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Pilgrims and Persecutions

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Introduction

This book examines a paradox at the heart of the twentieth century: how faith communities, and especially the Russian Orthodox Church, endured and adapted under a state committed to building a godless society. The Soviet project sought not merely to privatize belief but to replace it, to forge new rituals, new loyalties, and a new moral grammar. Yet across seven decades, believers remained, practices resurfaced, and identities evolved in ways that neither officials nor clergy could fully script. “Pilgrims and Persecutions” offers a balanced account of this contested terrain, tracing how coercion and accommodation intertwined and how sacred life persisted in registers both public and private.

The narrative begins in revolution, when the collapse of imperial authority unsettled every institution, including the Church that had long been intertwined with the throne. Early decrees on church-state separation stripped religious bodies of legal privileges and property, while local activists sought to recast streets, calendars, and classrooms in secular terms. The 1920s witnessed experiments on all sides: the state’s shifting tactics, ecclesiastical schisms like Renovationism, and parishes learning to navigate new rules of registration, taxation, and surveillance. Even in these harsh conditions, the rhythms of baptism, marriage, and burial did not disappear; they moved, sometimes awkwardly, into new spaces and codes.

The 1930s brought intensified pressure—collectivization, campaigns against “superstition,” mass closures of churches, arrest of clergy, and the terror that turned many sacred landscapes into absences. Yet persecution did not yield the atheized society planners anticipated. Suppression often fragmented religious life, but it also produced new forms of solidarity: clandestine worship, household piety, and the quiet authority of grandmothers and lay catechists who kept prayers, icons, and narratives alive. War altered the balance yet again. In the crucible of 1941–45, the state rediscovered the mobilizing value of tradition and permitted a limited restoration of ecclesiastical structures, even as control remained tight.

Late Stalinism and the ensuing decades reveal the “gray zone” that is central to this study. Belief neither vanished nor openly dominated; it endured through routines of petitioning, compromise, and tacit understandings. The Khrushchev-era offensive against religion closed thousands of churches and intensified propaganda, but it also exposed the limits of administrative atheism. In schools, factories, and collective farms, atheistic instruction coexisted with persistent rites of passage and the stubborn eloquence of sacred art and music. Meanwhile, specialists in “scientific atheism” built institutes and curricula that sought to rationalize disbelief—efforts that sometimes refined, rather than erased, the very questions religion posed.

By the 1970s and 1980s, activism and conscience-based dissent brought new pressures and possibilities. Samizdat circulated reports of violations and testimonies of faith; international agreements on human rights created leverage that believers and their allies learned to use. Inside parishes, everyday negotiations with local officials defined what could be sung, when candles could be lit, and how youth might be catechized. The millennium of the Baptism of Rus' in 1988 symbolized a carefully managed revival, illuminating both the tenacity of memory and the state's desire to choreograph it. Perestroika finally widened public space for religion, opening archives, restoring buildings, and revealing the extent of both damage and resilience.

This is not a triumphalist tale, nor is it a simple ledger of oppression. It is a social history of entanglement, where policies made in Moscow were refracted through provincial offices and parish councils, and where the boundaries between private devotion and public performance shifted over time. While the Orthodox Church provides the spine of the narrative, comparative glimpses of other confessions—Old Believers, Baptists, Catholics, Muslims, and Jews—highlight themes shared across communities: the improvisation of ritual, the authority of elders, the politics of memory, and the elasticity of identity. Sources include state decrees, police and administrative files, episcopal correspondence, parish registers, antireligious periodicals, memoirs, oral histories, and the material traces of worship itself.

The chapters that follow move chronologically while pausing for thematic depth: the making of militant atheism, the reinvention of ritual, women's domestic piety, clandestine monasticism, the cultural life of icons and sacred music, and the moral economies that sustained communities under pressure. Together they illuminate how people learned to inhabit contradictions—attending May Day parades and Easter liturgies, reciting oaths to the socialist future while preserving memories of saints and martyrs. By attending to these everyday negotiations alongside high policy, this book seeks to explain not only how religion survived but how it changed: leaner in some places, more public in others, and everywhere marked by the experience of rule.

"Pilgrims and Persecutions" invites readers to consider a broader question that extends beyond the Soviet case: what becomes of belief when the state claims the power to define meaning? The answer offered here is neither the inevitability of secularization nor the certainty of religious resurgence. Rather, it is the story of contested sovereignties—of bodies, buildings, calendars, and consciences—and of the men and women who, in fear and hope, negotiated them. If the Soviet project aspired to close the sacred, its history reveals instead a complicated persistence: faith communities diminished yet durable, transformed yet recognizable, never fully within the grasp of those who sought to govern their souls.

CHAPTER ONE: Revolution and Reverence: 1917 and the Shattering of Sacred Order

The year 1917 began in candle smoke and ended in gunpowder, with the Russian Empire caught between old prayers and new proclamations. Across a vast geography of villages, factories, and garrison towns, February pulled the rug from under tsarist rule as bread riots swelled into street demonstrations and then into mutiny among troops who once swore loyalty in the name of God and autocrat. By autumn, another revolution had scrambled meanings again, bringing slogans about workers, peasants, and a radical future that had little patience for the ecclesiastical calendar. Between these upheavals, authority cracked, and the Orthodox Church, which had worn imperial purple as comfortably as vestments, suddenly found itself stripped of guarantees, its bishops and parish priests no longer sure whether they were guardians of order or relics of a dying regime. The sacred order did not vanish overnight, but it fractured visibly along streets where processions once marched and posters now shouted competing promises.

In the capitals, the mood shifted like weather over the Neva, brisk one day and stormy the next. Liberals imagined a constitutional arrangement in which the Church would step politely aside from government, while radicals dreamed of a society reorganized from the cell outward, with rituals remade to fit new allegiances. The Provisional Government abolished censorship of religious publications, allowed seminaries some autonomy, and spoke of civil liberties that included worship, but it could not feed cities or calm front lines, and its authority drifted like thistledown. In parishes, clergy weighed whether to bless demonstrations or preach order, and many concluded they could do both, sprinkling holy water on soldiers while mourning the collapse of predictability. The air became dense with pamphlets and proclamations, and even Easter, usually a reliable marker of continuity, felt like a contest as choirs sang amid rumors of land seizures and factory takeovers.

When the Bolsheviks seized power in October, they did so with a crispness that startled even their allies. Soviets, they claimed, would govern in the name of workers and peasants, and their first decrees aimed to strip old privileges from church and crown alike. The Constituent Assembly, elected and dispersed within days, became a thumbnail lesson in how quickly majorities could be dissolved. Meanwhile, the new People's Commissariat for Enlightenment began thinking about schools without catechism, and committees drafted plans to confiscate property that had long escaped taxation. Clergy who once relied on status and deference found themselves negotiating with commissars who spoke of class struggle and historical necessity. The Church was not outlawed, but it was made peripheral by design, and the tools for

doing so—decrees on land, on marriage, on education—were already being sharpened.

In the countryside, where most Russians still lived, the calendar of saints and seasons held practical sway. Peasants measured time by fasts and feast days, and village churches anchored routines of birth, marriage, and death. The revolution did not erase these habits, but it unsettled the social soil in which they grew. Land committees appeared, and manor houses were occupied, and questions followed about who owned the fields and who owned the churches that stood beside them. Some villagers shrugged and divided property with a logic born of scarcity, while others defended icons and bells as if they were family silver. A priest who had preached deference to landlords could suddenly be asked to preach deference to no one, and many chose discretion, trimming sermons to fit smaller certainties.

Cities offered a different texture of change. Workers and soldiers formed committees that claimed the right to inspect bank accounts, warehouses, and even parish ledgers. The smell of coal and wet wool mingled with the scent of melted candle wax as churches were commandeered for meetings, first aid stations, or storage. Clergy who had expected deference found themselves answering to skeptical audiences, and not all conversations ended politely. Yet even amid suspicion, routines persisted: women brought embroidered cloths to be blessed, and infants were carried to the font, as if sacraments were private languages that public tumult could not translate. The rhythm of worship did not stop, but it learned to step quietly.

The Orthodox hierarchy faced its own reckoning. At the center stood the Most Holy Governing Synod, inherited from Peter the Great, an institution designed to manage the Church as an arm of the state. With the monarchy gone, the synod lacked an emperor to legitimate it, and its members hesitated, caught between defending tradition and avoiding provocation. When the Bolsheviks abolished the Synod and promised a council to decide the Church's future, some bishops welcomed the chance to think anew, while others sensed a trap. The idea of a council, long deferred by imperial management, now glimmered with possibility and peril, as competing factions lined up to argue about authority, reform, and obedience.

Patriarch Tikhon, elected in the autumn of 1917 after a long vacancy, brought to the role a mixture of pastoral calm and administrative inexperience. He had traveled widely as a bishop and understood the provinces, but the storm he now faced was unlike any he had known. His first messages urged restraint, calling on clergy to avoid inflaming passions and on laity to respect lawful authority, a category that was rapidly shrinking in definition. He tried to hold the Church together as dioceses fractured along lines of politics and personality, and he did so with a patience that looked like passivity to radicals and like cunning to conservatives. The patriarchate, restored after decades of bureaucratic rule, was both a symbol and a target, and Tikhon soon learned that symbols attract fire.

Beyond the hierarchy, everyday believers improvised. Households hid icons behind curtains as soldiers searched for weapons and valuables. Lay readers kept services alive when clergy were absent or afraid. Choirs practiced hymns in cellars, and parish councils counted coins not for candles alone but for lawyers' fees and bribes, though they would not have called them that. The language of faith did not disappear; it migrated into smaller gestures, like crossing oneself before a meal in a communal apartment, or whispering a prayer before a factory shift. These acts were not dramatic, and they left few records, but they accumulated like frost on glass, barely visible until the pane cracked.

The revolution also opened a door for voices long muffled. Women, who had borne the brunt of household piety, now organized study circles and coops, sometimes using religious networks to trade favors and news. Workers who once knelt now addressed meetings, and a few tried to square the circle by arguing that Christianity and socialism shared a concern for the poor. National minorities, from Poles to Muslims, tested how much autonomy they could claim in a state that promised self-determination but feared fragmentation. Even Old Believers, long marginalized for their stubborn rites, peeked out from their enclaves to see if the air had changed. The landscape of belief became crowded, contested, and experimental.

By year's end, Russia had two capitals and two calendars, one civil and one still stubbornly liturgical, and the gap between them was widening. The Bolsheviks closed the Constituent Assembly, declared a unilateral peace, and began nationalizing banks and land, acts that stripped the Church of legal protections and revenue. Yet they did not yet launch a frontal assault on worship itself; instead, they removed its scaffolding—property, courts, schools—and waited to see what remained. The Church responded with declarations of loyalty to the people, careful not to mention the old regime, and by calling on believers to endure with dignity. These declarations were published, debated, and sometimes torn down, a sign that words, too, had become provisional.

The shattering of sacred order was not only a matter of decrees and demonstrations. It was also a matter of symbols rearranged. Streets named for saints acquired new titles honoring revolutionaries, and frescoed walls in requisitioned churches were whitewashed to display slogans about science and labor. Calendars were redrawn, and holidays shifted, so that May Day began to compete with Easter for public energy. Yet the old feasts lingered in kitchens and courtyards, celebrated quietly or retooled as cultural events, a way to keep time without invoking the forbidden. This bending of time would become a habit of Soviet life, practiced by officials and ordinary people alike.

In the provinces, the picture was uneven. Some towns saw churches vandalized by zealous committees, while others negotiated uneasy truces in which clergy agreed to

register sermons and officials agreed not to interfere with funerals. A bishop might travel for days through mud and snow to assert authority, only to find his diocese running on rumor and improvised liturgies. The railway, newly nationalized and unreliable, carried both commissars and pilgrims, and at stations one could overhear arguments about God, grain, and the price of boots. Geography shaped faith as much as policy, and the sheer size of Russia ensured that no campaign could be applied with uniform force.

Internationally, the revolution rippled through Orthodox communities abroad, from Constantinople to New York. Emigre bishops watched with alarm as reports arrived of requisitions and arrests, and they began to organize aid and to claim the mantle of legitimate authority. These diaspora voices would later matter, but in 1917 they were already tuning their instruments, preparing for a long debate about who spoke for Russian Orthodoxy in a land that no longer had a tsar. The question of legitimacy—who could ordain, who could own, who could speak—would shadow the Church for years.

The year closed with hunger sharpening its teeth and with the Constituent Assembly a memory. The Orthodox Church had lost its imperial partner, but it had not yet learned its new partner's name. It stood, like many institutions, on one foot planted in memory and the other in improvisation. The faithful still knelt, still gave alms, still brought their children to the font, but now they did so knowing that the rules could change by morning. The revolution had not destroyed reverence, but it had made reverence portable, something to carry carefully through streets that no longer recognized its language.

This first year set patterns that would repeat in sharper forms: the clash between doctrine and decree, the migration of piety into private spaces, and the stubborn endurance of ritual even when stripped of legal standing. It also revealed a truth that would become clearer with time: that the state could dismantle institutions but could not easily dismantle habits, especially habits that were woven into birth, love, and grief. Faith communities learned to shrink without vanishing, to adapt without surrendering, and to wait for the next turn of the screw.

As 1917 gave way to 1918, the calendar advanced, but the questions remained. Who would define the sacred in a land rebuilding itself? How would priests and commissars share the same streets? And what would become of the millions who believed not because of law but because of longing? These were not abstract puzzles for bureaucrats but daily negotiations for midwives, soldiers, choir directors, and secretaries. The revolution had cracked the mirror of sacred order, and in its shards, people glimpsed both danger and possibility, a world in which faith might have to learn new accents and new silences to survive.

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