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WHAT'S WRONG WITH THIS PICTURE?



REUTERS/Dima Sokolov/Archive Photos

No, it's not the occasion—Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko exchanging congratulations after signing a treaty creating a Community of Sovereign Republics.

And it's not the site—the Kremlin.

It's the third person of the Commonwealth trinity—Russian Ortho-

dox Patriarch Alexei II.

Today, Orthodoxy seeks linkage with the Russian state, though not, says Alexei II, to the degree that Orthodoxy becomes the official state religion. Rather, the patriarch seeks legislation that would curb proselytizing by non-Russian evangelists. The church pictures itself as besieged by Protestant missionaries, who aggressively promote a non-

Russian brand of faith. Just what the Russian brand is would be difficult for Orthodox communicants to define: Services are celebrated in Old Church Slavonic, an ancient language unintelligible to all but linguists.

To be Russian is to be Orthodox. To be Russian and to be something other than Orthodox is to be something other than Russian. This equation is not new; it is historic. The communists sought a new math, but even Maria Pantelyevna, mother of Mikhail Sergejevich Gorbachev, kept an icon behind a picture of Lenin on the wall of their two-room hut in the village of Privolnoye. Early in 1989, then-president Gorbachev revealed that he had been baptized as a child.

And since the demise of communism, the Russian Orthodox Church has sought to regain its dominance in the halls of government. In July 1993, a legislative committee of the Russian Parliament, under the leadership of Orthodox churchman Father Vacheslav Polosin sought to undo the freedom of religion clauses in a 1990 statute. They proposed amendments that would have confined foreigners primarily to worship activities in churches established by foreigners specifically for the use of foreigners. The legislation could have put Adventist radio and television programs off the air, sent foreign evangelists packing, and

placed the legal existence of Russian evangelical churches at the mercy of an Orthodox-dominated committee that would, within a year, recommend their fate. According to Polosin, "the Patriarch presented President Yeltsin with a straightforward ultimatum: If this law is not signed [by Yeltsin], the Russian Orthodox Church will turn against Yeltsin." Said Polosin: "The president must choose either his own people, its tradition, lifestyle, interests—or yield to the blackmail of foreign politicians. This is a very symbolic choice and I would even call it sacred."

Alerted by Russian Adventist leadership, the Department of Public Affairs and Religious Liberty of the General Conference joined with Russian Adventists and others in opposition to the bill. Within 24 hours, the department contacted representatives of some 40 world confessional members, asking them to immediately inform President Yeltsin of their opposition to the legislation. In addition, the department convened a meeting of 24 church organizations in the Washington, D.C., area, contacted the Helsinki Accords Committee of the Congress, and took other measures. Within a few days, 175 members of Congress had registered their opposition to the Orthodox-sponsored bill.

Other governments acted, emphatically reminding President Yelt-

sin that the Russian Federation had signed three major international religious-liberty documents that promoted freedoms the Orthodox-backed bill would compromise. President Yeltsin returned the bill to the parliamentary committee with the recommendation that it be brought into harmony with the international accords. The committee, however, defiantly toughened their bill and returned it to Yeltsin. On September 21, two days before the legislation would have become law without his signature, Yeltsin dissolved the parliament.

But, as the photo on page 64 suggests, Alexei II didn't fold up his tent like the Arabs and—as the poet had it—silently steal away. Once again, as a Sovietologist has suggested, Russian Orthodoxy seeks to become handmaiden to the government, its focus on “status and awe rather than good deeds and moral teaching.” Once again the Russian Orthodox Church seeks legislation to muffle non-Orthodox witness. And, under pressure of the presidential campaign, candidates waffled.

Yeltsin missed no opportunity to be seen in the company of the patriarch. He also gave Alexei II a number of offices within the Kremlin. During his first presidential campaign swing through southwestern Russia, Yeltsin said: “By reviving the spirit, we revive Russia.” Communist presidential candidate Gennady Zyuga-

nov promised that his government would be even more aggressive than Yeltsin's in shutting out foreign missionaries. He was quoted in an Orthodox newspaper last fall as saying: “A politician who doesn't understand what a colossal and unique role the Orthodox religion has played. . . doesn't understand Russia and cannot lead Russia out of its crisis.” Alexei II made his choice obvious by appearing with Yeltsin the day before the election.

The July 3 run-off between Zyuganov and Yeltsin, neither of whom garnered a majority of the votes, is now history. So also is Yeltsin's subsequent victory over Zyuganov. Will the new government answer the prayers of Alexei II? There's good news and there's bad news. The good news is that a committee of the Duma (or lower chamber of the Russian Parliament), which is working on a revision of the 1990 statute, has rejected a renewed call by the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church to ban foreign missionaries.

The bad news comes in three doses. First, the Duma committee's decision came two weeks before the elections. Second, the committee agreed to a compromise requiring religious organizations to register with the government. Third, on June 27, tough-talking Alexander Lebed, presidential contender (he garnered 14.5 percent of the vote) and then

*Will Yeltsin survive his term? And if he does not,
who shall most likely be his successor?
Will it be the man who believes that to be Russian is
to be Orthodox? And that to be other is
to pose a "direct threat to Russia's security"?*

Boris Yeltsin's national security advisor and unofficial running mate, told an assembly of patriotic organizations that he would rid Russia of foreign religions and cults. Lebed said Russia had only three "established, traditional religions"—Orthodox Christianity, Islam, and Buddhism.

Conspicuously absent from Lebed's speech was any mention of the nation's 650,000 Jews, who both under the Czar and communism suffered from antisemitism. Prominent in it was a bitter attack on Mormons, whom he called "mold and scum." Lebed likened Mormonism to aum Supreme Truth, the Japanese sect that last year released poison gas in Tokyo subways. Said the retired general: Mormons pose a "direct threat to Russia's security" because they are bent on "perverting, corrupting and ultimately breaking up our state." He pledged to do his best to restore "the great Russian state."

Were Lebed's words only part of a bad-guy, good-guy pre-election

strategy? The observer must recall that he spoke as the compromise statute requiring registration of religious organizations came before the Duma. At press time, the Duma is debating the statute, with strident voices raised in favor of toughening it. Will the Russian Parliament act to oust foreign missionaries and, in general, compromise the evangelical witness? Or will Yeltsin, safely in office, once again, act to frustrate his pre-election supporter Alexei II?

There is another, not-unlikely scenario that must be considered, says an Adventist leader familiar with Russian affairs. That Yeltsin's health is precarious, even life-threatening, is well known. Will this courageous Russian leader survive his term? And if he does not, who shall most likely be his successor? Will it be the man who believes that to be Russian is to be Orthodox? And that to be other is to pose a "direct threat to Russia's security"?

It was once said that photos don't lie. As computer hackers know, pho-

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tos now can be made to lie rather easily. The one below, with heads of President Yeltsin and Patriarch Alexei II switched, was produced in approximately three and a half hours. The photo could just as easily have shown Yeltsin and Alexei II as Siamese twins. Or with a wall of separation between them. But real history isn't made that way.

The Persian ruler Cyrus (the

name translates to "Koresh") once adjusted state policy to conform to the objectives suggested by the gentle wooing of two mighty princes, one of whom was later to walk among humanity as the Messiah. Cyrus learned that if you want to sleep peacefully when "the prince of the kings of the earth" becomes involved, you better dream His dreams and walk His walk. □



Original AP Photo/Pool photo retouched by Barbara Knox