Russian Orthodox church: early history and art

Russian Orthodox church is largest autocephalous, or ecclesiastically independent, Eastern Orthodox church in the world. Its membership is estimated at between 40 and 80 million. Internet resources on Christianity are available from the Russian Christian Home Page (English and Russian versions), courtesy of Oleg Voskresensky (vosole@bethel.edu)

Removal of the empire's capital from Rome to Constantinople, the "second Rome," in 330 greatly strengthened the temporal power of the bishop of Rome. In the Byzantine Empire the patriarch of Constantinople remained under the political control of the Christian emperor. Cultural, political, philosophical, and theological differences strained relations between the two cities. Rome

demanded Latin as the one ecclesiastical language, but Constantinople encouraged national languages for the liturgy and emphasized translation of the Scriptures. In 1054 leaders of the two bodies excommunicated each other.

One reflection of growing difficulties lay in counterclaims to pursue mission in and hold the allegiance of border areas between the two jurisdictions. Rostislav of Great Moravia sought help from the Emperor, who (presumably through the Patriarch) in about 862 sent two brothers, Constantine (later called Cyril; c. 827-869) and Methodius (c. 825-884), from Constantinople to Moravia. They provided Scriptures and liturgy in the mother tongue of each people evangelized. They also trained others in their methods--a major factor in winning Bulgaria.

Constantinople's greatest mission outreach was to areas known as Kievan Rus that later became Russia. Christianity was apparently introduced into Kievan Rus by Greek missionaries from Byzantium in the 9th century. An organized Christian community is known to have existed at Kiev as early as the first half of the 10th century, and in 957 Olga, the regent of Kiev, was baptized in Constantinople. Undoubtedly influenced by his Christian grandmother and by a proposed marriage alliance with the Byzantine imperial family, Olga's grandson Vladimir I (c. 956-1015) prince of Kiev, from among several options, chose the Byzantine rite. Baptized in 988, he led the Kievans to Christianity. His son Yaroslav encouraged translations and built monasteries.

Under Vladimir's successors, and until 1448, the Russian church was headed by the metropolitans of Kiev (who after 1328 resided in Moscow) and formed a metropolitanate of the Byzantine patriarchate.

While Russia lay under Mongol rule from the 13th (Genghis Khan's army entered Russia in 1220s) through the 15th century, the Russian church enjoyed a favoured position, obtaining immunity from taxation in 1270. This period saw a remarkable growth of monasticism. The Monastery of the Caves (Pecherska Lavra) in Kiev, founded in the mid-11th century by the ascetics St. Anthony and St. Theodosius, was superseded as the foremost religious centre by the Monastery of the Holy Trinity, which was founded in the mid-14th century by St. Sergius of Radonezh (in what is now the city of Sergiev Posad). Sergius, as well as the metropolitans St.Peter (1308-26) and St. Alexius (1354-78), supported the rising power of the principality of Moscow. Finally, in 1448 the Russian bishops elected their own patriarch without recourse to Constantinople, and the Russian church was thenceforth autocephalous. In 1589 Job, the metropolitan of Moscow, was elevated to the position of patriarch with the approval of Constantinople and received the fifth rank in honour after the patriarchs of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem.

In the mid-17th century the Russian Orthodox patriarch Nikon came into violent conflict with the Russian tsar Alexis. Nikon, pursuing the ideal of a theocratic state, attempted to establish the primacy of the Orthodox church over the state in Russia, and he also undertook a thorough revision of Russian Orthodox texts and rituals to bring them into accord with the rest of Eastern Orthodoxy. Nikon was deposed in 1666, but the Russian church retained his reforms and anathematized those who continued to oppose them; the latter became known as Old Believers and formed a vigorous body of dissenters within the Russian Orthodox church for the next two centuries.

After Constantinople fell to the Turks in 1453, Russia continued for several centuries to develop a national art that had grown out of the middle Byzantine period. During the 10th-15th centuries, Russian art had begun to show marked local variation from the Byzantine model, and after the fall of Constantinople it continued along these distinctive lines of development. This period of Russian art, which lasted until the adoption of western European culture in the 18th century, is also known as the Moscow or National period. You can browse miscellaneous icons, XV-XIX centuries (index of inline images, maintained by the Christian Orthodox Page).

After the hegemony in the world of Orthodox Christianity shifted to Muscovite Russia, Moscow, having become the new city of Constantine--the "third Rome"--and aspiring to rival the older centres of culture, launched a building program commensurate with its international importance.

The Kremlin and two of its important churches were rebuilt by Italian architects between 1475 and 1510. These churches, the Assumption (Uspensky) Cathedral and the Cathedral of St. Michael the Archangel, were largely modeled after the churches of Vladimir. The Italians were required to incorporate the basic features of Byzantine planning and design into the new cathedrals; it was only in the exterior decoration of St. Michael the Archangel that they succeeded in introducing Italian decorative motifs. A third church, the modest Annunciation Cathedral (1484-89), with its warm beauty, was the work of Pskov architects. There the kokoshniki were introduced in the treatment of the roof. This element, similar in outline to the popular Russian bochka roof (pointed on top, with the sides forming a continuous double curve, concave above and convex below), foreshadowed a tendency to replace the forms of the Byzantine arch by more elongated silhouettes. Ecclesiastical architecture began to lose the special features associated with the Byzantine heritage, becoming more national in character and increasingly permeated with the taste and thought of the people. The most important change in Russian church design of the 16th century was the introduction of the tiered tower and the tent-shaped roof first developed in wood by Russia's carpenters. Next was the substitution of the bulb-shaped spire for the traditional Byzantine cupola. This affected the design of masonry architecture by transforming its proportions and decoration and even its structural methods. The buildings acquired a dynamic, exteriorized articulation and specifically Russian national characteristics.

The boldest departures from Byzantine architecture were the churches of the Ascension at Kolomenskoye (1532) and the Decapitation of St. John the Baptist at Dyakovo (c. 1532) and, above all, the Cathedral of St. Basil (Vasily) the Blessed (or, the Pokrovsky Cathedral) in Moscow, 1554-60. In St. Basil the western academic architectural concepts, based on rational, manifest harmony, were ignored; the structure, with no easily readable design and a profusion of disparate colourful exterior decoration, is uniquely medieval Russian in content and form, in technique, decoration, and feeling. St. Basil, like its predecessors the churches at Kolomenskoye and Dyakovo, embodies the characteristic features of the wood churches of northern Russia, translated into masonry. An effective finishing touch was given to the ensemble of the Kremlin's Cathedral Square by the erection of the imposing Belfry of Ivan II the Great, begun in 1542. The colossal white stone "column of fame," with its golden cupola gleaming above the Kremlin hill, was the definite expression of an era, reflecting the tastes and grandiose political ambitions of the rising Russian state.

The basic types and structural forms of the Russian multicolumned and tented churches were fully developed in the 16th century. It remained for the next century to concentrate its efforts on the refinement of those forms and on the embellishment of the facades. The tent spires degenerated into mere decoration; they were used as exterior ornamental features set loosely in numbers over gabled roofs and on top of roof vaulting (Church of the Nativity in Putinki in Moscow, 1649-52). This decorative use of the formerly functional element was combined with the liberal employment of the kokoshnik. The latter, in converging and ascending tiers and in diversified shapes and arrangements, was used as a decorative screen for the drumlike bases of the spires and sometimes as parapets over the cornices. At the same time the formerly large expanses of unbroken wall surfaces (of the Novgorod-Pskov architectural traditions) were replaced by rich decorative paneling. Polychromy asserted itself: coloured and glazed tile and carved stone ornament, used in combination with brick patterns, were employed extensively. This was especially evidenced in a large group of Yaroslavl churches.