Orthodox Paradoxes

Heterogeneities and Complexities in Contemporary Russian Orthodoxy

Edited by

Katya Tolstaya
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Mediators Between Heaven and Earth: The Forms of Spiritual Guidance and Debate on Spiritual Elders in Present-Day Russian Orthodoxy*

Irina Paert

According to the ascetic tradition of the early church, elders were men and women, ordained or non-ordained, recognized as teachers and advisors, who guided the monks and the laity. Even though there have been different models of spiritual direction within the church, the understanding of elders as ‘the bearers of the spirit’ was inseparable from the original apostolic view of the church as the site of the activity of the Holy Spirit.¹ The original vision, more egalitarian and non-hierarchical, as Nikolai Afanas’ev has argued, has been distorted throughout the centuries because of the separation between initiated and non-initiated, laymen and clergy, and the intervention of the extraneous Roman law into church life.² The elders, whose authority derives not from their ordination, a position or status in the hierarchy, but from the authority of personal holiness, bear witness to the early church’s understanding of priesthood (coincidentally, presbyteros means elder) which strikes a balance between the contemplative life and service to the others, the so-called ‘active contemplative’.³ The ascetic approach to salvation, understood as acquiring the knowledge of God through purification of the soul from passions, required an experienced master. It is possible that both ideals, pneumatic and ascetic, were embodied in the figure of the elder as we know it from the Byzantine era. In pre-Petrine Russia, therefore, it was natural that monasticism would become a site where старчество (spiritual guidance by elders) was nourished and then become influential within the church as a whole. S.I. Smirnov wrote that the institution of spiritual fatherhood as it was practiced in pre-Petrine

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* This article was written with the support of the Estonian Ministry of Education and Research, targeted financing project SF0180026s11 and the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund (Centre of Excellence CECT).


² Afanas’ev, Church, pp. 426–448.

Russia had been influenced by monasticism, so that the model of the relationship between a novice and his or her spiritual mentor could be applied to lay people.⁴ In fact, Smirnov was one of a few church historians who tried to reflect on the role and position of elders within the Orthodox Church, but his contribution remained undeveloped due to the revolutionary crisis. In nineteenth-century Russia eldership thrived primarily within the monastic context, while in post-revolutionary Russia the forms of eldership have been practiced in contexts outside monastic circles, including parish life.

Even though in nineteenth and twentieth-century church discourse the elders were essential elements of Orthodoxy, there was no agreement as to who could be regarded as an elder and by what authority, where exactly lay their specific tasks within the church, and what the limits of their authority were.⁵ Attempts to construct a typology and some normative ideal of eldership on the basis of empirical evidence tend to use historical and hagiographic material in isolation from its historical and cultural context.⁶ It is interesting that in other Orthodox countries, the role of elders is firmly connected with the practice of confession that normally is independent of priestly ordination; the candidate who is regarded worthy receives a special blessing from the bishop.⁷

The revival of eldership in postsocialist Russia represents the following paradox: on the one hand, there is a shared understanding of eldership as intrinsic to Orthodox practice and doctrine; on the other hand, the numerous distortions of this practice have led to a conviction among many members of the church and critics from outside that contemporary practices of spiritual guidance frequently have little to do with Orthodox tradition and more with specific social and cultural developments of post-Soviet society, and therefore do not represent a viable and valid pastoral form for the contemporary church.

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⁵ See more on this in I. Paert, Spiritual Elders: Charisma and Tradition in Russian Orthodoxy (DeKalb, IL, 2010).  
⁷ On other Orthodox countries experience see, N. Stebbing, Bearers of the Spirit: Spiritual Fatherhood in Romanian Orthodoxy (Kalamazoo, MI, 1989).
Elders and Spiritual Guidance in the Post-Soviet Period:
Interpretations and Key-Problems

The prominence of elders in post-Soviet Orthodoxy has become a subject of scholarly interest and theological reflection. As Nikolay Mitrokhin states, elders, representing a section of a broader group of priests who specialize in confessing and guiding lay people (духовники), function as a parallel structure within the church, which is responsible for generating informal relations and an ability to build social and economic networks. According to Mitrokhin, elders often lead anti-hierarchical movements within the church, tend to be exponents of “fundamentalist” Orthodoxy rather than liberal and modernist trends, and often evoke half-hearted criticism from the church hierarchy. The popularity of elders in post-Soviet Russia suggests the process of disintegration of a “collectivist” mode of religiosity and adaptation to modern society. Anthropologists approach elders as an essential part of popular religiosity that is not necessarily connected with the “official regime” of the Orthodox Church, which includes belonging to a parish community, subordination to church hierarchy, and participation in the sacraments of the church. There are two positions. One tends to interpret elders as true icons of Holy Russia, representatives of some authentic spirit of Orthodoxy that survived in rural areas undamaged by modernisation and atheism, who in all respects strictly correspond to the normative ideal of the Orthodox church. In quite the opposite way, Zh. Kormina views elders essentially as the product of the imagi-

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12 This is the trend represented by the works by M. Gromyko and her centre. See М.М. Громыко, «О единстве православия в церкви и народной жизни», *Научный православный журнал. Традиции и современность* [M.M. Gromyko, ‘On the Unity of Orthodoxy in Church and Folk Life’, The Scholarly Orthodox Journal: Traditions and Modernity] 1/1 (2002), pp. 3–31.
nation of the urbanites who journey to rural areas in search of an authentic spiritual experience. In reality, she points out, the contentious character of the term, conflicts over the living and the dead elders, and the multiplicity of interpretations deprive the concept of eldership of its analytical and semantic potential. This is, of course, not a novel situation. Historians have shown that eldership was already a contentious category within the Imperial Russian church, and that different typologies of eldership could be constructed on the basis of hagiographical material and historical data.

Roughly, within the church one could sense two approaches. One identifies elders with the ascetic-mystical tradition within the Russian Orthodoxy, within which they are understood as the “bearers of the Spirit”; the other is driven by a desire to purify the Orthodox church of alien elements that in a parasitic manner coexist with and contaminate church life, including the occult, New Age practices, and, broadly speaking, folkloric Orthodoxy. It is within the sphere of the folkloric neo-Paganism that Archdeacon Andrei Kuraev places some popular старцы [female elders] such as Matrona of Moscow and Pelagiya of Ryazan, and their admirers and hagiographers. Defining the role of theology as ‘keeping in check the mythological creativity of the people’, he proceeds with a sharp critique of the contemporary Orthodox culture that has placed the opinions of semi-literate “elders” and especially “eldresses” — старницы, female elder], above the teachings of the Church. While his criticism skillfully dissects some tragicomic and bizarre features of popular Orthodox culture, Kuraev can hardly hide the feeling of powerlessness of the intellectual male theological elite facing the vast mass of pious Orthodox middle-age women who opt for the next edition of Zhdanova’s life of Matrona rather than Kuraev’s own polemical treatise.

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As I have studied the development of eldership within Russian Orthodoxy in the period between the second half of the eighteenth century and late 1990s (with the post-Soviet period more as an epilogue), my view of contemporary eldership is fragmentary and not based on a consistent collection of evidence; it is limited to published sources, Internet (such as web-discussions, blogs, web-sites), and a patchy evidence from interviews I have been collecting for a project related to contemporary Orthodoxy in Estonia. In this space, however, I would like to address the specific problems that eldership has raised within the contemporary ROC, such as the limits of the pastoral power, individual freedom, the status and authority of a religious leader, and the healing power of holiness.

*Starchestvo* in today’s Russia can be discussed in (but is not limited to) four related contexts. First, as a *genre*, secondly, as a *pastoral* model based on a more intense relationship between the elder and his disciple, then as a *network*, that is, a specific social structure within the church, often characterized by anti-globalist ideology; and, finally, as a *debate* on starchestvo in the church and mass media, including the critique of the so-called младостарчество (*mladostartsy* are literally “young elders”). These contexts are related: hagiographical accounts about elders stimulate people to look for living elders, to find a spiritual advisor; the elders’ circles produce hagiographical accounts; hagiography serves as a model for emulation by both clergy and laity and for the pastoral relationship.

**Eldership as a Genre**

Compared to their pre-revolutionary counterparts, contemporary Orthodox believers have a better access to the means of information such as published books and the Internet. For the peasants in post-Emancipation Russia, and even in Soviet Russia, the elder was either someone who lived locally, or someone who they knew by word of mouth, from pilgrims who visited far-away monasteries and met the living elders-monks. The Optina Pustyn’, for example, was popular among the peasants of Kaluga province, some of whom came to visit a specific monk for a specific task, such as exorcism or intercessory prayer. Today, however, the Orthodox Internet and books often serve as the first source of knowledge about elders. Many Orthodox bookshops have sections about elders in their internal structure; some books become bestsellers.

The genre of жизнеописание, a spiritual biography of a person of great spiritual authority, cannot strictly be defined as hagiography. The biographies of the elders, written by their disciples and accompanied by reminiscences and elders’ sayings or letters, were becoming popular in the second half of the nine-

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teenth century, when the rules of censorship gradually relaxed. Many spiritual biographies of male and female elders were compiled by Archimandrite Nikon Kononov at the turn of the twentieth century in his 19-volume collection. In comparison with medieval hagiographies, the spiritual biographies of elders are better grounded in historical and biographical details, and express more interest in individuality and biographical details rather than conforming to a specific hagiographical model. In the last decades of the twentieth century, the genre of spiritual biographies has enjoyed an extraordinary renaissance, resulting in a stable stream of texts whose literary quality and theological content raise much criticism from the experts. Even though many of these texts are not anonymous, it is difficult to determine the origins and commission of one text or another: some are commissioned by groups or institutions (for example, monasteries and convents) who lobby for canonization of a particular saint; others may represent purely commercial projects. As if in order to counteract “hagiographical kitsch”, the church promotes its own versions of literature in a hagiographical genre, written by approved authors.

Although the book market is quite well supplied by elders’ writings, biographies, and memoirs, the demand for new works remains quite high. The number of books related to elders in large Orthodox on-line bookshops such as “Arefa” or “The Russian Pilgrim” is between 200 and 300 including DVDs. Some books go through several reprints (the book by Sofronii Makritskii about Elder Serafim Tyapochkin is published in its twelfth edition, the print run is 5050 (the average print run for books in this genre is between 5–10,000).

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18 М. Лоевская, Русская агиография в культурно-историческом контексте переходных эпох [M. Loevskaya, The Russian Hagiography in a Cultural-historical Context of Transitional Periods], PhD dissertation (Moscow, 2005); Kuraev, Оккультизм в православии.
19 http://arefa.ru/; http://www.idrp.ru/buy/full.php?s=3. I have noticed a decrease in the number of books on elders in both bookshops between September 2011 and March 2012, which could be connected with the gradual implementation of church censorship. The requirement for all Orthodox literature to go through the expertise of the Publishing Council of Moscow Patriarchate has become more consistently implemented from 2009; see the ruling of the Holy Synod from 25-12-2009 http://izdatsovet.ru/doc/index.php?ELEMENT_ID=801.
20 Иеродиакон Софроний (cf. translation ‘Ierodiakon Sofronii’) (Макрицкий), Белгородский старец Архимандрит Серафим (Тяпочкин) 1894–1982 [Ierodiakon Sofronii (Makritskii), The Belgorod Elder Archimandrite Serafim (Tyapochkin)] (Moscow, 2004).
Books are complemented by films on DVD. With the introduction of church censorship in 2009, some publications and films have been banned from sales in Orthodox shops and for circulation in parish libraries but they can still be read and watched on the Internet or bought in Orthodox exhibitions. Film is a medium which allows people to have a glimpse into an elder’s personality on camera yet more often than not it becomes a means by which filmmakers use recollections about an elder to forge a persona suitable to their own purposes.

There is no direct link between hagiographic literature and canonization. Some elders are venerated without official approval, and many canonized saints do not enjoy popular veneration. However, the canonizations of Paisii Velichkovskii and Amvrosii of Optina in 1988 legitimised eldership as a hagiographical canon. This was continued during the councils of 1996 (Optina elders) and by canonizing other elders of the eighteenth–twentieth centuries, Fedor (Ushakov) of Sanaksary, Aleksei Mechev, Zosima Verkhovskii, and Serafim of Vyritsa. The canonizations of elders were just a small part of the massive hagiographical project that was carried by the church in the late decades of the twentieth century. The canonizations of elders did not automatically secure their status as most venerated saints in the context of recovered piety. It is often the case that elders of the eighteenth and nineteenth century “lose out” in popularity to other more contemporary saints, especially the above-mentioned Matrona of Moscow, Pelagiya of Ryazan’ and others.

**Eldership as a Pastoral Model**

According to a study of contemporary church folklore ‘[t]he relationship of spiritual guidance is the most important aspect of spiritual life for modern believers. The spiritual father defines the entire life course of an Orthodox believer, and surely he is responsible for his spiritual life. In our day, the fact that one possesses a spiritual father serves as a “pass” into intra-church circles.’

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22 For example, the series of five films «Соль земли» [The Salt of Earth] about the holy elders, reflects the position of “fundamentalist” circles: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4PbnuO0o83uY.

23 Е. Куleshов, А. Тарабукина, «Культ духовного отца в прицерковной среде», в А. Архипова, И. Полянский (ред.), Исследования по славянскому фольклору и народной культуре [E. Kuleshov, A. Tarabukina, ‘The Cult of Spiritual Father in the near-
However, it has not been a subject of special investigation as to when, how, and why having one’s own духовник [spiritual father] became a norm for a committed Orthodox Christian in Russia today. According to one classification recently produced by an Orthodox priest, all members of the Orthodox church could be divided into seven categories, according to their degree of commitment. The actively practicing Orthodox Christians who live under the guidance of their spiritual father who may not be their parish priest belong to the second highest category (number six). Those who are able, so to say, to manage their own life in coordination with their spiritual father, but not under his minute guidance, are at the top of the chart (number seven). The principle of living under spiritual guidance of one or another father-confessor may belong to the realm of “invented tradition”, although the roots of it certainly lay in the late Imperial era and the Soviet period. The practice of penitential families that embraced a father-confessor and his numerous spiritual children may have been a reality in pre-Petrine Russia, when the whole country was a community based on two kinds of kinship, one based on blood, the other on spiritual ties.

During the Synodal period, this system of penitential families, replaced by the territorial parish, was preserved only among religious dissenters.

I have argued elsewhere that in post-Emancipation Russia the spiritual family can be seen as a revival of an earlier form of покаянная семья [“penitential family”]. In post-revolutionary Russia, when the church led by Patriarch Tikhon was in a state of deep ecclesiastical crisis, some forms of revival in spiritual life were based not on the parish but rather on networks that formed around charismatic spiritual leaders. The community of Fr Sergii Mechev in 1920–30s Moscow defined itself as a “liturgical-penitential family”, using the term “penitential family” applied by Smirnov to the Byzantine and the medieval Russian church. During the era of religious persecutions, spiritual networks became essential for the survival of the church.

Orthodox milieu, in Studies in Slavic Folklore and Folk Culture, A. Arkhipova, I. Polinskii (eds.) (Oakland, CA, 1997), pp. 27–41.

24 Прот. И. Прекуп, Православные христиане—кто они? [Prot. I. Prekup, Orthodox Christians. Who are They?], Unpublished manuscript, pp. 7–8.


27 С. Смирнов, Древне-русский духовник [S. Smirnov, The Spiritual Father in Old Russia] (Moscow, 1913), pp. 238–240.

28 Paert, Spiritual Elders, pp. 150–152.
underground of the Soviet era, as presented by A.L. Beglov, consisted of numerous networks that were bound by loyalty to a spiritual leader and to members of spiritual families.29

However, the unwritten norm that a Christian should have a spiritual father to provide guidance in all matters of life has developed disproportionately during the post-socialist era, defining not only religious lives of the isolationist “intrachurch” circles as in Tarabukina’s study, or the members of “net Orthodoxy” but also much broader groups of ordinary Orthodox Christians.30 Below I will discuss a case-study of the relationship between a spiritual father and an enthusiastic woman who had become an active Orthodox in the late 1980s.

Born in a provincial town in the Ukraine in 1971, Alla went to study in St Petersburg in 1988 to become a librarian. Following her elder brother who also lived in St Petersburg and eventually became a monk and an icon-painter, she started to visit church during her student years. Her initial period in church was quite simple, she just followed what other people in church did. Her engagement with Orthodoxy deepened when she began to read ascetic literature which convinced many lay men and women about the necessity of a spiritual guide.31 During her frequent trips to Pyukhtitsa convent in Estonia, she became part of a group of young women who sought active spiritual engagement. The new Orthodox youth were full of hopes and expectations, searching for a spiritual guide who would help them to find their way. ‘We all have read the ascetic literature and went searching for such ideals’, she remembers. When asked what this group had in common, she replied:

Our group was consolidated by priests. There was Fr G. He was a very strict ascetic. There was Fr D., who was kind and good-hearted. There was also Fr S. He was relatively young. I was surprised to find out that he was only 37 at that time. In my eyes he was an elder. He managed to gather young people around himself. There was a sense of competition. . . . ‘He took her to a service but did not take me’. He knew how to involve [people] through some activity. The girls sung in a choir. He took them to services. He gave us tasks: to sew, to embroider. Some made rosaries, others knitted socks.32

29 Beglov, In Search, p. 84 and elsewhere.
30 On “net Orthodoxy” see Mitrokhin, The ROC, and Kormina, ‘The Social Orthodox Regimes’.
32 Interview with Alla (b. 1971), 27-02-2010, Tallinn.
Fr S. was a celibate priest who was brought up in a pious rural family in Central Russia and wanted to become priest from his youth. He had graduated from Moscow Theological Academy and received an appointment to Pyukhtitsa convent as a priest by Patriarch Aleksii II. It seems that he was one of the most energetic priests at the time, who had been involved in several reconstruction projects. He had been awarded for his efforts by several church medals, but also was awarded with an honorary Estonian citizenship, a remarkable achievement. After his service at the convent, he had been appointed a priest in an Estonian city where in the mid-1990s he had restored the cathedral and laid the foundation for a new church. This was a time of religious revival when thousands of men and women became baptised and socialised in the Orthodox church. Fr S. had founded and run a Sunday school, organised free food for the homeless, and generally had become the driving force for several projects. Perhaps, as he was a newcomer to the city N. he had to rely on people he knew, so he brought with him a group of dedicated young women, including Alla, who were his spiritual daughters.

Alla had graduated from College but never worked according to her qualification. To my question about whether she had had a choice between following her profession or dedicating her life to church, she replied:

No, at that time we were swamped by a kind of a wave of spiritual life. There was no question about a career. There was only a question about the choice between life in the world and a monastic life. During the period from the late 1980s to the beginning of the 1990s all young people had this dilemma, and to solve it they went to see Fr Nikolai [Gur’yanov], and elders such as Fr Kirill in Troitse-Sergieva and Fr Ioann Krest’yankin.

Alla refers to her peers, in their early twenties, all of whom belonged to the circle of young women and men she met during her stays in monasteries and convents. Alla herself had a chance to ask a reputable Fr Kirill during the latter’s visit to Valaam (where her brother was a novice).

When Fr Kirill came to Valaam, people flocked to him to solve their questions. They stood in a tight corridor. I had a question about whether I should go to Narva to help Fr S. or become a nun. He put his hand on my hands. I was struck by the heaviness of his hand, like a relic, so heavy that I had to bow low down to kiss it. To my question he said, that if I did not leave the [secular] world immediately, I would never become a nun. Then to my question, whether I should go to Fr S., he said ‘I know Fr S., go ahead’.
Alla helped Fr S. to organize parish life, dedicating her time to daily tasks within the church. As a charismatic leader, Fr S. managed to revive parish life and create an environment for Orthodox activities. He had built a group around him that was held only by their relationship to the leader. It is no wonder, that after Fr S. departure, this group fell apart. It is also evident that a strong personality like Fr S. could not fit into the structure of the diocese. Still, his career developed, and he is now a bishop in another diocese.

Alla’s story shows that, on the one hand, the norms of spiritual life were established by both the clergy and the laity who have tried to emulate the ascetic literature they had read. The relationship between lay men and women (especially women) and the pastors, on the other hand, often followed the scheme of spiritual direction which was based on the norm of obedience and also intense emotional relationship. Charles Lindholm has compared the charismatic relationship to romantic love: both relationships involve ‘the voluntary opening up of the boundaries of the self, and of the private, jealously guarded life-world’. Even though Alla refers to elders in her story only in passing, her relationship with Fr S. had been evolving along the lines of spiritual direction similar to that between elders and their spiritual children.

Eldership as a Social Network and Antiglobalization Ideology

The previous section has indicated that networks were intrinsic to eldership as a pastoral mode. This form of organization of religious life is deeply rooted in Orthodoxy. However, during the post-socialist period, this form had the potential to become distorted in several ways. On the one hand, networks around elders could become the breeding ground for fundamentalist ideologies; on the other hand, as the leaders of these networks have an extremely high degree of spiritual authority, the principle of Christian freedom could be violated.

At the risk of oversimplifying, one can distinguish between elders as leaders of some anti-globalist fundamentalist groups that are characterized by their own mythopoetics and ritual culture on the one hand, and elder-traditionalists who simply represent more conservative, ascetic-oriented culture within the church on the other. As Kormina has also shown, it is possible that there are multiple meanings which can be attached to the same person, serving as the ground for consolidation of various social groups each of which holds their own, more truthful vision of the elder. The case-study for this is Elder Nikolai

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Gur’yanov from the island of Zalit, who had served as an object of excessive attention and controversy in the last years before his death.34

Observers have tended to describe elders and their spiritual children as a social network, a parallel structure within the church, whose mode of existence is not reducible to the parish “regime” of the Orthodox church.35 Post-socialist networks are different from the “penitential families” of the pre-Petrine and post-revolutionary period, however.

During the post-Soviet period of economic and social instability, elders were essential in helping to form small communities in various regions of Russia, performing economic, social and religious functions. For example, several spiritual daughters of Archimandrite Naum (Baiborodin) from Trinity-Sergius Lavra settled in the land around Pyukhtitsa convent during the 1980–90s, transferring log houses to Estonia from Russia. They have since had to leave this settlement due to visa restrictions implemented by the Estonian government.36 The status of these spiritual families did not fit well into the existing ecclesiastical structure and often lead to conflicts and tensions. Another controversial figure, Archimandrite Petr (Kucher) formed a community of about 200 nuns and restored Bogolyubskii monastery in Vladimir diocese, which had an orphanage. The members of the community, including children, refused to accept passports and medical insurance. Archimandrite Petr was attacked by the media in 2009 after the escape of a girl from the orphanage in Bogolyubovo convent under the spiritual supervision of the powerful Fr Petr.37 Despite the investigation of this affair and criticism by

34 Kormina, ‘Contesting the Sacred’.
35 Kormina, ‘The Social Orthodox Regimes’.
36 From personal communication. After the departure of “Naumovki”, the houses were bought by lay members of Estonian Orthodox. More on starets Naum in Н. Митрохин, «Архимандрит Наум и „наумовцы” как квинтэссенция современного старчества» [N. Mitrokhin, ‘Archimandrite Naum and “Naumovtsy” as a Quintessence of Contemporary Spiritual Guidance (Starchestvo)’], in Agadzhanyan, Rousselet, Religious Practices, pp. 126–148.
37 http://www.keston.org.uk/_russianreview/edition42/01-vladimir-monastary-democracy-filatov.html. Despite the publicized case of Valentina Perova, the claims that children were tortured in the orphanage were not confirmed (the evidence that children slept 7.5 instead of minimum 8.5 hrs and did not have meat in their diet could not be used as grounds for persecution). However, the lack of passports and medical insurance of course raised concerns of the authorities. It is also quite evident that the case was used, but not successfully, to get at Fr Petr as a symbolic figure, at http://www.novayagazeta.ru/news/4032.html.
the church and secular media, the powerful elder, who is officially “retired”, continues to lead the community, albeit informally.

While generally elders express traditionalist views, some may also have been involved in anti-globalization eschatological religious ideology. For example, the refusal to accept the Individual Tax Code, medical insurances, and passports is motivated by the belief that these documents contain the number of the Beast. The call to national repentance is an echo of the words of St John Bishop of San Francisco (1896–1966), one of the spiritual leaders of the Russian emigration, that Russia as a nation has to repent in the sin of the revolution, apostasy, and the murder of the tsar. The message of Bishop John was addressed to those members of the émigré community who put the blame for the revolution and the terror on the Bolsheviks, but also to those who justified the historical necessity of the revolution. In the Чин всенародного покаяния [“Ritual of National Repentance”], promoted by Archimandrite Petr (Kucher), the idea of the redeeming self-sacrifice of tsar Nicholas II and the necessity of collective repentance for the sin of the murder of the tsar (as well as a number of historical and contemporary sins, including the emigration of the intelligentsia to the West, celebration of 8 March and 1 April, etc.) may lead to the restoration of historical harmony that was lost in 1917. Some scholars have indicated that there are parallels between some of the modern evangelical churches that believe in Christ as personal redeemer who liberates from sin and makes one immune to sin, and the implications of the Rite of National Repentance, which according to them, point to quite modernist religious logic.38

The extreme cases of elders’s social and political involvement, that came under the spotlight of the media, highlight the complex relationship between contemporary Orthodox culture and universal traditionalist tendencies.39 In any case, these conservative groups may represent an extreme edge, not the mainstream.


39 Compare, for example, with the Old Calendarists, who split from the Greek Orthodox church.
Debate on “mladostarchestvo”

The emergence of multiple little centres around charismatic elders throughout Russia and Ukraine in the post-Soviet period had become a subject of intrachurch criticism and secular media attention only in the late 1990s. The term младостарчество [young or immature eldership] was introduced in Patriarch Aleksii II’s speech in 1998 to provide a name for abuse of pastoral practice by some priests, and later published as a circular of the Holy Synod on 28-12-1998 “on the practice of confession”. The term mладостарчество used by the émigré historian Ivan Kontsevich in his work “Optina Pustyn’ and its time”, was meant to describe spiritual immaturity of the clergy who, having familiarized themselves with elders’ practices, through ascetic literature try to emulate старцы in their pastoral practice. Младостарчество is used to denote a distortion of tradition of старчество, a false religion. Attempts to provide some theological background for the criticism of this distorted practice were made. Metropolitan Ilarion Alfeev, hieromonk at the time, carried out an interview in London with Bishop Antonii of Sourozh, in which the latter called for even stricter measures against младостарцы than those applied at a time, suggesting that these priests should be defrocked unless they stopped confessing people.

Following these leads, church writers began to discuss the problem from various angles. For example, in Fr Vladimir Sokolov’s book mладостарчество is placed in the context of church history, and explained by five broad reasons: first, the psychology of the elders’ followers who avoid responsibility for their decisions; second, the already mentioned spiritual immaturity of the elder; third, the hastiness of ordination that overlooked inaptitude of the candidate for priesthood; fourth, the lack of spiritual guidance; and finally, the distortion of human nature after the fall.40 Apart from these reasons, there is an underlying problem of the communist legacy, which resulted in a habit for mimicry and hypocrisy and thus had a detrimental effect on human personality, producing an inability to take responsibility for one’s decisions. The contamination of Christianity and non-Christian teachings, including occultism, New Age, or neo-paganism were typical for the late Soviet era and post-Soviet period of transition. The atmosphere of some sections of church congregations is affected by non-Christian spirituality and sometimes results in the perception of elders as soothsayers and oracles.41

40 Владимир (Соколов), Младостарчество и православная традиция [Vladimir (Sokolov), Mladostarchestvo and the Orthodox Tradition] (Moscow, 2005), pp. 22–25.
41 Idem, pp. 26–27.
There is a strong tendency to evaluate the contemporary elders’ circles which have not been approved by the Moscow Patriarchate as a sect. According to the missionary priest Daniil Sysoev, who was murdered in 2009, the search for elders is more typical among those who have had experience with occult sects. Sokolov also noticed the tendency for elders’ followers to create a totalitarian sect from every parish. In this vein, the authority on sects, the founder of the Centre of St Irinee of Lyon, A.L. Dvorkin, defines the worldview of the elder Archimandrite Petr (Kucher) as ‘fundamentalist ecumenism’ and vulgar occultism.

Fr Anatolii Berestov, brother of the authoritative elder Rafail Berestov, in his book Православные колдуны. Кто они? offers an image of an elder which could well have been taken from boulevard literature on Rasputin published in the aftermath of February revolution. A witness describes his visit to a clairvoyant elder, schemamonk Feodosii, to get cured from alcoholism.

He began to treat me; he looks at the icon of Mother of God, communicates with her, then looks deep in my eyes, so that I cannot turn my eyes away. I felt that my spine was beginning to crack and felt some pain in my abdomen as if something was taken out from me, even though Feodosii did not touch me… The story ends with Elder Feodosii trying to seduce his client, at which point the latter realized that the elder was in fact a lewd impostor rather than a holy elder…

Standing a little bit “to the left” from the usual criticism of mladostarchestvo, Hegumen Petr (Meshcherinov) addressed the distortion of Orthodox theology in the contemporary attitudes towards spiritual guidance. According to him a distorted understanding of the relationship between Christ, the priest, and the believer is at the root of the problem. On the one hand, following Afanas’ev, Hegumen Petr believes that all Christians are equal before God, only differing by the kind of their ministry and their God-given duties. ‘There is not the Church which teaches and the Church that is being taught, one representing the caste of teachers and another the caste of silent listeners’. The pastor is a servant of Christ, whose task is to bring the teaching of Christ and Church. The fact of ordination does not make the priest automatically the better vehicle.

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44 Анатолий (Берестов), «Православные колдуны». Кто они? [Anatolii (Berestov), Orthodox Wizards. Who are They?] (Moscow, 1998), pp. 126–27.
between the Holy Spirit and humanity, so to say. ‘Every Sacrament presupposes the co-creativity of man with God and depends on moral efforts’.\footnote{Petr (Meshcherinov), \textit{The problems of Enchurchment}, pp. 37–38.} Seeing the reasons for \textit{mladostarchestvo} in infantile attitudes of believers to their pastors, he emphasizes their unorthodox understanding of the will of God, which is perceived as something programmed within the human being. The role of the elder is to discern this predetermined will of God, which denies the individual Christian the possibility to follow the path of commandments actively through struggle against sin and through personal relationship with God.

Writing in 2007, Fr Petr argued that the position Patriarch Aleksii expressed in 1998 has not yet reached the parish level and thus distorted attitudes towards pastoral relations still flourish. However, a number of policies have been introduced to counteract \textit{mladostarchestvo}. All candidates to the priesthood are required to have a theological education; there are now stricter rules on the publication of church literature, which is now required to undergo internal censorship; there is stricter control of the monasteries through the cadre policy (involving the transfer of priests and bishops); and there has been a strengthening of the “vertical of power” which enables greater regulation of relations between dioceses and Moscow. Even though some centres of “fundamentalist” circles continue to exist, their position is marginalised within the church and their public reputation is damaged.

\textbf{Conclusion}

In this article I have tried to show the pervasive character of the spiritual kinship, by which I mean the relationship between spiritual fathers, some of whom may be regarded as elders, and their spiritual children.\footnote{This is different from spiritual kinship on the basis of God-parenthood which was a widespread form of kinship not based on blood ties in the Middle Ages. See B. Jussen, \textit{Spiritual Kinship as Social Practice. God-parenthood and Adoption in the Middle Ages} (Newark, DE / London, 2000).} Spiritual fatherhood and eldership as forms of ministry do not contradict the Orthodox ecclesiology and have historical precedents. The revival of spiritual elders and spiritual kinship in postsocialist Russia is a process that indicates, in my view, the inclusive character of Orthodox ecclesiology which accommodates both hierarchical and non-hierarchical principles, institutional and charismatic forms of church authority. It is important, I believe, to see these shifting ecclesiological principles in their historical development, taking into account the degree of
institutionalization of the church. In postsocialist Russia, spiritual kinship and elders have had an ambiguous position within the church. On the one hand, there is a clearly expressed popular interest and popular demand for elders, often stimulated by publications and popular Orthodox culture. Moreover, the idea that every Orthodox Christian should have a spiritual father, and be guided by elders at some moments of his or her life, is widespread in Orthodox circles. On the other hand, there is a growing opposition to elders from the church hierarchy and the liberal Orthodox clergy. This criticism is not always very effective. The observers sometimes wonder why, despite the condemnation of the ill practices of mladostarchestvo, there were not many practical actions taken against these violations. One explanation could be that spiritual kinship like the one based on blood connects all members of the church by the relationships to one or another spiritual father.

When the institutional structure of the church was going through the process of reconstruction during the late 1980–90s, the ability of individual priests and monastic leaders who mobilized human resources to rebuild parish and monastic life was essential. Personal charisma was an important resource that helped to provide social consolidation on the basis of non-economic motivation. Horizontal links between the members of these “spiritual families” were quite weak, their life-span was short, there were frequent violations of the canon law.

The rebuilding of the institutional structure of the ROC in the late 1990s and 2000s, the strengthening of the links with the state and society, the emergence of the new mechanisms of control, resulted in a shift from “charismatic” to institutional ways of consolidating the social structure of the church, not only by rational bureaucratic means but also by strengthening horizontal links through social activism and institutions of civil society. While the charisma of holy elders and revered confessors is not rejected, it belongs to a realm of a spiritual ideal and no longer to a practical form for organizing religious life on the ground.

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