

Patrick Grubbs

Religious Freedom and the Swedish Lutheran Church of St. Katarina

Recognized by many as a fundamental human right, religious freedom implies that a person can hold and openly express any spiritual belief. This includes:

wearing religious dress or symbols; observing dietary restrictions; participating in rituals associated with certain stages of life; possessing property rights regarding meeting places; and maintaining the freedom to manage religious institutions, possess, publish, and distribute liturgical and educational materials, and raise one's children in the religious teachings and practice of one's choice (Reese).

Located in the center of St. Petersburg, the Swedish-Lutheran Church of St. Katarina stands as a symbol of the changing attitudes toward religious freedom in Russia. Initially the Church was as a place of worship for Swedes living in St. Petersburg; later it became a Soviet-controlled non-religious building and now finally is a building that provides a place of worship for minority religions that might otherwise not have any place to go. By looking at the history of the Swedish Lutheran Church of St. Katarina we can see how religious freedom and oppression has shifted throughout Russian history because of changes in government and attitudes toward religion.

The Church's history

Sweden and Russia have a long history of contention. The area around the Neva River, which runs through St. Petersburg, has been home to a variety of ethnic groups, although it has belonged to Russia since around the ninth century. In 1240, the Swedish army invaded Russia near St. Petersburg. The Russian troops from Novgorod fought and

conquered the Swedes on July 15, 1240 in the Battle of the Neva. Years later, during the first part of the 17th century, Russia was weak. Tsar Fedor Ivanovich had died without an heir. The Swedes took advantage of this weakness and took over much of northwestern Russia. In 1617, the Stolbovo treaty established a new Swedish-Russian border and the Neva River became Swedish territory. This territory remained under Swedish control until the end of the century when Peter the Great turned things back around. Wanting access to the Baltic Sea for trade purposes, Peter the Great started the Northern War to regain the territory from Sweden. In May 1703, three years after the Northern War began, the Swedish fort of Nienchanz surrendered to the Russians. To defend the area from future attacks by the Swedes, the Peter and Paul fortress was built and the city of St. Petersburg was founded. By 1712 the city had grown large and had become the new Russian capital. The Swedish army launched an unsuccessful invasion of Russia again in 1709. In 1721, two decades after the war started, the Nistadt Peace Treaty was signed, which gave Russia control over the Baltic and the city of St. Petersburg.

After the Northern War, there were many Swedes left in St. Petersburg as prisoners of war. After the relationship between Russia and Sweden became less contentious, many Swedes came to St. Petersburg to work voluntarily. Because of this, the architecture of many of the buildings in St. Petersburg, such as Peter Paul Fortress and the Peterhof summer palace, have a strong Swedish influence.

Some of the large number of Swedes in St. Petersburg founded the Swedish-Lutheran Church of St. Katarina, the oldest non-Orthodox church in St. Petersburg. The Church was founded in 1703—the same year as the city itself. The congregation of the

Church of St. Katarina was originally made up of Swedes and Swedish-speaking Finns. The Church had no building for the first thirty years of its existence. But in 1733 the Church received land in the center of the city and the Church of St. Anna was built. Due to conflict within the congregation between the Swedish and Finnish speaking members, the congregation split ten years after the original church building was erected. In 1769, the Swedish members built the original building of the Church of St. Katarina, but the current building, designed by Carl Andersson, was constructed in 1865. Andersson was born in Stockholm, but raised in St. Petersburg.

Religion in pre-Soviet Russia

During the 1700s non-Orthodox churches in St. Petersburg were rare. The population of Russia was overwhelmingly Russian Orthodox. Of the many religious buildings constructed during the 18th century in St. Petersburg, most are Orthodox. Some of the greatest landmarks in the city—St. Isaac's Cathedral, Smolnii Convent, Kazan Cathedral—are Orthodox buildings. Churches such as the Catholic Church of St. Catherine and the Swedish Lutheran Church existed, but were few in number.

In Tsarist Russia, religion was closely tied to the state. The Tsar was believed to be a ruler ordained by God. It was difficult to distinguish the Russian government from the Orthodox Church because they were so closely tied. Orthodoxy held major advantages over any other religion: the royal family had to be Orthodox and it was the only religion that was allowed to proselytize. Converting to another religion from Orthodoxy was illegal and resulted in severe punishment. The Orthodox Church had great political influence. Membership in the Church was taken as a sign of political loyalty and was necessary for

social mobility and financial prosperity (Geraci 4). In summary, while minority religions were allowed to exist, they were not treated equally under the law, and members of various religions did not enjoy the same rights and freedoms as others. In other words, the people may have been allowed to hold any beliefs they chose, but not everyone was allowed to express them fully.

Religion in the Soviet Union

After the fall of the Tsar and the establishment of the Soviet Union, religion took on a different role. Karl Marx, author of the *Communist Manifesto*—the book from which Lenin’s idea for a new Russia was taken—believed that religion was “the opium of the people” (Dixon). The communists wanted a new form of government in Russia, with equality for everyone. Religion was seen as a tool of the bourgeois, defending exploitation and working against the working class.

The state separated itself from the church and religion was no longer taught in schools. The government disseminated anti-religious propaganda, but religion was not outlawed until 1929, when the government began to close churches by force. A five-year plan was developed for abolishing religion. If the plan were successful, not a single house of worship would remain at the end of the five-year period. In fact, the very concept of God, believed to be an “instrument of oppression of the working masses” (Dixon), would not remain in the Soviet Union at all. Beginning in 1917, anti-religious policies forced churches to hand over property to the government. Congregations could make arrangements with the local government to use churches for worship, but they could not oppose the use of church buildings for other purposes, such as for movies and dances. Former clergy became

second class citizens in the Soviet Union. They received little or no rations, and their children did not have access to education in secondary schools and universities. Public religious instruction was forbidden; as was religious instructions to groups of people under eighteen years of age (Timasheff 26). Later, churches were forced to surrender their sacred items to the government. Resistance to these anti-religious measures meant execution, exile, and imprisonment. Religious freedom was essentially non-existent during the Soviet era. Not only were people of various religions not given equal rights, but any person belonging to any religion was subject to severe punishment.

This restriction of religious freedom is reflected in the history of the Swedish-Lutheran Church. The Church of St. Katarina is one of the many church buildings that was taken over by the government and repurposed for non-religious use during the Soviet Union. In 1932, the Church of St. Katarina ceased to function as a church, yet remained in use until 1960 as a warehouse and office building. In 1962 the building became the Miagkova Sports School. The building was renovated and a second floor was added. These changes remain in place today. The wooden floor of the second story is covered in colored lines to mark the court where classes were held for basketball and other athletic games during the Soviet Union. Off to the side there are bars installed along the walls for ballet practice. The building also housed wrestling classes. In 1993, after the fall of the Soviet Union, the building was finally returned through a decree signed by Mikhail Gorbachev to the church for its original religious use.

Religion in Russia today

In Russia today there is technically no official religion. All religions are officially equal before the law and the government is not allowed to interfere in religion. This law, however, is not always respected. In practice, the Russian Orthodox Church has gone back to being tied to the government more than any other religion. The Church has several formal and informal agreements with the government that allow it better access to public institutions like schools, hospitals, prisons, etc. The Russian Orthodox Church is given the use of public schools after hours for religious instruction. Many public schools offer a class on Russian Orthodoxy and in some regions this class is required. For many religions other than the Russian Orthodox Church, the government makes it difficult to register with the state, to obtain land or permits to build houses of worship, or to renew leases. Attacks and vandalism against religious minorities are rarely prosecuted. While religious freedom has improved in Russia since the collapse of the Soviet Union, whether or not it is better than it was before the October Revolution is debatable. People technically have the right to hold whichever beliefs they please, but if their beliefs do not adhere to the Russian Orthodox Church, these people are not given as many rights nor are they protected from persecution.

Twenty years after the end of the Soviet Union and the return of the Swedish-Lutheran Church of St. Katarina to its congregation, the state of the church building is starting to reflect changes in religious freedom. Although the Church still has the added second story, the basketball court lines on the floor and the ballet bars on the walls, the building now functions as a church. The Church receives financial help from the Swedish Consulate General, which is located just across the street, to buy furniture and books, and

to pay for utilities. The Church also participates in cultural events put on by the consulate, such as festivals and holidays. Plans are currently underway to begin work on restoring the building to its original state. Vitalii Hasselblad, whose family hails from Sweden but has lived in St. Petersburg for generations, is in charge of the renovations. His ancestors served as pastors at St. Katherina and donated about 500 Swedish books to the church's library, where he now acts as librarian. According to Hasselblad, the second floor of the church will be removed. The large window in front, which was enclosed during Soviet times, will be opened and other changes will be made so that the Church of St. Katherina will be restored to the way it was before it was taken over by the state.

Today there are about 250 people, or 110 families, who attend services at St. Katherina's. Many are descendants of Swedes who came to work in Russia; others are simply people interested in Swedish culture. Most members of the congregation are adults. When the Church first began to function again after the fall of the Soviet Union, most of the congregation were elderly people who had been to St. Katherina's before religion was outlawed and the building was converted into a sports facility. But now an increasing number of youth are beginning to attend. Because the building is both a historical site and a place of worship, many tourists visit St. Katherina's as well. About twenty groups arrive each day from all over the world. The Church hosts religious services for both adults and children, offers Sunday school classes, and has libraries with Christian and Swedish literature. There is a choir that practices and performs at St. Katherina's.

The Church of St. Katarina also rents out the building for use by other religions, perhaps in part because of the difficulty non-Orthodox religions have in obtaining land and

building permits. According to Dmitrii Frolov, the pastor of an Evangelical Christian Baptist church that rents space from the Swedish-Lutheran Church, they rent because of the convenient location and because of the difficulty and high costs of land and building materials. They have no immediate plans to construct a church building of their own.

Conclusion

The Swedish-Lutheran Church of St. Katarina is a symbol of the history of religious freedom in Russia. The church is a reminder of the history between Sweden and Russia, of the change brought about by the Soviet Union, and of the struggle for religious freedom even today. When the church was founded in the 1700s, Russia was a country with little religious diversity. The Church of St. Katarina was a lone Lutheran church in a city full of Orthodox cathedrals. The Church started as a place for the Swedish-speaking people of St. Petersburg to gather together and worship during a time when non-orthodox religions were allowed, but uncommon. With the abolishment of religious freedom during the Soviet era, the Church of St. Katharina ceased to function as a religious building and became a secular, state-owned facility. And now that religious freedom in Russia is back, but struggling, the Church serves as a meeting place for its own congregation and for those who, due to the supreme position of the Orthodox Church with the government, have no way of getting a building of their own.

Bibliography

Dixon, Paul. "Religion in the Soviet Union—Part One." In *Defence of Marxism*. 1 Aug 2014.

<<http://www.marxist.com/religion-soviet-union170406.htm>>.

Frolov, Dmitrii. "Evangelical Baptist Church." E-mail interview. 29 July 2014.

Geraci, Robert P., and Michael Khodarkovsky. *Of Religion and Empire: Missions,*

Conversion, and Tolerance in Tsarist Russia. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2001. Print.

"International Religious Freedom Report 2007." U.S. Department of State. 1 Aug 2014.

<<http://www.state.gov/j/drl/rls/irf/2007/90196.htm#>>.

Jangfeldt, Bengt. "Sweden and Saint Petersburg." Consulate General of Sweden. N.p., n.d.

Web. 15 Mar. 2014. <[http://www.swedenabroad.com/Embassies/Saint-](http://www.swedenabroad.com/Embassies/Saint-Petersburg/About-Sweden/Sweden-and-Saint-Petersburg/)

[Petersburg/About-Sweden/Sweden-and-Saint-Petersburg/](http://www.swedenabroad.com/Embassies/Saint-Petersburg/About-Sweden/Sweden-and-Saint-Petersburg/)>.

Reese, Thomas. "Religious Freedom Is a Fundamental Human Right." *National Catholic*

Reporter. N.p., 16 May 2014. Web. 25 Sept. 2014.

"Religion in Russia and the Soviet Union, to 1945." *Macrohistory and World Timeline*. 1

Aug. 2014. <<http://www.fsmitha.com/h2/ussr3.htm>>.

"Swedish Community in Spb." Swedish Community in Spb. N.p., n.d. Web. 22 Apr. 2014.

<http://webstudio.il4u.org.il/projects/_spb/spholswed/swed/eng/obsh.htm>.

Timasheff, Nicholas S. *Religion in Soviet Russia, 1917-1942*. New York: Sheed & Ward,

1942. Print.

Vitalii Hasselblad. "Swedish-Lutheran Church." Personal interview. 18 June 2014.

"When and How Was St. Petersburg Founded?" When and How Was St. Petersburg
Founded? N.p., n.d. Web. 22 Apr. 2014. <[http://www.saint-
petersburg.com/history/foundation.asp](http://www.saint-petersburg.com/history/foundation.asp)>.