

FEBRUARY 10, 2014

Russians Return to Religion, But Not to Church

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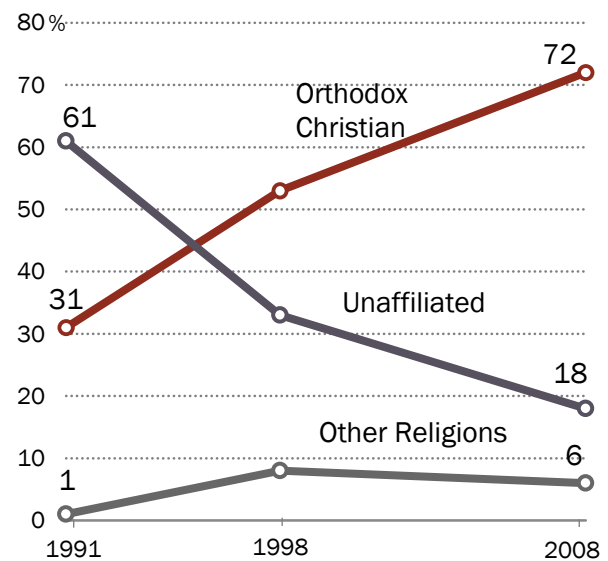
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Russians Return to Religion, But Not to Church

Over the past two decades, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been an upsurge in affiliation with Orthodox Christianity in Russia.¹ Between 1991 and 2008, the share of Russian adults identifying as Orthodox Christian rose from 31% to 72%, according to a new Pew Research Center analysis of three waves of data (1991, 1998 and 2008) from the [International Social Survey Programme](#) (ISSP) – a collaboration involving social scientists in about 50 countries. During the same period, the share of Russia’s population that does not identify with any religion dropped from 61% to 18%. The share of Russian adults identifying with other religions, including Islam, Protestant Christianity and Roman Catholicism, rose in the 1990s and then leveled off. (Estimates of the size of Russia’s Muslim population vary. The most recent ISSP survey finds that Muslims make up 5% of Russia’s population, but other surveys and studies have somewhat higher estimates. For more information, see “[Sochi Olympics shine spotlight on Russia’s Muslim population.](#)”)

Major Religious Groups in Russia, 1991-2008

% of adult population that identifies with each group



Source: International Social Survey Programme. Respondents who did not answer the question are not shown.

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¹ The term “Russian” in this report refers to all residents of Russia, not just ethnic Russians.

There also has been a modest increase in some measures of religious commitment. For example, the share of Russian adults who said they are at least “somewhat” religious rose from 11% in 1991 to 54% in 2008. And the portion of adults who said they believe in God rose from 38% to 56% over the same period.²

But for most Russians, the return to religion did not correspond with a return to church. Across all three waves of ISSP data, no more than about one-in-ten Russians said they attend religious services at least once a month. The share of regular attenders (monthly or more often) was 2% in 1991, 9% in 1998 and 7% in 2008. This suggests that although many more Russians now freely identify with the Orthodox Church or other religious groups, they may not be much more religiously observant than they were in the recent past, at least in terms of attendance at religious services.

Russia’s Changing Religious Makeup

For centuries, [Orthodox Christianity was the dominant religion](#) in Russia. This began to change in the early 20th century, following the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and the imposition of state-sponsored atheism as part of communist ideology. During the Soviet period, many priests were imprisoned, many churches were converted to other uses or fell into disrepair, and people who publicly professed religious beliefs were denied prestigious jobs and admission to universities. While it is likely that some share of the population continued, in private, to identify with the Orthodox Church and other religious groups, it is impossible to measure the extent to which these attachments survived underground during the Soviet period and to what extent they faded away.

Similarly, it is difficult to disentangle the extent to which the upsurge in Orthodox affiliation found in the surveys represents an expression of long-held faith or a genuinely new wave of religious affiliation. It may be that after the fall of the U.S.S.R. in 1991, Russians felt freer to express the religious identities they had quietly maintained during the Soviet era.³ However, given that the share of Russians identifying with a religion rose almost as much between 1998 and 2008 as it did

Trends in Russian Religious Practices and Beliefs

% of Russian adults who said they ...

	1991	1998	2008
Attend religious services at least once a month	2%	9%	7%
Believe in God	38	46	56
Believe in life after death	33	31	32
Describe themselves as at least somewhat religious	11	45	54

Source: International Social Survey Programme

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² For the full results on these questions, see pages 12-14.

³ For more information on religion during the Soviet period, see Anderson, J. 1994. “Religion, State and Politics in the Soviet Union and Successor States.” Cambridge University Press.

from 1991 to 1998, the data suggest that the change is not solely an immediate aftereffect of the collapse of the Soviet system.

According to the ISSP, six-in-ten Russian adults (61%) surveyed in 1991 identified as religiously unaffiliated, while about a third said they were Orthodox Christians (31%). Over the next 17 years, those percentages virtually flipped. By 2008, roughly seven-in-ten Russians identified as Orthodox Christians (72%), while about one-in-five were religiously unaffiliated (18%). During the same period, there also was a modest increase in the share of the Russian public identifying with religions other than Orthodox Christianity, including Islam, Protestant Christianity and Roman Catholicism.⁴

Trends in Religious Identification Among Demographic Groups

	% identifying as Orthodox Christians			% with no religious affiliation		
	1991	2008	Change	1991	2008	Change
All Russian adults	31%	72%	+41	61%	18%	-43
Men	17	63	+46	76	24	-52
Women	43	81	+38	48	12	-36
Ages 16-49	26	69	+43	66	18	-48
50 and older	40	79	+39	52	18	-34
University degree*	16	76	+50	75	16	-59
Less education*	34	75	+41	57	17	-40

Source: International Social Survey Programme

*Among those ages 25 and older.

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Growing religious affiliation in Russia is seen across a variety of demographic groups. For example, the share of Russian women identifying as Orthodox Christians increased by 38 percentage points between 1991 and 2008, while the share of women with no religious affiliation declined by 36 points. The changes among Russian men have been even more pronounced; 63% of Russian men identified as Orthodox Christians in 2008, up 46 percentage points since 1991, while the share of Russian men who espoused no religious affiliation declined by 52 points over the same period.⁵

Similarly, the ISSP surveys show increases in identification with Orthodox Christianity among both younger Russians (up 43 percentage points among Russians ages 16-49) and older Russians

⁴ Demographic trend data for religious groups other than Orthodox Christians cannot be shown due to small sample sizes. But the data do show that, overall, the share of Russia's population belonging to religions other than Orthodox Christianity has increased somewhat since 1991.

⁵ For more detailed analysis of changing religious identity in Russia, see Greeley, A. M. 2004. "Religion in Europe at the End of the Second Millennium: A Sociological Profile." Transaction Publishers.

(up 39 points among Russians ages 50 and older). And affiliation with Orthodox Christianity has grown substantially among Russians at all education levels, especially among Russian university graduates.

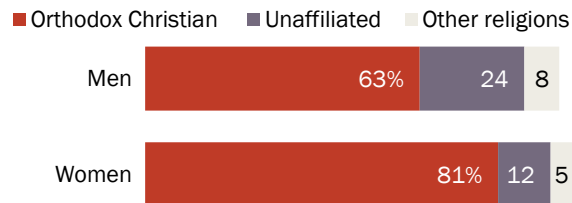
The remainder of this analysis examines religious affiliation and religious beliefs and practices by demographic group in 2008, the most recent year for which ISSP data are available. In 2008, Russian women were more religious than Russian men, and Russians ages 70 and older were more religious than younger age groups on some measures.

Differences in the Religious Affiliation and Religious Commitment of Russians, by Demographic Group

Gender

Russian women were considerably more likely than men to identify as Orthodox Christians in 2008. While about eight-in-ten Russian women (81%) were Orthodox Christians, fewer Russian men (63%) said they belonged to the Russian Orthodox Church. At the same time, about twice as many Russian men (24%) as women (12%) said they had no religious affiliation.

Religious Identification Among Russians, by Gender, 2008



Source: International Social Survey Programme. Respondents who did not answer the question are not shown.

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By several measures, Russian women also had higher levels of religious commitment than Russian men. For example, much larger shares of women said they believe in God (63% of women vs. 46% of men) and described themselves as at least somewhat religious (63% of women vs. 43% of men). However, Russian women were not much more likely than Russian men to say they regularly attend religious services (9% vs. 5%).

Russian Religious Practices and Beliefs, by Gender, 2008

% who said they ...

	Men	Women
Attend religious services at least once a month	5%	9%
Believe in God	46	63
Believe in life after death	30	35
Describe themselves as at least somewhat religious	43	63

Source: International Social Survey Programme

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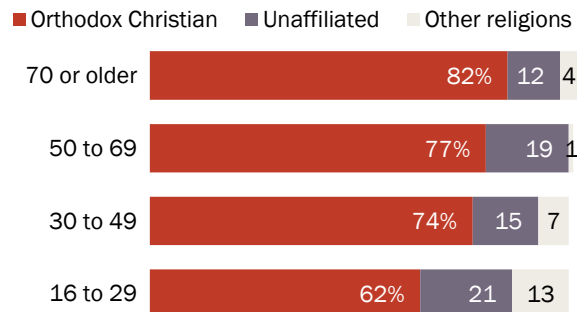
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Age

Majorities of all age groups in Russia identified as Orthodox Christians in 2008. However, older Russians were more likely than those in younger age groups to say they belong to the Russian Orthodox Church. More than eight-in-ten (82%) Russians ages 70 and older identified as Orthodox Christians, compared with 62% of Russians ages 16-29.

Meanwhile, identifying with religions other than Orthodox Christianity was more common among younger Russians (13% among those ages 16-29, 7% among those ages 30-49) than among older Russians (1% among those ages 50-69, 4% among those ages 70 and older). According to the ISSP data, Muslims account for 9% of Russians ages 16-29, 6% of Russians ages 30-49, 1% of those ages 50-69 and 3% of those ages 70 and older.

Religious Identification Among Russians, by Age, 2008



Source: International Social Survey Programme. Respondents who did not answer the question are not shown.

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With a few exceptions, religious practices and beliefs did not differ widely by age group in Russia in 2008. However, Russians ages 70 and older were more likely than younger cohorts to say they believe in God and to describe themselves as at least somewhat religious.

Russian Religious Practices and Beliefs, by Age, 2008

% who said they ...

	Ages 16-29	Ages 30-49	Ages 50-69	Ages 70 and older
Attend religious services at least once a month	6%	7%	6%	11%
Believe in God	53	55	54	69
Believe in life after death	40	30	29	30
Describe themselves as at least somewhat religious	52	50	54	70

Source: International Social Survey Programme

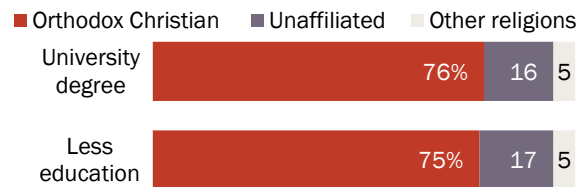
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Education

In 2008, Russians' religious affiliation did not differ markedly by education level. About three-quarters of those with a university degree and of those with fewer years of formal education identified as Orthodox Christians, while about one-in-six in each group said they had no religious affiliation.

Religious Identification Among Russians, by Education Level, 2008



Source: International Social Survey Programme. Among those ages 25 and older. Respondents who did not answer the question are not shown.

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Religious commitment also did not vary much by education level, according to several measures, including frequency of attendance at religious services, belief in God and describing oneself as at least somewhat religious. The only measure on which education level made a significant difference was belief in life after death; Russians who have a university degree were slightly more likely than those with less education to say they believe in life after death.

Russian Religious Practices and Beliefs, by Education Level, 2008

% who said they ...

	University Degree	Less Education
Attend religious services at least once a month	10%	7%
Believe in God	59	56
Believe in life after death	42	30
Describe themselves as at least somewhat religious	54	55

Source: International Social Survey Programme

Among those ages 25 and older.

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Methodology

The data used in this report are from the [International Social Survey Programme \(ISSP\)](#), a consortium of researchers who conduct public surveys in about 50 countries according to international sampling standards with comparable questionnaires across countries. The ISSP includes many North American and European countries as well as a few nations in South America, Africa and Asia. The trends in this report go back to 1991, the year the USSR was formally dissolved and the ISSP conducted its first survey of religious beliefs and practices in Russia. Religion also was the focus of ISSP surveys in 1998 and 2008. This report is based on data from the [ISSP Religion cumulative file](#).

The surveys are probability samples that are geographically stratified and are nationally representative of the Russian adult population ages 16 years and older. Data were collected by self-administered questionnaire May 15-June 6, 1991; Sept. 5-26, 1998; and Jan. 2-26, 2008.⁶ Surveys were conducted in the Russian language. All survey estimates use weights provided by ISSP staff. Sample sizes for the total adult sample and subsamples are shown in the table above. Based on sample sizes and designs of the surveys, the margin of sampling error for results based on the total sample is roughly $\pm 3.0\%$ in 1991, $\pm 3.3\%$ in 1998 and $\pm 4.4\%$ in 2008, with larger margins of error for subgroups.

Sample Size, by Year

	1991	1998	2008
All adults	2,964	1,703	1,015
Men	1,350	766	367
Women	1,614	937	648
Ages 16-29	844	454	240
30-49	1,137	638	311
50-69	924	489	316
70 and older	59	122	148
Less than completed university*	1,921	1,142	655
Completed university*	515	254	208

Source: International Social Survey Programme.

* Among those ages 25 and older.

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⁶ Download the methodological documentation for each survey as a PDF: [1991](#), [1998](#) and [2008](#).

Full Results for Questions Used in the Analysis

What is your religion, if any?

	1991	1998	2008
No religion	61%	33%	18%
Roman Catholic	0	<1	<1
Protestant	0	<1	<1
Christian Orthodox	31	53	72
Islam	<1	2	5
Buddhism	0	<1	<1
Other Christian	0	4	0
Other Religion	<1	<1	<1
No (Christian) denomination given	0	1	0
Can't choose/No answer	<u>7</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>3</u>
	100	100	100

Source: International Social Survey Programme. Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

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How often do you attend religious services? (Use categories as probes if necessary)

	1991	1998	2008
Once a week/2-3 times a month	1%	5%	3%
Once a month	1	4	4
Several times a year	5	10	14
Once a year/Less frequently	7	23	35
Never	83	55	39
Can't choose/No answer	<u>3</u>	<u>3</u>	<u>5</u>
	100	100	100

Source: International Social Survey Programme. Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

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Which best describes your beliefs about God?

	1991	1998	2008
I don't believe in God now and I never have	36%	28%	11%
I don't believe in God now but I used to	3	2	2
I believe in God now but I didn't used to	16	18	18
I believe in God now and I always have	22	27	37
Can't choose/No answer	<u>23</u>	<u>25</u>	<u>31</u>
	100	100	100

Source: International Social Survey Programme. Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

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Do you believe in life after death?

	1991	1998	2008
Yes, definitely	15%	12%	15%
Yes, probably	18	19	18
No, probably not	20	20	21
No, definitely not	30	26	21
Can't choose/No answer	<u>17</u>	<u>23</u>	<u>26</u>
	100	100	100

Source: International Social Survey Programme. Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

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Would you describe yourself as ...

	1991	1998	2008
Extremely religious	3%	3%	2%
Very religious	2	20	9
Somewhat religious	6	21	43
Neither religious nor nonreligious	13	11	11
Somewhat nonreligious	12	8	10
Very nonreligious	21	16	6
Extremely nonreligious	34	14	12
Can't choose/No answer	<u>10</u>	<u>6</u>	<u>8</u>
	100	100	100

Source: International Social Survey Programme. Figures may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

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