home, they were largely aligned in several ideological viewpoints, including the idea that Russia, and by extension, the ROC, was a geopolitical savior that might have the power to rescue them from the mires of American secularism. This community is one of many springing forth in the United States, where ROCOR is growing and sustaining itself through American conversions.

Converts are found all throughout the social structures of ROCOR, taking up positions of power, authority, and control. These converts bring with them social, cultural, and religious baggage that is transforming the ethos of ROCOR. Crucial to the worldbuilding project of far-right believers with whom I have worked was the inversion of the American Cold War paradigm. Converts often pitted Russia, as a revived traditionalist nation, against the modernity of the United States. One spring day while I was at the monastery in West Virginia, I sat down with the abbot to talk about the relationship between Russia and the United States. He explained that American conservatives used to be “anti-Russian” and liberals were historically “pro-Russian”—at least that is what he had experienced as a youth in the 1950s. Now, he offered, the roles were seemingly reversed. The abbot proclaimed, “Our country now represents anti-Christianity and Russia represents Christianity. It’s really a complete reversal of roles” (interview with author, 13 February 2018). The abbot used the language of the New Cold War in an effort to explain the ways in which religious belief and adherence had transformed both in the United States and in Russia since the 1950s. The contemporary affinity that has been shaping up between religious conservatives and illiberal Russian actors is one steeped in the international morality language of Cold War politics and the history of the American culture wars. During the Cold War, American marketing and political discourse crafted an image of the United States that was akin to a national savior. Russia, on the other hand, was depicted as the red menace, a communistic country that rejected both God and a vibrant free-market economy steeped in the mechanisms of the Protestant work ethic (Herzog 2011). The language of the New Cold War among converts to Russian Orthodoxy flips the binary, portraying the United States as in need of Russian salvation, thereby forging a new, dualistic understanding of Russian–American international affairs that is filtered through the lens of the globalizing American culture wars.

4. The Culture Wars Go Traditional

The American culture wars that James Davison Hunter highlighted at the beginning of the 1990s have seemingly returned with even more vigor, reaction, and global movement in the twenty-first century; and Russian conservative actors have latched onto the divisive culture wars rhetoric with deft swiftness (Hunter 1991). In the 1980s and 1990s, American conservatives were preoccupied with issues of gender, gay rights, policing of the body, and what it means to be a moral person; those social issues are still pressing for conservatives today, and through the new global culture wars they are animated and digitally spread around the globe in tandem with the nostalgic language of traditionalism (Davis 2019). By traditionalism, I mean the political philosophy that focuses on the defense of universal ideas and ancestral understandings of the body, the self, and society, particularly the strain espoused by Rene Guénon (1886–1951), the so-called father of traditionalism (Sedgwick 2004). This new type of global, perhaps hybridized, culture wars is not just about social discourse; rather, it emphasizes proactive forms of control. In the Russian context, scholars have shown how traditionalism has become a religio-political concept that is often mobilized in public discourses by the ROC through the language of the culture

wars, which seems to be a political import to Russian Orthodoxy rather than an ideological export (Zhuravlev 2017). Perhaps part of the American import of the culture wars to Russia is also the increased focus on militia activity and vigilantism that has been, in some instances, institutionalized by the Moscow Patriarchate to promote traditional social values (Laruelle 2021, p. 108). These reactive disciplinarians focus on reforming, on moralizing the social sphere through attacks and pushback against LGBTQ+ rights groups and events. The ROC-instituted militia groups focus on undermining human rights, violently enforcing ideologies of traditionalism that are transnational in their circulation. While the American influence surely comes to bear in the culture wars in Russia, they are also a production of a relationship between an autocratic government increasingly focused on the denial of basic human rights and a resuscitated religious powerhouse—the post-Soviet ROC—one of the main drivers of social conservatism.

Patriarch Kirill, high-ranking Russian clerics, American laymen and clergy who have expatriated to Russia, and philosophical comrades, such as Aleksander Dugin, all seemingly have an outward-facing focus that American far-right actors find appealing. Dugin, in particular, has a large following among ROCOR male converts in the United States, who are drawn to his understanding of traditionalism and radically reimagined political systems that emphasize a return to religiosity in the public sphere (Shekhovtsov and Umland 2009). Dugin's understanding of traditionalism is beholden to Guénon, whose influence is also felt in the work of Julius Evola (1898–1974), and contemporary traditionalist thinkers, including Steve Bannon (Teitelbaum 2020, pp. 42–45). One of the most beloved figures in Russian Orthodoxy, both in the United States and in Russia, is the mid-twentieth century convert Fr. Seraphim (Eugene) Rose, who was also philosophically influenced by the writings of Rene Guénon, and has become, in many respects, the icon of the Orthodox Trad movement, along with, and perhaps even more so than, Dugin. Rose credits Guénon for transforming his ideas about the world: "It was Rene Guénon who taught me to seek and love the truth above all else, and to be unsatisfied with anything else" (Christensen 1993, p. 61). Rose did not weaponize the traditionalist philosophies of Guénon in the same way that political power brokers Bannon and Dugin do; however, Rose infused the ideas of traditionalism into this written work, the majority of which has had a profound shaping influence on far-right converts to ROCOR in the United States. Despite Rose's deep theological influence on ROCOR traditionalism, it is safe to say that the radical philosophical ideas espoused by ROCOR converts are distinctly political, and are far more akin to those espoused by Dugin and Bannon than Rose. At the same time, the majority of converts with whom I have worked have noted how influential Rose was and is in their lives. At the monastery in Appalachia, Rose's works were on the novice reading list, and his books filled space in the community's bookstore that received orders from around the globe.

In the political context, traditionalism is a philosophy that has links to contemporary American and Russian politics and historical notions of purity and supremacy (Teitelbaum 2020). While Dugin himself decries the label of traditionalist, many of his readers in the United States cling to that title with great fervor, while they also hold to purist notions of social politics. Converts to Russian Orthodoxy in the United States are not unlike their conservative, far-right Christian counterparts found in other religious traditions. Yet they do possess political views that are often not congruent with contemporary American conservatism. The ROCOR converts with whom I worked in West Virginia had a wide range of political affiliations, including paleoconservative, far right, traditionalist, monarchist, and even fascist. In their online discourses, conservative Orthodox converts and those born into Orthodoxy who adhere to radical politics, often use the term trad or traditionalist to denote both their political philosophy and their strident religious praxis. Traditionalism as a world-orienting paradigm allows far-right Orthodox believers to see their religious beliefs and political practices as fighting in tandem against both democratic structures of power and social immorality. "Traditionalists" and "monarchist-leaning people, not people who believe in capitalism, democracy, and the Constitution" are a threat to the devil,

according to Michael Witcoff, an Orthodox convert YouTuber who goes by the moniker “Brother Augustine” and has more than six thousand subscribers (Witcoff 2021).

In June 2021, Orthodox “micro-celebrities” from across the United States gathered in Argos, Indiana to host a “Trad Forum”.³ Organized by Michael Sisco, a current candidate for the U.S. House of Representatives in West Virginia, the conference featured E. Michael Jones, a Catholic traditionalist labeled by the Anti-Defamation League as an anti-Semite, who gave the keynote address (Anti-Defamation League 2013). Featured speakers boasted a wide range of political views that could be lumped under the umbrella of the far/alt right. Crucial to their conference platform was the idea that traditionalist Christianity is needed to thwart the plans of secular modernity. Traditionalist Orthodox Christians aspire to everything modernity is not (Teitelbaum 2020). Thus, they engage with storied thematic elements—the family, morality, and purity—long associated with white Christian hegemony, in order to make their political vision a transnational reality (Chatterjee 2021). While these values have long been the project of conservatives in the United States, traditionalists mobilize around the issues in far more volatile and globally connected ways. This is why Putin’s New Russia, with its focus on family values, implementation of anti-LGBTQ+ laws, and emphasis on being a distinct nation wholly outside of Western understandings of modernity, seems to be appealing to American ROCOR members with whom I have worked (Shekhovtsov 2017). Post-Soviet Russia, the creation of both church and state as it were, a geopolitical, religiously attuned country, becomes, in the words of one of my Appalachian interlocutors, “the only thing that can save the world”. This salvation for traditionalists comes through the preservation of the heteronormative family, the moral curation of the public sphere, and the subjugation of fundamental human rights for LGBTQ+ people (Novitskaya 2021). Indeed, during a 2013 interview between far-right conspiracist Rick Wiles and World Congress of Families managing director Larry Jacobs (1967–2018), the latter proclaimed to the former that “the Russians might be the Christian saviors of the world at the UN because they are standing up for these traditional values—family and faith” (Tashman 2013).

5. Family Values and Morality Discourses

To say that traditionalism, as a philosophical paradigm, is attached to the language of family values within the global flows of post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy is an understatement. The rhetoric of family values takes on two primary ideological formations—emphasis on the heteronormative nuclear family as an etic worldbuilding project and homeschooling as a purity practice (Allahyari 2012, p. 205). As an umbrella topic, the nuclear family does two types of worldbuilding work. First, it provides the moral structuring of the far-right Orthodox worldview. Second, it uses the body, gender, and sexuality to create emic and etic boundary-making schemas that reify who qualifies as orthodox and who does not. Scholars of Russian Orthodoxy are quick to point out that family values, as a moralizing discourse, have not been part of the faith until recently, and that the notion is arguably, as a politically charged concept, an invention of post-Soviet Orthodoxy (Stoeckl 2020). The late Sonja Luehrmann notes that the preoccupation contemporary Russian Orthodox pro-family and anti-abortion activists have with prerevolutionary Orthodoxy often ignores the complexities of kinship networks in order to nostalgically and imaginatively create something traditional (Luehrmann 2019). The language of family values in contemporary Russia, as scholars including Kristina Stoeckl have pointed out, seems to be an ideological import from the United States (Stoeckl 2020). Luehrmann draws out the theo-political import of family values discourse when she writes, “Russian family values activists can thus be regarded as part of the global right wing because they locate an idealized order of life in the national past and have a messianic sense that Russia preserves values needed by the rest of the world” (2019, p. 722).

The new Russian focus on family values is seen not only in governmental policies that promote heteronormative childbearing and rearing, but also in the post-Soviet ROC’s attempts to prevent abortions through Church-centered adoptions (Anderson 2014). While

the MP has a long history of philanthropic activity, including childcare, fostering, and benevolence work, the language attached to these types of care work seems to be taken, in large part, from the rhetoric associated with the American culture wars, including the abortion debates of the late 1980s and early 1990s in the final years of the Cold War (Luehrmann 2017; Stoeckl 2020). On the whole, Russia has historically had significantly high rates of abortions, and thus while the Moscow Patriarchate and conservative political leaders aim at putting an end to abortions, they continue nevertheless. Yet, the conservative ROCOR converts with whom I worked were not interested in a secular account of statistics or secular media accounts of Russia in general. The abbot of the monastery, a convert by way of Catholicism, firmly believed that Russia, as a whole, was “trying to turn away from abortion and sensuality, and immorality” (interview with author, 13 February 2018). The information highways of converts were buzzing with Russian state-sponsored media, including *Russia Today* and *Pravoslavie*, alongside social media content from Russian priests, other ROCOR converts, and conservative American media outlets. Through these media sources, personal connections in Russia, and each other, they crafted fictive narratives about Russia that reinforced their worldbuilding project of radical conservatism. As a monk at the monastery in Appalachia noted in reference to Putin and his New Russia, “there’s a glimmer of goodness in Russia that we can’t see anywhere else in the world” (interview with author, 9 May 2018) The monk went on to discuss the “blind vitriolic hatred” that Western media outlets have for Russia as a potential symptom of secularism’s contempt for Christian values (interview with author, 9 May 2018).

Within the global imaginary of American converts, Russia is the stalwart, traditional country of family values, even if that is not the case in practice. Family values language has had a long history in American conservative Christian and political circles, and it amplified during the late 1980s and 1990s. In the post-Civil Rights period, the family took on a much more glorified status. For the latter half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century, religious conservatives in the United States used the language of the family to express their fears of the other and their emphasis on social purity (Dowland 2015). In the 2010s, American far-right groups, focused on the heteronormative family, or what anthropologist Sophie Bjork-James calls the “divine institution”, elevated the rhetoric surrounding family values, something that has had and continues to have traction among institutional and individual actors in Russia (Bjork-James 2021). American far-right organizations have built on this Russian embrace of American culture wars rhetoric and the nuclear family to forge more globalized networks of political communitas. This is especially seen, as Kristina Stoeckl has written about, with the WCF’s embrace of Russian conservatives (Stoeckl 2020). Within recent years, the WCF has also become an international platform for both monarchists and far-right Orthodox Christians, converts included, to lament the decline of Western civilization, decry human rights initiatives for LGBTQ+ communities, and encourage the private Christian education of children (Barthélemy 2018).

The second ideological stream of family values rhetoric that flows globally between the United States and Russia is one focused on education. In his work on conservative homeschoolers, Seth Dowland notes that American far-right actors are reaching out to Russian homeschoolers for ideological support and pedagogical advice (Dowland 2015). Within the context of my own research with conservative ROCOR communities in the United States, I have found that converts are far more likely than those born into the faith to homeschool their children and to emphasize ideological reasons for doing so. It is important to note that the ideological machinations of converts are not limited to ROCOR. In 2016, at the WCF meeting in Tbilisi, Georgia, Fr. Josiah Trenham, an American convert in the Antiochian Archdiocese, was a featured speaker at the event (Southern Poverty Law Center 2016). Trenham is considered to be an expert on homeschooling among Orthodox communities. In a 2017 conference on homeschooling held in southern California, Trenham proclaimed,

Our life hangs by a thread. We are, at all times, on the edge of a cliff. The Islamic invasion of the West threatens us. North Korea threatens us with nuclear

holocaust. The drug addiction epidemic is killing us. Diseases and the outbreak of unique cancers are exploding. The family is broken, completely collapsed. Divorce, domestic violence, poverty, gender dysphoria—all of these are examples in our culture of what the Scriptures would consider a rescinding, a retreat of Grace. (Trenham 2017)

Employing a politics of panic that harkens back to the language of the Moral Majority and Jerry Falwell, Trenham emphasized later in his speech that providing children with a Christian education, namely homeschooling them, is key to surviving “society’s collapse” (Herd 2009; Trenham 2017). For the radically conservative American converts with whom I have worked, and many like them throughout the United States, united by social media networks, the family and homeschooling are two key issues that have shaped their understandings of Orthodox Christianity, the post-Soviet ROC, and the secular West. The turn by American homeschoolers to conservative Russians for support and curriculum is not surprising given the shifting paradigms around America and Russia in this New Cold War period; this is particularly noticeable in the interest of Russian conservative actors in the Global Home Education Exchange (GHEX) that seeks to unite homeschoolers who are focused on pro-family policies (Permoser and Stoeckl 2021). The emphasis on pro-family language is often a foil for issues of heteronormativity and socially conservative forms of morality that refute basic human rights.

The shifting moral shape of Russia in the post-Soviet period is inextricably linked to its intimate spiritual ally, the Russian Orthodox Church (Höjdestrand 2017). Scholars have been critical of the reflexive relationship between Putin’s government and the ROC, especially under Patriarch Kirill, with Zoe Knox going so far as to say that post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy is a “pseudo-state church” (Knox 2003). It is crucial to note that when most of my interlocutors spoke about Russian Orthodoxy, Russia, or Putin, more often than not they were doing so with the understanding that each of these overlapped with the other. While most of the converts with whom I spoke understood that the ROC and the Russian state were separate entities, they nevertheless seemed to view them through the historic lens of symphonia, which they often believed would help aid the return of traditional Christian values to both the United States and Russia. When discussing these issues, the abbot of the monastery in Appalachia explained,

Part of these issues that Russia stands for in terms of morality are issues that the liberal press holds very dear: transgender rights, gay marriages, women priests, and women bishops. These are all issues that are very important to the liberals and to liberal Christianity in the West. Russia is the opposite of that. It stands for traditional morality and traditional beliefs. (interview with author, 13 February 2018)

Here the abbot specifically notes that Russia, not the ROC, stands for morality. Under Putin’s tenure, the Kremlin has become increasingly close to the ROC, and the converts with whom I have worked believed that was ideal. At the same time that Russia was dealing with the interconnected effects of Putin’s expanding power and the Moscow Patriarchate’s ascendancy to a more public role of religious authority, America was grappling with its own sociopolitical transformations in light of the 2016 presidential election. For four years, the presidencies of Donald Trump and Vladimir Putin overlapped, and it is during that time when we find heightened forms of conservatism in Russia and the United States, and an even greater draw to post-Soviet Russian Orthodoxy by those in the Western world.

6. The Putin–Trump Effect

My fieldwork with American converts to Russian Orthodoxy began just shy of nine months after Donald Trump was inaugurated. The community was located in a county and state that helped Trump win the election. However, community members were far more interested in Russian politics, at least in their religious and transnational dimensions, than those of their own country. A young convert monk living at the monastery in Appalachia expressed to me during an interview that Putin was an echo of the last tsar—Nicholas II.

While the community in Appalachia was, on the whole, quite taken with Putin's projected piety, not all converts to Russian Orthodoxy (and other nationalistic forms of Orthodoxy) agreed with Putin's politics or found him to be an ally of the ROC. A priest in Appalachia, when talking about the revival of morality in Russia, offered his take on Putin's power to influence Christianity using the language of the New Cold War,

Now America largely is kind of post or anti-Christian, whereas you have the opposite happening in Russia where there's this rebirth of Christianity there and a turning of people away from godlessness and atheism to belief in God and all that that entails, including with regard to ethics. I can't put that at the feet of Putin. It goes at the feet of the fact that Christianity thrived, you know, in Russia for a thousand years and eighty years of attack on, on the Orthodox soul of Russia. [Sovietism] was not enough to destroy the inherent desire for God that exists in the heart of the Russian people. (interview with author, 14 June 2018)

Despite the priest's hesitation to place Putin at the center of the revival of Christianity in Russia, my interlocutor noted that Putin's Russia has become vilified in the Western imagination for its so-called return to Christian values. Putin's willingness "to foster, to support" and even to get "out of the way" of the Church was admirable, according to my interlocutor (interview with author, 14 June 2018). The priest also commented that he often felt as though he were "an exile" in the United States, his own country, since he was "outside of the mainstream for not jumping on the bandwagon of progressivism" (interview with author, 14 June 2018).

The focus on authoritarian leaders promoting Christian values has become somewhat normative among conservative Orthodox converts. Public examples of this can be found in the work of political pundit Rod Dreher who, instead of focusing on Putin, turned his attention to Hungary and the authoritarian politics of Viktor Orbán, even persuading American conservative talk show host Tucker Carlson to travel to Hungary in the summer of 2021 to interview Orbán (Wallace-Wells 2021). At the same time, there were far-right converts, especially those online, such as U.S. House candidate Michael Sisco, who were not always smitten with Putin's politics; yet they were generally in favor of the Moscow Patriarchate as the more "traditional" leader among the Orthodox hierarchs. Even if far-right Orthodox Christians are not political aligned with Putin, they still tend to favor the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church as "true" or "traditional" in contrast to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which was seen by many of the folk with whom I worked as far too liberal socially and politically. The 2018 schism between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, due to the latter granting the Ukrainian Orthodox Church autocephaly that same year, has become a lynchpin issue for conservative American supporters of the post-Soviet ROC. To align with the Moscow Patriarchate meant that American actors were often far more political conservative than counterparts who supported the Ecumenical Patriarchate; and typically, to align with the Moscow Patriarchate meant to align with the right side of Church history and world politics, according to my interlocutors. ROCOR converts often talk about the Russian state and the ROC as almost the same institution. In part, this seemingly stems from the inordinate focus on *symphonia*, both in the history of Russian Orthodoxy and among many American contemporary converts. At the same time, it must be noted that not all converts or even conservative converts have this preoccupation with Russian nationalism, the ROC, and Putin or other authoritarian leaders, such as Orbán. Yet, this trend is growing, particularly in ROCOR (Riccardi-Swartz 2022).

The preoccupation with returning to a closer relationship between church and state is one that tracks across genders, incomes, and geographical locations, united by ideological beliefs in the validity of monarchic rule, or at the very least the return of the Christian nation (Riccardi-Swartz 2021). During the Trump administration, conservative Americans began to mobilize, looking eastward to Russia as a potential safe haven for their "Judeo-Christian values", as one interlocutor term it. The ROC's spiritual collaborations with Russian military—the nuclear priesthood—and its support of militia groups aimed at

reinforcing conservative, often repressive, social morals, offered radicalized ideologues in the United States a vision of a country focused on the disciplining of not only the body politic, but bodies in general (Adamsky 2019; Richters 2013). Russia not only became a geopolitical place to admire, it also became a potential spot for migration. One online commenter, in a group focused on Americans migrating to Russia, noted that the country was a moral lodestone for his soul.

In the spring of 2018, during a conversation with one young American convert monk, he questioned whether or not American converts to ROCOR were “grasping at straws with Putin and Russia” but suggested ultimately that “Russia is the only thing that corresponds to the hunger we feel”. The existential angst the monk described is part and parcel of the worldbuilding language Appalachian converts employed and others like them continue to use in their social media discourses. Whether or not the post-Soviet Church is truly experiencing a revival, and whether or not Putin is supportive of the Church and its moral ideologies, ROCOR converts continue to craft narratives of holiness using inverted Cold War propaganda and culture wars rhetoric. Their ideological imaginings speak to something much larger than just the circulation of global Christianity—they highlight the political preoccupation of American conservatives with institutions and people, wherever they are on the geographical and political map, willing to enforce their theo-ontological views of the world.

7. Conclusions

The social transformation of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Post-Soviet period has been a source of new analysis in Slavic and Eurasian Studies. However, most work done on the social politics of the Church, its relationship with the state, and its supposed cultural revival, have focused primarily on the geopolitical space of Russia proper. Yet, the impact of and interest in the ROC from those outside of Russia cannot be underestimated. Far-right converts to Russian Orthodoxy see the post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church and, by telescopic extension, the Russian State under the authority of Vladimir Putin, as an Eastern bulwark against Western secularism. No longer subject to the seemingly insidious influences of Soviet politics, the Moscow Patriarchate is portrayed by the far-right faithful outside of Russia as a traditional hierarch, aimed at promoting church influence in the political arena. The emphasis on the ROC, as tied to Putin’s Russian political project, is alluring to believers who see in the well-marketed comradeship between the Russian president and Patriarch Kirill a chance for contemporary symphonia and, perhaps, the revival of tsarist Russia. What remains to be seen is how future political trajectories in the United States and the 2024 Russian presidential election will affect conservative American actors’ views of Russia as a potential national savior from the moral ills of global modernity. It is evident from my engagement with American converts that the influence of the post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church, within their conceptional imagination, is not waning or over; rather, it is just beginning to take on its global role in the conservative reimaging of the United States.

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Notes

- 1 While it is grammatically correct to use the article “the” before ROCOR, it is not used colloquially in speech or interpersonal communications. Thus I have opted largely to omit the article for ease of reading.
- 2 As Anton Shekhovtsov and Andreas Umland note, Dugin has a complicated relationship with traditionalism. While he espouses ideas linked to traditionalism, he also decries being labeled a traditionalist. Certainly, his political philosophy is filtered through other ideologies including German interwar conservatism, contemporary far-right European politics, and Old Believer theology (Shekhovtsov and Umland 2009). It is safe to say, from my vantage point, that Dugin can be considered a traditionalist, with the caveat that his interpretation of traditionalism is not directly in line with those expressed by Guénon and Evola.
- 3 This event was advertised via various social media platforms, including on YouTube, Twitter, and the event had an Eventbrite page. See Saint Edwards Media, “The Trad Forum: Navigating Our Present and Planning Our Future”, Eventbrite (accessed on 1 June 2021) <https://www.eventbrite.com/e/the-trad-forum-tickets-125332730571>; Church of the Eternal Logos, “The Trad Forum: Navigating Our Present Planning Our Future with Michael Sisco (12 June, Argos, IN)”, Church of the Eternal Logos YouTube Channel (accessed on 2 April 2021) <https://youtu.be/tdNlhv-WSi8>.

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