

The Economist

In Religion and Economics, Cause and Effect Are Very Hard to Prove

Linking Eastern Christianity with politics and economics

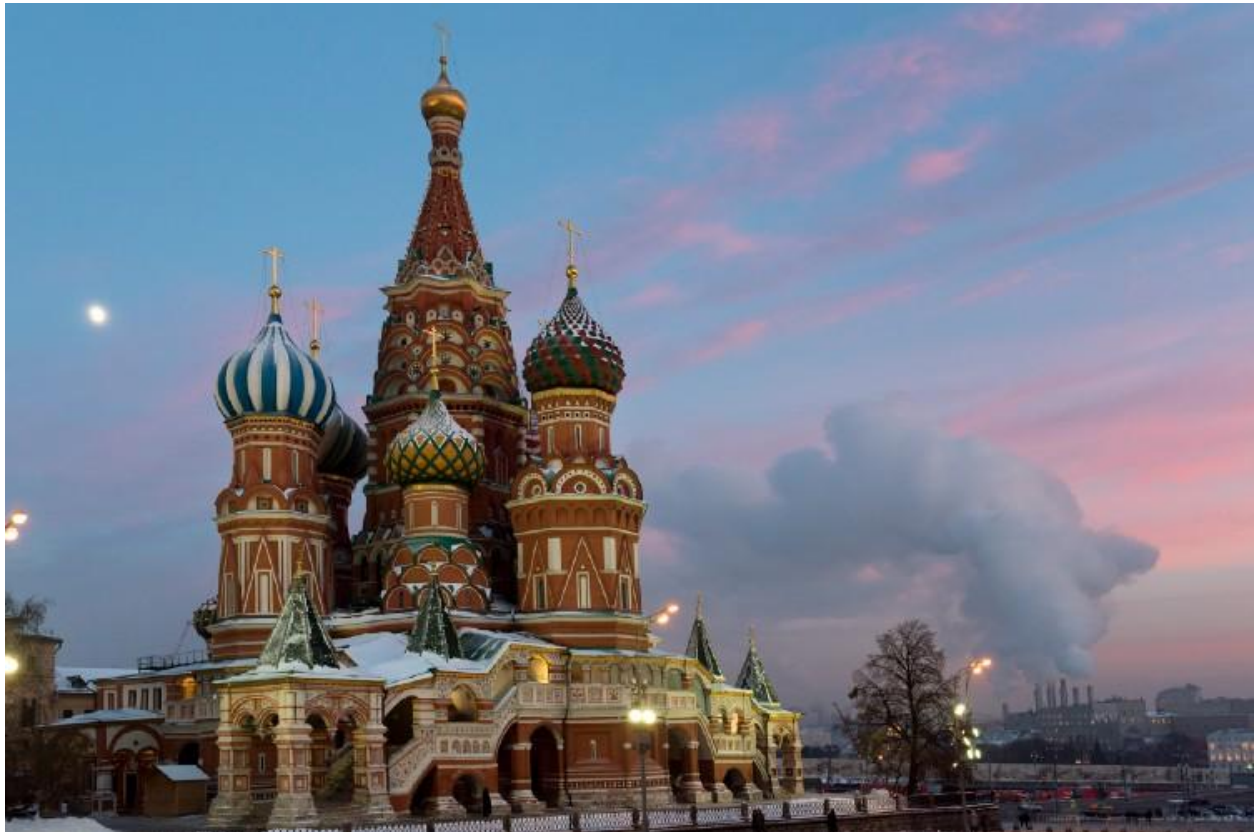


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Religious determinism, or the idea that particular forms of belief and worship lead to particular forms of political and economic behaviour, is always a fascinating field for dabbling. Indeed one might even say that such determinism is itself a form of religion, if that is defined as a system of thought which offers compelling answers to questions that might otherwise be shadowy and elusive. Recently there has been a little wave of discussion about religious determinism in the e-commentariat.

It began with a working paper for the World Bank by two economists with Bulgarian roots: the country's former finance minister, Simeon Djankov, and Elena Nikolova of University College London. They crunched some of the results of two transnational investigations into social attitudes: the World Values Survey and a probe by the European Bank for Reconstruction and

Development. Their conclusion was that something about Eastern Orthodox Christianity had made its adherents more susceptible to communism, and less oriented towards liberal Western capitalism, than other people. They found that:

Eastern Orthodox believers are less happy compared with Catholics and Protestants [according to] data from more than 100 countries...Relative to Catholics, Protestants and non-believers, those of the Eastern Orthodox religion have less social capital and prefer old ideas and safe jobs...Compared with non-believers and Orthodox adherents, Catholics and Protestants are less likely to agree that government ownership is a good thing, and Protestants are more likely to agree that getting rich can only happen at the expense of others.

Leonid Bershidsky, a Berlin-based commentator for Bloomberg news service who lived through Russia's transition, responded that 20 years ago he would have been sceptical of such a thesis, but now he found it hard to disagree with, at least as it applied to Russia. Indeed, he noted, the economists' view chimed with an important strain in Russian thought, dating from the 19th century, which found that Orthodoxy, for better or worse, created a barrier between Russia and the legal and rational order which prevailed farther west. As Mr Bershidsky put it:

The ancient roots and religious underpinnings of a culture may indeed have a greater impact on the path a country takes than any rational, geopolitical or economic considerations. If so, nations with an Orthodox background aren't really comfortable in a Western-dominated world—a source of tension that can only be mitigated, not removed.

This drew a response from Nathaniel Wood, associate director of the Orthodox Christian Studies Centre at America's Fordham University. He retorted that Mr Bershidsky was dealing in half-truths, at best, and in any case relying on a stereotypical dichotomy between East and West. Such a crude dichotomy could be also be found in some hard-line Russian quarters; but the best Russian Orthodox thinkers had something much more subtle to propose.

Rather than deference to Western capitalism...which is what Bershidsky seems to want, thinkers like [Sergei] Bulgakov and [Nikolai] Berdyaev point towards the possibility and necessity of Orthodox theological engagement with Western thought. Such engagement serves as a reminder that Orthodoxy need not be opposed to every aspect of modern Western economics, but that Christianity should not simply be capitalism's handmaid either.

As this discussion suggests, religious-determinist theories are easy to propose and also relatively easy to undercut, because they can be challenged by a few robust counter-examples. Consider the fact that all over the Ottoman empire, from Turkey to the Levant, the segment of society that showed the strongest orientation to capitalism was precisely the Orthodox Christian minority.

When members of those communities migrated to the New World, they retained their faith, their entrepreneurial skills, and several other things which the World Bank writers deem relatively incompatible with Orthodoxy: social capital, derived from strong loyalties to the extended family and voluntary forms of association, and the ability to calculate, bargain and thrive in a diverse, law-based society.

It is hard to make valid generalisations that apply both to Russia, where active adherence to and real knowledge of the Orthodox faith is confined to a small minority, and mainly Orthodox

Romania, where levels of church-going and religious knowledge are much higher. And (if the World Bank paper has any substance) harder still to make sense of the fact that Romania's elected leaders have firmly anchored the country in both NATO and the European Union.