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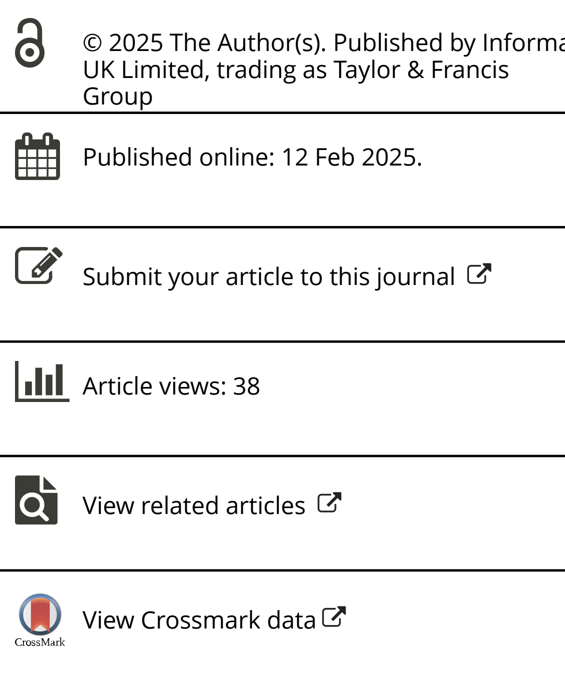

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OBSTACLES TO COVENANTAL PLURALISM IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

By Jekatyerina Dunajeva and Karrie Koesel

> When Russia expanded and absorbed other peoples who professed Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism, Russia was always very loyal to those people who professed other religions. This [religious diversity] is the country's strength.
>
> —V.V. Putin, 2024 (TASS 2024)

Russia is widely associated with Orthodox Christianity: over 70 percent of the population identify as Orthodox, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) is considered a fundamental pillar of society, and the Church has established a close relationship with the state (Fagan 2012, 43; Levada Center 2023; Marsh 2011, 127). Russian law recognizes the "special role" of Orthodox Christianity in the country's historical, spiritual, and cultural development (1997 Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations, No. 125-ФЗ). This designation has led to privileged access to political decision-makers and government resources (Koesel 2014; Lunkin 2020b; Marsh 2011), and made the Russian Orthodox Church the *de facto* established church.

At the same time, Russia is tremendously diverse. Approximately 200 different ethnic and national groups are counted by the census; there are over 27,000 registered religious organizations; and Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Catholics, Protestants, Hindus, Baha'is,

Abstract: What are the prospects for covenantal pluralism in Russia? Despite constitutional guarantees of religious freedom and the state's recognition of its multi-confessional and multi-ethnic character, this article argues that Russian religious communities face a hierarchical system that divides religious groups between "traditional" and "non-traditional" faiths. This religious hierarchy creates an uneven playing field where non-traditional faiths tend to experience greater legal restrictions and societal pressures. Drawing on fieldwork in Russia, the article explores how Christian minorities experience religious freedom and negotiate politicized labels of traditional and non-traditional faiths. The article concludes that there are significant barriers to covenantal pluralism in Russia.

Keywords: Russia, religion, covenantal pluralism, religious minorities, Russian Orthodox Church, non-Orthodox Christians, multi-confessional

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Tengrists, pagans, other faiths and non-believers all call Russia home (Federal State Statistics Service 2015; n.d.). This diversity is protected and celebrated by the Russian state. The constitution guarantees the rights and freedoms of all religions and nationalities ensuring equal protection under the law. Diversity is also honored in Russian National Unity Day, one of the first holidays created after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This holiday commemorates a 1612 popular uprising that ended the Polish occupation of Moscow. Central to the narrative is Kuzma Minin, a butcher from Nizhny Novgorod, who organized a multi-ethnic and multi-confessional militia to liberate Moscow. The popular uprising is remembered as a day when Russians from diverse backgrounds united to defend the Motherland (Koesel 2014, 128–129; Omelicheva 2017, 436–437; TASS 2016; Yakovleva 2023). Diversity is, therefore, patriotic.

This same diversity is also celebrated at the highest levels of the state. President Putin regularly describes Russia as a multi-confessional and multi-ethnic state with diversity hardwired into its "cultural code" (Fagan 2012, 28; Kremlin 2023; TASS 2023a). According to Putin, diversity is not only the cornerstone of Russian statehood, but also one of the country's greatest strengths (Interfax.ru 2024; Kremlin 2023; TASS 2024).

Against this complex backdrop of Orthodox dominance and diversity, this article explores the prospects of covenantal pluralism in contemporary Russia. Covenantal pluralism, in its most basic form, is a normative vision for a diverse society. It centers on legal equality and the establishment of neighborly solidarity among diverse groups. This framework is guided by a "constitutional order of equal rights and responsibilities and by a culture of reciprocal commitment" (Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover 2020, 21, 30). In this way, covenantal pluralism moves beyond thin and temporal appeals for "tolerance" or "coexistence" and requires a combination of top-down legal protections for religion alongside the bottom-up development of norms of mutual respect, engagement, and understanding among religious groups (Seiple 2018; Stewart, Seiple, and Hoover 2020, 30–33). Covenantal pluralism, therefore, needs state protections and equal rights for *all* religious life alongside inter-faith understanding and mutual respect to take hold.

Can covenantal pluralism emerge in contemporary Russia? We argue the prospects are significantly limited. Although religious freedoms are certainly more protected than during the Soviet era, Russian religious communities currently operate in an uneven playing field where faith-based communities have been sorted into those that are seen as "traditional" and deeply rooted in Russian society, such as Orthodox Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and Buddhism, and "non-traditional religions and sects" that are seen as religious newcomers. We suggest this bifurcation impedes the development of covenantal pluralism in two important ways. First, it encourages legal inequity. Traditional religions tend to have greater policy influence and access to state resources, while non-traditional religions face greater government restrictions and scrutiny (Garrard and Garrard 2008; Marsh 2013; Richters 2013). Second, the division overtly politicizes religion. Traditional faiths are seen as patriotic and loyal to the state, while non-traditional religions are depicted by state and societal actors as foreign faiths, potential sources of extremism, and threats to Russian society and culture (Filatov 1999; Knox 2019; Koesel 2014). This same politicization, in turn, fosters social intolerance and discrimination toward non-traditional religious minorities (Fox 2016; Pew Research Center 2024), making it difficult for religious communities to find common ground and cultivate relationships of mutual understanding. Simply put: there are roadblocks to covenantal pluralism.

We advance this argument by drawing on fieldwork in Russia, including in-person interviews with traditional and non-traditional religious leaders, practitioners as well as scholars, experts, and human rights lawyers.[1] We show how top-down laws and policies create a two-tiered system of religions that fosters legal inequity and politicizes religious life, especially for religious minorities. Specifically, we focus on

the everyday experiences of non-Orthodox Christians—that is, Christian minorities with diverse histories in the country, but tend to be labeled religious outsiders or foreign faiths. This includes Baptists, Catholics, Charismatics, Evangelicals, Jehovah's Witnesses, Lutherans, Methodists, Pentecostals, Seventh Day Adventists, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Unification Church. Drawing on interviews with church leaders, we explore how Christian minorities experience religious freedom and navigate politicized labels as traditional and non-traditional faiths. We conclude that this has led to a highly uncertain environment for Christians, making it difficult for norms of mutual respect and religious understanding to develop. In short, an environment inhospitable to covenantal pluralism.

A Legal Framework Undermining Covenantal Pluralism

What is the nature of religious freedom in contemporary Russia? The Russian Federation provides broad protections for religious life (Drozdova 2021), while also maintaining the secular nature of the state. The constitution and several laws are aimed at protecting religious freedoms and practices. The constitution affirms that Russia is a secular state with no established state religion and that all religious associations are equal before the law (Article 14). It guarantees "the freedom of conscience, the freedom of religion, including the right to profess individually or together with any other religion or to profess no religion at all, to freely choose, possess and disseminate religious and other views and act according to them" (Article 28).[2] The constitution further protects against the instigation of religious hatred and bans propaganda that fosters religious supremacy or restricts human rights based on religious grounds (Article 29; Article 19).

The 1997 federal law *On the Freedom of Conscience and Religious Associations* (1997 Law, No. 125-ФЗ) affirms the constitutional guarantees of freedom of conscience and religion. The preamble of the law "consider[s] it important to promote mutual understanding, tolerance and respect in matters of freedom of conscience and freedom of religion" (1997 Law, No. 125-ФЗ). Like the constitution, this law also prohibits discrimination based on religious affiliation, and ensures the equality of all religious associations as well as their independence from the state. However, the same law impedes the development of covenantal pluralism in two important ways.

First, it recognizes the special role of Orthodox Christianity in Russian "history and the formation and development of its spirituality and culture" (1997 Law, No. 125-ФЗ, preamble). In singling out the Russian Orthodox Church, the law sets the Church above other religious organizations, essentially offering it *de facto* establishment (Wallace and Marsh 2007, 8, 11; Witte 1999, 12, 14). This special recognition also grants symbolic privileges to the Russian Orthodox Church. For instance, only religious organizations that have been active and legally registered in the country for 50 years can use "Russia" or the "Russian Federation" in their name, essentially limiting this use to the Orthodox Church (1997 Law, No. 125-ФЗ, Article 8, 5).[3] The special recognition of Orthodox Christianity could be interpreted as a violation of the constitutional principles of equality because it sets Orthodox Christianity apart from all other faiths. Indeed, this was President Yeltsin's concern that the law contradicted the religious equality laid out in the constitution (Witte 1999, 17).

Second, the 1997 law designates select religions as playing an "integral" part in Russia's heritage, including Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, and "other religions" (*другие религии*) (1997 Law, No. 125-ФЗ, preamble). By identifying certain faiths as "integral," the law establishes an informal division between "traditional" and "non-traditional" religions. We argue that this division has come to define the Russian religious landscape. The Russian Orthodox Church and its members are at the top of this religious hierarchy, with various traditional Christian, Muslim, Jewish, and Buddhist groups in the middle, and all other non-traditional religious

groups at the bottom (Lunkin 2020b; Witte 1999, 12).

This informal hierarchy frames how religious communities navigate their relationship with the state and experience religious freedom. Orthodox Christianity and other traditional religions generally have greater access to state resources and protections than non-traditional religions, which eases relations with government authorities who oversee the regulation and protection of religious freedom (Codevilla 2008; Witte 1999, 19). Putin, for instance, has maintained that Orthodox Christianity is a natural ally of the Russian state and traditional religions can count on state support (TASS 2013). Non-traditional religions are not offered the same support nor are they depicted as allies of the state. At a 2023 State Award Ceremony honoring Russian patriots,[4] for instance, only traditional religions were highlighted as core to Russian unity and national security: "Russia is a God-protected country, Russia is holy. All traditional confessions are not imported: [this is] our Motherland, our origins are here," as one awardee put it (The President of Russia 2023). The implication, therefore, is that non-traditional religions are foreign faiths.

Religious Hierarchy: Political and Societal Implications

The elevated position of Orthodox Christianity vis-a-vis the state has meant an expanding role in Russian politics and society (Kasatkin 2010; Marsh 2011; Richters 2013). The Orthodox Church has been on the receiving end of state subsidies for the reconstruction of churches destroyed during the Soviet era and as more recent efforts to build churches in suburbs, train stations, and government buildings (see, for example, 200 Hramov 2012; Koesel 2014). The Church has also expanded its influence in Russian schools with the introduction of the "Fundamentals of Orthodox Culture"—courses designed to teach Orthodox Christianity and other traditional religions to students (Lisovskaya and Karpov 2010).

The Russian Orthodox Church and other traditional faiths have also been mobilized in support of Putin's conservative agenda. To protect against the existential threat of Western liberalism, the Kremlin has called on traditional faiths to strengthen "family values" and help with the "patriotic education of young people" (Kremlin 2023). Accordingly, traditional religions have been integrated into various social policies and programs. Putin has invited the "spiritual shepherds of Russia's traditional religions" to strengthen traditional families and 2024 was declared the "Year of the Family" (Kremlin 2024). Similarly, a Presidential decree on traditional values connected traditional religions with the moral foundation of Russian society (Decree of the President of the Russian Federation No. 809; The President of Russia 2022). According to the decree,

> Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism and other religions, which are an integral part of the Russian historical and spiritual heritage, have had a significant influence on the formation of traditional values common to believers and non-believers. Orthodoxy plays a special role in the formation and strengthening of traditional values. The Russian Federation considers traditional values as the foundation of Russian society, allowing the protection and strengthening of the sovereignty of Russia, ensuring the unity of our multinational and multi-religious country … (Presidential Decree 2022, 2)

This excerpt from the Presidential decree is revealing because it reinforces the informal hierarchy of religious life outlined in the 1997 federal law. Special importance is granted to Orthodox Christianity and traditional religions are singled out as playing an integral role in strengthening Russian traditional values. The decree also suggests that values promoted by traditional religions are not only the "glue" of a diverse society, but also for protecting Russian sovereignty. It would seem that traditional religions have taken on the role of defenders of the nation.

While the elevation of Orthodox Christianity and other traditional religions in the above decree may be dismissed as largely symbolic, it is

important to note that the state offers *no* such support to non-traditional religions. Instead, non-traditional groups tend to face discrimination and harassment, including the arbitrary implementation of laws and heightened government oversight and regulation of religious activities (e.g. Carobene 2021; Fautré 2020; Fox 2016; Pew Research Center 2024; Sibireva 2024). This scrutiny of non-traditional faiths is driven, in part, by the assumption that they are unpatriotic and unrooted in Russian society (Aitamurto 2020; Knox 2019; Koesel and Dunajeva 2018; Lunkin 2020a). Non-traditional faiths are religious outsiders and potential threats to Russian culture and national security.

The religious hierarchy that shapes the Russian religious landscape also contributes to an overtly politicized environment for religious life. Patriarch Kirill of the Russian Orthodox Church, for instance, has suggested that non-Orthodox Christians are "spiritual colonizers." Kirill has argued that for many Russians "'non-Orthodox' means those who have come to destroy the spiritual unity of the people and the Orthodox faith—spiritual colonizers who by fair means or foul try to tear the people away from the Church" (quoted in Witte 1999, 9). Non-Orthodox Christians are frequently labeled in the media as "pseudo-Christians," "enemies of Orthodox Christianity," "totalitarian cults," and "foreign agents" conspiring with the West to challenge the Kremlin (Löfstedt 2012; Poplavsky 2012; Richters 2013; Verkhovsky 2015).

However, it is important to note that many Christian minorities have considerable roots in Russia. The first Lutheran church was built under Ivan the Terrible in 1576 outside of Moscow (Veith 2023); Russian Baptists were institutionalized and officially recognized at the end of the 19th century (Glavatskaya and Popova 2016); and the Russian Pentecostal movement began in the early 20th century before it was violently persecuted by the Soviets (Löfstedt 2012; Lunkin 2004). Despite these historical ties, non-Orthodox Christians tend to be lumped together as religious newcomers and "threats" alongside other Christian communities that arrived in the 1990s (Carobene 2021; Dunajeva and Koesel 2017; Koesel and Dunajeva 2018). As a result, non-Orthodox Christians carefully negotiate labels of traditional and non-traditional religions and make the case that they should be considered as the former and not the latter.

To summarize, an uneven playing field has emerged for religion and religious life that impedes the development of covenantal pluralism. A top-down hierarchy of religions has emerged with Orthodox Christianity as the most fundamentally Russian religion and the ultimate "provider of traditional values," claiming "exclusive right to a close relationship with the government" (Lunkin 2020b; Stoeckl 2020, 1). A second tier of religions includes those seen as "integral," including Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism. These religions are collectively referred to as the "traditional religions," and are also considered by Putin as part of the "moral foundation" of Russian society (TASS 2023b). Finally, a third tier of non-traditional religions sits at the bottom of the hierarchy. These are considered non-integral faiths and are commonly depicted as foreign faiths or newcomers. Religious groups at the bottom of this hierarchy tend to face harassment and discrimination. As the remainder of the paper will demonstrate, the informal division between traditional and non-traditional religions encourages inequity and distrust; it compromises the development of covenantal pluralism.

A TOP-DOWN HIERARCHY OF RELIGIONS HAS EMERGED WITH ORTHODOX CHRISTIANITY AS THE MOST FUNDAMENTALLY RUSSIAN RELIGION

Everyday Experiences of Christians in Russia

How do Christians navigate the religious hierarchy? We argue that the hierarchy creates an uneven playing field for religious communities and politicizes religion, which has negative consequences for the development of covenantal pluralism. The hierarchy between traditional and non-traditional religions impacts both how

religious communities experience religious freedom and their relations with one another. We suggest that the fluidity of these labels is particularly felt among non-Orthodox Christians. As noted earlier, this is a diverse Christian minority that includes Adventists, Baptists, Catholics, Charismatics, Evangelicals, Jehovah's Witness, Lutherans, Pentecostals, and members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints and the Unification Church.

In this section, we focus on the everyday experiences of non-Orthodox Christians by drawing on 32 semi-structured interviews with religious leaders and scholars in Russia in 2015. Our analysis sheds light on two themes: (1) the unevenness of religious freedom experienced by non-Orthodox Christians; and (2) the tension among minority churches as they navigate politicized labels of traditional and non-traditional religions. The everyday experiences of Christian minorities reveal striking inequity and intolerance, which makes it difficult for religious groups to develop norms of trust and find common ground.

Uneven Religious Freedom

In reflecting on the nature and scope of religious freedom in Russia, nearly all respondents emphasized the uniqueness of the Russian historical context and the role of the Russian Orthodox Church. Leaders of minority churches spoke optimistically of increasing religious freedom, especially compared to the Soviet era, but also cautiously of the challenges facing Christian minorities living under the shadow of the Orthodox Church.

Specifically, church leaders tended to contextualize their experience with religious freedom against the backdrop of the Soviet Union where open religious expression was banned and many churches operated underground and in secret. Against this repressive past, church leaders described their current experience largely in positive ways. One Baptist pastor exclaimed without hesitation that there is religious freedom in Russia and "compared to communist times, we have freedom, but we have to coordinate (*согласовывать*) with the authorities" to exercise that freedom (Interview with Baptist pastor B., 2015). The pastor explained that today local government authorities and police are far more tolerant of their missionary work, even more tolerant than the local population. However, this tolerance means that they must keep local authorities abreast of their religious activities and "coordinate" with the state. Here, he offered an example of an outside worship service that received complaints from anonymous citizens. Rather than shutting down their religious revival, local police reassured the pastor of his legal rights, and in a friendly manner, asked church leaders to coordinate these events in advance, "so they don't need to waste their time responding to such calls" (Interview with Baptist pastor B., 2015). The pastor used this example to illustrate how far the state has come in the protection of religious life.

Church leaders also reflected on the nature of religious freedom vis-à-vis the Russian Orthodox Church, which is seen as the *de facto* established church. Christian minority leaders frequently commented that "Russia is an Orthodox country" or the "Russian Orthodox Church is dominant," with a few adding that Islam is another strong religious force in the country. Operating under the shadow of the Orthodox Church, minority Christian leaders were also careful to explain that they were not competing with Orthodox Christianity nor should their churches be considered threats to Russian culture (Interview with Pentecostal pastor V., 2015). Others added that despite good relations with local government authorities, they feel pressure because the Russian Orthodox Church sees them as competitors (Interview with Baptist pastor B., 2015). But "minority churches," as a Pentecostal pastor put it, "are not competing; we understand that the Russian culture is very much tied to the Orthodox religion" (Interview with Pentecostal pastor V., 2015). Another pastor noted that the Orthodox Church has a "strong lobby" with the state that has led to limited opportunities for others. However, he suggested that this may have a silver lining in that it has encouraged Protestants to become more "entrepreneurial," which may have long-term benefits for church growth (Interview with Methodist pastor D., 2015).

Other Christians described the relationship between the Kremlin and the Russian Orthodox Church as mutually beneficial. In particular, a telling discussion was with an Evangelical leader who stated that "the Russian Orthodox Church became part of the government bureaucracy and they have a tight relationship just like before the [1917] Revolution, but on a more modern platform … [in this union] both sides benefit: the government gains more control over people and Russian Orthodox Church gets financial assistance" (Interview with Evangelical leader M., 2015). A Methodist pastor described the unity between Orthodox Church and the government as a practical union—that is, given the diversity and dividedness in other denominations, it is "easier to deal with only the Orthodox Church" (Interview with Methodist pastor D., 2015). This practical union, however, often comes with negative consequences for minority churches, such as being accused of being unpatriotic and foreign faiths.

Still other Christian minorities described the challenges of living under the shadow of the Russian Orthodox Church. Perceptions of inter-religious competition can have far-reaching consequences for Protestants. An expert explained: "Protestants, especially when they are part of conflicts, they risk being seen as undermining the Pravoslav [Orthodox] faith in Russia and almost immediately become associated with espionage" (Interview with expert L., 2015). This scholar bluntly added that religious freedom largely differs from region to region, and frequently "depends on the mood of the Orthodox bishop" (ibid.). He offered examples from one region where the Orthodox Church accused Christian minorities of "participation in the Orange revolution" which led to inter-religious suspicion to the example of another region where one Orthodox priest single-handedly laid a foundation for inter-faith dialogue and thriving religious pluralism. To explain this regional variation, one scholar noted that the Russian Orthodox Church should be understood as a diverse actor and not a unified body (Interview with scholar C., 2015). In fact, the scholar continued, at the grassroots level interfaith networks are common, yet there is no official platform for cooperation and positive examples of interfaith projects are not publicized, perhaps because this is "not the right time to develop ecumenical relations" (ibid.). This underscores the political influence of the Orthodox Church and its ability to shape and constrain the religious freedom of others.

Church leaders also reflected on differences in religious freedom by linking it differences between traditional and non-traditional faiths. One Protestant leader suggested that religious freedom can be understood through these informal labels. Another referred to the idea of "smart religious freedom," where non-traditional religions should not enjoy the same freedoms as traditional ones (Interview with Lutheran minister L., 2015). The minister emphasized his status as a traditional faith alongside concerns about non-traditional faiths and sects: "When we talk about traditional religions, there are no problems [of religious freedom] whatsoever! Equally to the Orthodox Church, the Catholics and us—we are all interested in limiting the destructive sects. In our city, you can find churches of most non-Orthodox Christian faiths (*инославные религии*), but 'sects' are not represented"—this, he maintained, is a "smart approach" to religious freedom.

When inquiring into the presence of "sects," the minister explained that during the 1990s Russia experienced "unchecked freedom" (*вседозволенность*), when many "sects" came from abroad, and "were given land and ability to build churches" (Interview with Lutheran minister L., 2015). Here, he offered the example of Jehovah's Witnesses as "foreign sects," adding sarcastically that before the 1990s "Russians had no idea who the Jehovah's Witnesses were; they were a 'gift' from abroad" (Interview with Lutheran minister L., 2015). For this church leader, the distinction between traditional churches and religious newcomers justified a two-tiered system of religious freedom. Other Christians agreed that without "smart limitations" on non-traditional religions, the radicalization of religion is inevitable (Interview with Protestant leader S., 2015). Therefore, non-traditional religions should not enjoy the same freedoms as traditional ones.

When asked about the unevenness of religious freedom, another Protestant leader explained: "Of course there are regional differences … but here in our city, there is no oppression of confessions … that is of traditional confessions! There are groups of course whom the government oppresses, such as Jehovah's Witnesses, and their situation is harder … but in terms of traditional religions, there are no problems today" (Interview with Lutheran minister B., 2015). The minister enumerated examples of cooperation and often reminded us during the discussion that his community is thriving and developing networks with other faiths. Yet, when religious groups are branded as non-traditional, or worse as "sects" as in the case of Jehovah's Witnesses, they are met with bureaucratic, legal, and administrative hurdles. These religious groups are regularly denied requests to hold public meetings, and are routinely accused in the media of damaging religious activities. A representative of a Methodist organization explained the difficulties of registering their organization and the arduous process of realizing their charity projects after they were denounced as a "sect" (Interview with Methodist pastor L., 2015). Thus, suggesting that these labels have important consequences on religious communities.

In general, scholars and experts reiterated the variation in religious freedom across the country. One religious expert explained that to understand religious freedom in contemporary Russia we must look not only at the "level of the government," but also at how this principle is applied "in practice" locally (Interview with expert R., 2015). The expert saw this as a process, where "religious freedoms are declared, then assured in practice, and then people recognize (*осознать*) this freedom as well." Another religious scholar retorted about declining freedom in Russia: "we are not happy with the general concept of freedom in Russia today, let alone religious freedom" (interview with religious scholar C., 2015). The scholar listed several reasons for the decline of freedom: intellectuals seldom discuss the issue of religious freedom in Russia and, he believes, this is the time when Russia is actively "reviving traditions and the past" and freedoms are not part of the heritage.

Another legal expert suggested the unevenness of religious freedom on the whims of local government authorities: "when it comes to violations of freedom of religion, what we see is that in different regions there is a 'little Tsar' and depending on their attitude towards certain religious organizations, they are treated differently" (Interview with legal expert Z., 2015). A legal expert added that ambiguities of rules and regulations, together with the lack of independent courts, allow for "discriminatory treatment" of certain religious groups, such as refusal to register non-traditional religions (interview with legal expert R., 2015). What is clear, the expert continued, that religious freedom exists "on the level of government" and "not in practice," as we live in the "times of [religious] pressure (*нагнетание*)" (Interview with legal expert R., 2015). In the meantime, another religious scholar linked the importance of loyalty to religious freedom—maintaining "if you want to be free, you have to be part of the [corporate state of Russia] or the team of the president" (Interview with religious scholar C., 2015). Therefore, when comes to religious freedom, "the key [for religious actors] is to be loyal towards the Russian government" (Interview with expert L., 2015).

A common challenge to covenantal pluralism in Russia, as highlighted in these interviews, is the pervasive imbalance of religious freedom, where Christian minorities must navigate the dominance of the Orthodox Church and an environment with limited opportunities. Respondent openly reflected on suspicions directed at non-traditional religions or "sects" and justified the selective restrictions on religious newcomers. This environment, characterized by distrust, social exclusion, and division, makes it difficult for bottom-up norms of interfaith cooperation and solidarity to take hold.

Navigating Traditional and Non-traditional Labels

A second theme that emerged from the everyday experiences of Christian minorities was the negotiation of traditional and non-traditional

labels. As with religious freedom, respondents suggested that their experiences with these labels are localized and dependent on the historical particularities of a region—that is, in some locales Baptists were classified as a traditional religion, but in others, they were labeled as "sects." Despite these differences, interviews converged on the politicized labels that fostered scrutiny and social intolerance of Christian minorities. This scrutiny meant that church leaders were careful to take steps to "root" their churches locally.

Distrust of non-traditional religions, pejoratively referred to as "sects," was reiterated by several Christians. Jehovah's Witnesses were frequently offered as an example of a non-traditional religion facing state and societal pressure. Jehovah's Witnesses were described as "inappropriate" and "not rooted"; therefore, it was justified to adopt restrictive measures against them to "protect our culture" (Interview with Protestant leader S., 2015). A scholar added that there is a societal consensus that Jehovah's Witnesses are "scary" and that their proselytizing methods, such as passing out religious literature at Metro stations, were not "Russian" (Interview with expert L., 2015). Legal experts suggested that because of social fears, Jehovah's Witnesses face unparalleled restrictions in the country and tend to be linked to extremism (Interview with legal expert Z., 2015; interview with legal expert S., 2015).[5]

Jehovah's Witnesses described the accusations of "extremism" leveled against them as unfounded, pointing to a "proven history of over 100 years of Jehovah's Witness communities in Russia" (Interview with Jehovah's Witness representative I., 2015; interview with Jehovah's Witness leader Y., 2015). As to why Jehovah's Witnesses were singled out and labeled a "sect," one leading figure in their community hypothesized: "Perhaps, we are a good precedent, an example to show to the rest of churches to keep them 'in line', or, alternatively, we are a 'test case' on how to treat something perceived as the 'source of foreign influence' in order to avoid a situation like what happened on Maidan, in Georgia or elsewhere … I repeat, these are just assumptions" (interview with Jehovah's Witness leader Y., 2015).

Considering the negative associations attached to non-traditional religions, we found that Christian minorities also went to great lengths to avoid foreign connections. One Protestant pastor complained about popular perceptions of Protestantism as a foreign faith and the negative consequences of connecting with churches outside of Russia: "for our church, it's Finland [where our connections are] … and when that surfaces, the authorities (*власть*) immediately begin treating us with caution" (Interview with Lutheran pastor B., 2015). In a similar vein, a Methodist pastor discussed how his church had ties in Korea, and the Foreign Agent Law was easily applied to denounce their church as a "danger" (Interview with Methodist pastor D., 2015). It was also evident in interviews that the Russia-Ukraine conflict has profoundly affected Christian minorities in Russia—an important topic that is beyond the scope of this analysis, but that we wish to mention because of the implications for Christian minorities. One Protestant leader explained that having any form of cooperation with their Ukrainian counterparts has put their churches at risk because "the government is afraid that they will bring 'this' ideology to Russia" (Interview with Evangelical leader M., 2015). This tension has meant that Ukrainian pastors in some churches have been encouraged to leave the country. For these reasons, formal associations with Christians outside of Russia have become increasingly rare (Interview with scholar K., 2015; Interview with legal expert S., 2015). Indeed, this has been increasingly the case with the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine War.

Given social perceptions of foreign influence among Christian minorities, we observed a deliberate rooting of churches. A Lutheran minister explicitly linked the acceptance and respect of their church to its publicly acknowledged historical ties: "We are not oppressed, we are not treated as marginals and everyone remembers well that many of the Russian Empresses, were Lutherans—in our city everyone remembers it, maybe in other parts of Russia it is forgotten, but not here!" (Interview of Lutheran minister M., 2015). This local embeddedness—celebration in a variety of

religious communities as part of the fabric of society—gives the Lutheran faith not only legitimacy but also respect. However, one scholar explained that despite deep roots in Russia, Christian minorities remain at risk of being labeled as non-traditional because.

> Non-Orthodox Christians are not well contextualized, historically they are not rooted. Russia's history is intertwined with Orthodox religion … other [religions] were around too, but this is a new discovery and these churches are working on establishing a new concept of Russian history that they are also part of … they are doing it as a response to current situation … [to that end,] they are distancing themselves from other countries and … [develop a vision of the future that is] rooted in the local context and culture. American or other cultures are not relevant for this question, it must be the culture of Russia. (Interview with scholar K., 2015)

While the staff of city administration did not use the label of "traditional religions," instead they used the terminology of "main confessions" (*основные конфессии*), with whom the local authorities developed close and active cooperation (Interview with city administration, 2015). Much of this cooperation centered on celebrating regional and national history and patriotism. When discussing the vibrant inter-faith ties of this city with a local expert, he confirmed that it is "traditional" churches that participate in collaborative activities and round-tables organized by the local authorities, because "non-traditional religious organizations' number of believers is very small and they are not upfront with participation" (Interview with religious expert D., 2015). When pressed further on the issue, the local expert offered that non-traditional religions are rarely invited to participate in inter-faith activities; thus, reinforcing the exclusionary nature of the labels.

These interviews provide a unique window into how traditional and non-traditional labels impact religious life in Russia. They show how Christian minorities actively seek to define themselves as "traditional" because of the privileges that come with this label and avoid the negative connotations of non-traditional faiths. They also demonstrate how politicized labels have come to define a church's position in society and its relationship with the state. The interviews also offer insight into the stark divisions among religious communities, and that non-traditional groups are often excluded from interfaith cooperation and denied access to resources. Such exclusionary practices hinder the development of norms of mutual trust, respect, and understanding at the grassroots, further impeding the prospects for covenantal pluralism.

Conclusion: The Impossibility of Covenantal Pluralism in Contemporary Russia

The findings of this study outline the obstacles to covenantal pluralism in contemporary Russia. We began our analysis by assessing the legal landscape and found formal constitutional protections for religious freedom and diversity. Despite that, the entrenchment of Orthodox Christianity as the *de facto* religion creates an uneven playing field for other religious communities. We demonstrated that the top-down distinction between "traditional" and "non-traditional" faiths divides religious groups between those seen as rooted and patriotic and those perceived as foreign and threatening to the state and society. The legal and symbolic privileges accorded to Orthodox Christianity, and to a lesser extent other "traditional" faiths, in turn, perpetuate a religious hierarchy that impedes the development of genuine interfaith cooperation and solidarity.

We compared the everyday experiences of Christian minority churches to shed light on how this uneven terrain is navigated. Here, we showed stark differences in the perceptions and experiences of religious freedom between traditional and non-traditional religions. For traditional religions, religious freedom and respect have increased in recent years, as many suggested, while non-traditional religions

continue to experience oppression. We further demonstrated that many Christian minorities attempt to root themselves in Russian society to avoid negative labels, while others remain under suspicion or are outright marginalized, as exemplified by the experiences of Jehovah's Witnesses. This fragmented and inequal environment hinders the development of covenantal pluralism.

Ultimately, our analysis revealed that the politicization of religious life undermines efforts to create a normative culture of reciprocal commitment and equality among religious communities at the grassroots. The current system reinforces division and competition rather than neighborly solidarity. In this system, religious communities are shaped by a political climate that is deeply suspicious of foreign influence. This suspicion impacts Christian minorities, who are branded as foreign and unpatriotic, regardless of their lineage or history in Russia. Therefore, unlike more optimistic assessments for covenantal pluralism that suggest Russian society will develop in line with "the world outlook of tolerance and eclecticism" (Stolbov 2015, 178), we see significant barriers that must be overcome. Without major changes to how religious rights are protected and practiced as well as how minority faiths are perceived and treated by state and societal actors, covenantal pluralism will remain out of reach in Russia. ❖

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Notes

1. Fieldwork was conducted in St. Petersburg, Nizhny Novgorod, and Moscow during 2015 and supported by the Templeton Religion Trust. This includes interviews with traditional and non-traditional religious leaders, scholars, lawyers, experts, and government officials (IRB #01122015.011). This included interviews with church leaders from Russian Orthodox, Old Believer, Roman Catholic, Protestant (Baptist, Charismatic, Evangelical, Lutheran, Methodist, Pentecostal, and Seventh Day Adventists) and Jehovah's Witnesses churches. The identifying information of respondents has been omitted or changed. Following Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine, additional fieldwork has been impossible due to political and travel restrictions. Despite the time elapsed, the interviews are a valuable source of information and provide critical insights into the experiences of religious communities and the challenges to the development of covenantal pluralism.
2. The Constitution of the Russian Federation was adopted in 1993 and last amended in 2020. The translation of the constitution is available at http://www.constitution.ru/en/10003000-03.htm.
3. Other religious communities, such as Catholics, Pentecostals, and Baptists were active during the Soviet Union, but not legally registered by Soviet authorities and, therefore, ineligible to use Russia or any of its derivatives in their name.
4. During the ceremony, Putin honored "outstanding citizens of Russia, whose work, feat, and selfless service to the Fatherland make a noticeable, bright contribution to the development of our state" (The President of Russia 2023).
5. Jehovah's Witnesses were banned in Russia in 2017 for being an "extremist" organization.

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