

RELIGION IN RUSSIAN GEO-POLITICAL STRATEGY

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The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia, by Alfons Mucha, 1914. Prague City Gallery. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

Two frameworks can help us better understand the so-called God gap in America's international affairs, specifically regarding Russia. The "God gap" references the conceptual gulf that opens up between a person—or nation—and their actions when we fail to account for the role religious belief plays in motivating their behavior. My aim, then, is to identify some ways in which religion may play a larger role behind

the scenes in Russian political thought than secular leadership in the West may realize. These perspectives may help explain miscommunication between Russian leadership and the West. Analysis of the influential author and Russian political activist Alexander Dugin supports this conclusion by using two dissimilar frameworks—Marlene Laurelle's "Third Way" political analysis and Richard Slaughter's "Critical Layering"

cultural analysis. To better address this gap, the United States should use non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the near term and improve hiring practices within government for the long term.

Understanding Russian actions and motivations on the world stage remains important in U.S. international security calculations. In spite of seemingly contradictory memes in

American political discourse in recent years over the significance of Russia in U.S. national security considerations, Russia remains a superpower with significant capabilities to create mischief on the world stage. It is the number-two nuclear power and has embarked on a substantial modernization of its military capabilities, which are in many cases estimated to exceed those of the U.S.

In light of this priority, it is troubling that Russian and U.S. leaders keep talking past each other. The examples range from the Crimea, to the Middle East and Syria, and the accusations over “hacking” the recent U.S. presidential election. This raises the question of why this is the case.

Various political and decision theories have been suggested as explanations. But while offering some value, they stop short of a sufficient explanation as there are factors which go much deeper and more fully explain the extent of miscommunication by elites in the U.S. and the West in general with Russian leaders. The proposal of improving our foreign relations by addressing the God gap, the conceptual gulf in our analysis, offers at least a placeholder for naming the source of dark energy that has been largely unaccounted for in attempts to calculate relations between East and West. Generally speaking, filling in this God gap will require us to grapple with the extent to which the daily lives, aspirations, and expectations of individuals and nations are shaped and affected by ideas about God and their culture’s religious perceptions. Applied to Russia, therefore, this endeavor will bring into focus much more than simply the historical organizational Church relationships with the

Russian government and its integral role in Russian cultural identity formation. This task is as crucial as it is remedial. Especially because the West is increasingly deracinated from our Judeo-Christian patrimony, it is essential that we account for the religious motivation animating much of the rest of the world, the Russian political soul included.

American foreign policy’s God gap has been noted in recent years by senior officials, including former U.S. Secretary of State Madeleine K. Albright. As she stated in an interview with CNN, “In order to effectively conduct foreign policy today, you have to understand the role of God and religion... My sense is that we don’t fully understand [how]...religion is instrumental in shaping ideas and policies. It’s an essential part of everyday life in a whole host of countries. And obviously it plays a role in how these countries behave, so we need to know what the religious influence is.”

“It’s a hot topic,” said Chris Seiple, president of the Institute for Global Engagement and a Council on Foreign Relations member. “It’s the elephant in the room. You’re taught not to talk about religion and politics, but...it’s at the nexus of national security. The truth is the academy has been run by secular fundamentalists for a long time, people who believe religion is not a legitimate component of realpolitik.”

According to a two-year study by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs, U.S. leaders and the development of foreign policy are “handicapped by a narrow, ill-informed and ‘uncompromising Western secularism’ that feeds religious extremism, threatens traditional cultures

and fails to encourage religious groups that promote peace and human rights.” According to this report, “despite a world abuzz with religious fervor, the U.S. government has been slow to respond effectively to situations where religion plays a global role.” Trends which this gap has caused American leaders to miss include the “growing influence of Pentecostalism in Latin America, evangelical Christianity in Africa and religious minorities in the Far East.”

There have been some attempts by U.S. officials to address the God gap, especially in dealings with Islamic nations and groups. President Obama appointed a special envoy to the Organization of the Islamic Conference and created a new Muslim outreach position in the State Department. In the mid-1980s, the CIA established an office of political Islam and created in 2004 a Political Islam Strategic Analysis Program to study the issue, advise policymakers, and engage academics worldwide.

More recently, Steve Bannon underscored the role of religion in current international issues, but his views have not had a very positive reception among the foreign policy community. His charge that “secularism has sapped the strength of the Judeo-Christian West to defend its ideals” is an amazingly direct diagnosis of our Western culture’s secular disease. The extent to which the issue is addressed by the Trump Administration and what priority it takes in its efforts remain to be seen. Whatever the approach, it will need to overcome substantial structural challenges within the U.S. State Department that impede the successful tackling of existential

threats with major religious elements embedded in them.

The purpose of this essay is to suggest possible frameworks for understanding that gap in more than a cursory fashion. Second, with a higher fidelity understanding of the gap, it will identify some ways in which theology may play a larger role behind the scenes in Russian political thinking than secular leadership in the West give it credit. The objective is to bring greater understanding of the political motivations of Russia—a nation about which Winston Churchill's description that it's "a riddle, wrapped in a mystery, inside an enigma" still rings true.

ANALYSIS

This paper uses two divergent analytic frameworks to make sense of the real situation and improve the likelihood of achieving a more complete understanding of, and a better response to, that reality. The first is based on Marlene Laruelle's analysis of Russian Eurasianism, a political movement that places Russia in the unique geopolitical concept of Eurasia—and not in either Europe or Asia. The second, termed Critical Layering Analysis, has been developed by Richard Slaughter.

Dugin & Eurasianism

For this analysis, Alexander Dugin—the Russian ultra-nationalist dubbed "Putin's Rasputin"—plays the surrogate for Putin and Russian leadership. Understanding Dugin provides insight into Russia's deepest cultural mindset and motivations in international affairs. He has advised some of Putin's inner circle, written on geo-political strategy for

Russia's military, and is credited by some with playing a key role in facilitating the restoration of Russian relations with Turkey in 2015, following the shoot-down of a Russian Sukhoi Su-24M attack aircraft near the Syrian-Turkish border, as well as in playing a key role in advocating for aggressive Russian actions during the Ukraine incursions. "He's seen as a brilliant philosopher, but brilliance and madness are very close to each other," according to political consultant Sergei Markov, a member of Putin's staff. According to some accounts, Dugin may have also raised the initial concerns over a conspiracy by supporters of Gulen against Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, even prior to the attempted coup in Turkey in July 2016. Dugin's prolific writings have created an aura and level of influence in political, academic, and religious circles, not only within Russia but also in Iran, which he visits often. So, using this unlikely foreign-policy agent for the Kremlin as the surrogate into the mindset of Putin and senior Russian leaders, we turn to the first framework, based on work by Marlene Laruelle and summarized in Figure 1.

Of primary importance is, first, that Dugin's political philosophy stands in noted contrast to both the West's political Left and political Right. Second, in many instances it bears the clear marks of theology. These two characteristics suggest it is truly a Third Way in global politics. Dugin's concept of Eurasianism does not easily ally with the political Left's emphasis on identity politics and politically correct codes of behavior, nor with the nationalism and traditional family values of the political Right. Rather, it is focused on creating

a new theoretical experience (to replace that of Communism and in contrast with anything in the West) that is based on feeling for the Motherland. It is oriented to the clash of cultures in which religion is the foundation of civilization and in which civilizations "are the driving force of history." At the same time, it rejects Western explanations of reality based on secular and objective knowledge and looks to religion and cultural fundamentalism for explanations of existential questions and to "new science" to more fully express the nature of Eurasia. These features express themselves in unique Russian perspectives, as seen in Figure 1:

View of History. History is a record of civilizational decay from its original glory in a hyperborean past. The imperative then is to pursue civilization's flourishing by avoiding all that would erode its inner strength. This contrasts with the Left's emphasis on the inevitable upward progress of history from an origin in the evolutionary muck, and contrasts with the value placed by the Right on continuity and pragmatic preservation of the best of the past, whatever its origin.

Character of Actions. Dugin emphasizes the "revolutionary" nature of Russian counter-efforts against the political trends of the (temporarily) ascendant West. This revolution proceeds with uniquely Eurasian tools and methodologies, as outlined below.

Goal to Achieve. Eurasianism's aim is centered on restoring society and its prestige to that of its pre-historic past, elaborated below. This contrasts with the Left's more abstract goal of advancing society toward ends that are not entirely

knowable until they actually appear, and with the Right's goal of preserving the best of current society.

Through Primary Means. Dugin is emphatic that the primary means to achieve Eurasianism's goals are through spiritual, even theological, revival. This could hardly be in greater contrast with the Left's emphasis on the power of the people and social action, including the use of violence if necessary, and with the Right's emphasis on political action and the power of the ballot box and rational debate.

Religious Vector. Owing to its concerns regarding death, judgment, and the final destiny of both the individual soul and of humankind in general, one of Eurasianism's clarion characteristics is its attachment to eschatological totalitarianism, which in the context of Russian mysticism refers metaphorically to the end of ordinary reality and reunion with the Divine. Eschatological totalitarianism combines these theological and political ends with the resultant view that it is through absolute totalitarian control that such an ultimate destiny will be brought to all of mankind. This Eurasian view is in stark contrast with the militant atheism of the Left and with the Right's reliance upon formal, organized religious entities for religious practice (which in the American version is done in complete separation from the political realm).

Religious Approach. Dugin takes the path of esoteric Gnosticism, with its embrace of a wide range of loosely related unconventional ideas and movements about how to know God. Many of these are distinct from core Judeo-Christian theology and practice, as well as

Dugin & Eurasianism

Distinctions:	Political Left	Political Right	3 rd Way
View History as:	Progress to be Achieved	Constancy to be Maintained	Decadence to be Avoided
Character of Actions:	Active	Conservative	Revolutionary
Goal to Achieve:	Advancement of Society	Preservation of Society	Restoration of Society & Prestige
Thru primary means:	Social action	Political action	Revival of Theology
Religious vector:	Militant Atheism	Clericalism	Eschatological Totalitarianism
Religious approach:	Secular Dogmatism	Religious Dogmatism	Esoteric Gnosticism
Philosophical bent:	Materialism	Consumerism	Mysticism
Approach to science:	Secular, Objective Knowledge	Objective & Religious Knowledge	Synthesis & "New Science" (Naturphilosophie)
Geography:	Globalism	Nationalism	"Sacred Geography"
Culture:	Cultural Equality	Value in Cultural Distinctions	Cultural Fundamentalism

Figure 1: Dugin's Third Way. Based on Marlene Laruelle's work, Russian Eurasianism: An Ideology of Empire. Dugin's more religious conceptual associations are in red.

from Enlightenment logic, science, and rationalism. In spite of the ascendancy of rational science, and in part because of its sterility, esoteric Gnosticism embraces "enchanted" worldviews. It may even encompass pagan practices, the Hebrew spiritists Kabbalah, and deviant Christian philosophy, as well as occult worldviews and practices like Wicca and New Age thought.

Philosophical Bent. Unlike the materialistic or consumerist commitments of the Left and Right respectively, Eurasianism's perspectives on history, ultimate goals, and religion combine to provide a fundamentally mystical philosophical outlook.

Approach to Science. In its rejection of contributions from other civilizations, Eurasianism looks to achieve its own unique synthesis of questions and answers, including materialistic ones, as a result of developing a "new science" based on *Naturphilosophie*, a branch

of German idealism. Western science and objective reasoning cannot account for a reality that belongs to the field of religion and civilizational identity. With its lack of interest in "details, rigorous analysis, or facts," Eurasians are heirs to *Naturphilosophie* belief in the superiority of synthesis.

Approach to Geography. In line with its perspective on history, Eurasianism adheres to a sacred geography, ascribing meta-physical properties and the power to create a civilizational identity based on the points of the compass. North is goodness personified and embodied in Russia's Nordic pre-history and racial origin. East represents Russia's Oriental contribution to culture and asserts an eastern affinity and origin in addition to its Nordic past. Southern entities are part of the natural association to counter the West, with its decadence and noxious culture and politics.

Approach to Culture. Dugin's Eurasianism embodies a trium-

phalist form of cultural fundamentalism (Traditionalism) which attempts to bridge ethnic divisions by a call to pre-historic glory and persisting common elements. The totality of divinely revealed non-human knowledge determined the makeup of all sacred civilizations (Christian, Islamic, Buddhist, Confucian, etc.). These ordinal civilizations came from the pre-historic pre-civilizations of the Golden Age. Although they vanished in the mists, the deep-seated Sacred Order embedded within these civilizations has survived and forms the civilizational bond through which Eurasianism is destined to reunify mankind and restore ancient glories.

The distinctive views of Dugin and Russian leaders embracing his Eurasianism stand in significant contrast with the dominant views of those on the Western political Left and Right. It is significant that in a majority of cases these contrasts are indicated by religious and theological markers, at least as much as by political or contextual differences alone. This political framework provides deeper insights into the reasons why leaders in the West and Russia may be talking past each other. As we'll see, when applied to Dugin's worldview, the framework of Richard Slaughter's Critical Layering Analysis provides additional insights into the context of this ongoing miscommunication.

CRITICAL LAYERING ANALYSIS

Richard Slaughter developed Critical Layering Analysis for deriving a deeper understanding of cultural issues, designing it specifically for application to community interactions across cultural and ethnic lines. His

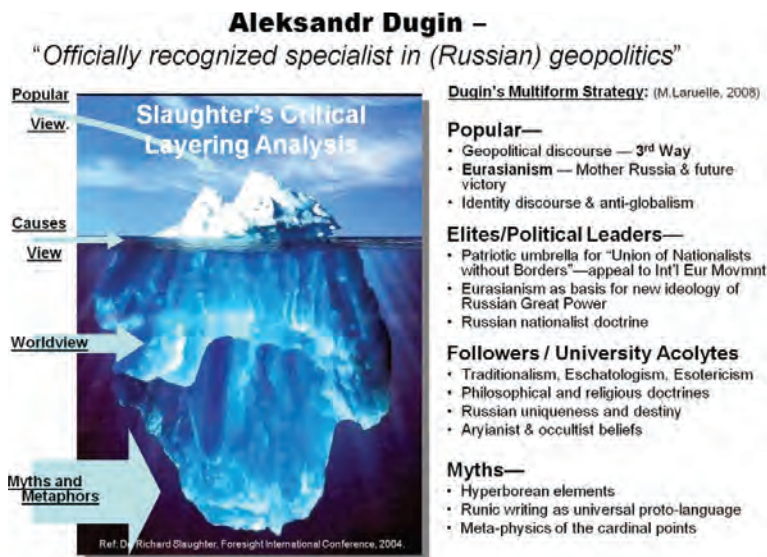


Figure 2. Alexander Dugin—In Slaughter's Critical Layering Analysis framework.

framework consists of multiple views of a culture in order to provide progressively deeper insights into cultural motivations and mindsets. Laruelle has noted Dugin's adeptness at tailoring his own “multiform strategy” to different target audiences. We can turn to Figure 2 for elaboration.

The **Popular View** is what we most often see in the media and is like the tip of the iceberg. It addresses only the surface elements and is the description typically published for public consumption. According to Slaughter, this view is “not too hot; not too cold; but just right!” This view may often be ideologically naïve, supportive of the status quo, and sometimes childlike in its belief in the nearly magical powers of science and technology. It is for this broad, general consumption level that Dugin writes and does media events to promote his Third Way perspective on geopolitical topics and current events. Thus, his writings include large-dose proclamations of loyalty to Mother Russia and of the inevitability of her future victory. Dugin's identity politics

have been oriented around anti-Westernism and anti-globalism, as each constitutes the decadent forces which must be defeated.

The **Causes View** comes from Dugin's descriptions and analysis of social sciences. At this level, Dugin focuses his message on influencing Russian elites and influential social and political leaders. He has worked to help create a patriotic umbrella for particular political institutions and has consciously appealed to political groups open to the viability of trans-national entities—in response to the imminent failure of existing national structures—to address substantial political and social challenges. In this context, Dugin has used Eurasianism to ground a new ideological justification for the restoration of Russia as a superpower, as part of his campaign to reestablish a basis for Russian nationalist doctrine, and in part to fill the vacuum created by the fall of Communist dogma and the political structure of the Soviet Union.

The **Worldview** level attempts to account for alternative ways of knowing by going below the surface to see larger issues stemming from assumptions in culture, society, and religion. Dugin targets his message of Eurasianism to close followers and his acolytes within the university community. Here, he paradoxically focuses on Orthodoxy as the founding institutional embodiment of Russian exceptionalism and her ultimate role in eschatology, while at the same time also embracing precursors to German national socialism, esotericism, and the new science need to express the nature of Eurasia. He also blends in a potent mix of philosophical and mystical religious doctrines bordering on Sunni mysticism, elements of neo-paganism, cult of earth worship, and the importance of harmony with nature.

Lastly, the deepest level of analysis focuses on the role **Myths and Metaphors** play in culture making. Analyzing the “social genetics” from which civilization emerges may uncover linguistic paradigms and subliminal cultural norms that help form cultural meaning. Dugin asserts that European roots are found in the Hyperborean myths of a Siberian proto-civilization that formed the pre-historic, golden age of human advancement and was the genesis of Aryan culture. This incorporates the symbolic meaning of continents along with the meta-physics of cardinal points (described earlier as sacred geography), a view of runic writing as constituting a universal proto-language, and science that encapsulates the secrets of world history.

Dugin’s cultural perspectives—and those of the Russian leadership he influences—are

sobering, particularly with regard to the potential for miscommunication. The problem is that while the political ideas grounding Dugin’s views stand in significant contrast with those of the West, they employ relatively common terms and concepts to address generally common political issues. This seeming familiarity, however, risks obscuring the cultural gap. The cultural foundations embraced by Dugin are so different and so truly foreign to the Western, secular mind that we ought to be concerned over the extent to which meaningful communication between Putin and Western leaders are realistically feasible. At minimum, Western leaders and those advising them must acquire a much deeper cultural understanding of their Russian counterparts.

RUSSIAN ACTIONS IN CRIMEA & SYRIA.

For instance, how does understanding Dugin help us understand possible reasons why Russia acted so aggressively in the Crimea or injected itself into Syria?

It was on the Crimean Peninsula that Byzantium passed the mantle of Orthodoxy to Russia. In the ancient Greek colonial city of Chersonesos, the Byzantine emperor baptized the Kyivan-Rus Prince Vladimir. According to one early Russian nationalist, Prince Vladimir’s conversion “began a new period of our existence in every respect: our enlightenment, customs, judiciary and building of our nation, our religious faith, and our morality.” It was, therefore, “the most important event in the history of all Russian lands.” Crimea sits at the heart of Russia’s self-perception as the Third Rome.

Regarding Syria, Russia’s intervention to rescue the Assad regime in October 2015 can also be seen in historical-religious terms. In 1774, by the Treaty of Küçük-Kaynardja, Russia obtained from the Ottoman Empire the right to protect numerous Orthodox Christians in the Levant. On this occasion, Russia also obtained the opening of the Bosphorus straits for her navy. Russian rapprochement with Turkey during the summer of 2016 allows Russia to regain the strategic position it had during the reign of Catherine II. As one observer puts it, by “understanding Putin’s rise as champion of Orthodox Christianity and [savior] of Christians in the Mideast, along with the absence of the US in the mix, you get a startlingly fresh focus on recent geostrategic events.”

IMPLICATIONS

The ongoing secularization of American culture hamstringing U.S. government efforts to understand the importance of religion in national security considerations. Former Secretary of State Madeleine Albright highlights this crisis in her book *The Mighty and the Almighty*, in which she asserts we ignore religion “at our own peril.” If we’ve learned nothing else since 9/11, the intersection of religion with national security is inescapable. Nevertheless, the problem remains. For example, the Obama Administration’s refusal to acknowledge the appropriation by the Islamic State (ISIS) of elements of Islam has left a residual challenge for the Trump Administration to resolve.

The U.S. needs to acknowledge and understand the religious motivation grounding the aggression of adversaries like the Taliban, ISIS, and Putin against



Portrait of a Philosopher, by Lyubov Popova, 1915. Source: Wikimedia Commons.

U.S. interests. This is not only because certain kinds of conflict will not be ultimately won with tanks and airplanes alone, but also because a lack of understanding promotes dangerous policy mistakes. The plight of Christians in the Middle East gives but one example:

Putin and Assad have maneuvered to become the explicit protectors of Eastern Christianity in situ. Moscow is back as their shield and Orthodoxy's patron. He didn't side up to the Russian church in recent years purely for

domestic reasons. He knew the unforgotten historical alignments just below the surface from Moscow out through the Balkans, through the Caucasus, past Turkey to the Holy Land. All he needed was a spate of Sunni jihadist assaults on Christians for which he could blame the West's chaotic freedom-mongering. His Shiite crescent from Tehran through Assad to Hezbollah can and do now posture as the champions of local Christians. As the US and Europe are too tangled up

in ideological confusion and contradictory goals to step into the breach, we furnish Moscow with easy triumphs in this area as in so many others.

In addition, since the Cold War the U.S. government has had a dismal record of attempted engagement in the war of ideas—at almost any level, but especially regarding religion. The State Department has given itself a failing grade after assessing efforts by the Obama Administration and foreign allies to combat the Islamic State's marketing machine. A part of the problem is that we as a nation have yet to respond to the 9/11 Commission's challenge that American society has to reaffirm—or rediscover—what it is we really stand for and the ideas that give us meaning.

Our cultural and governmental elites seem impotent to overcome the God gap. This ineptitude is an opportunity for the religiously informed and theologically literate—including institutional efforts like *Providence*—to engage in the realm of ideas and inform and shape government activities. Historically, nongovernmental organizations—including those with religious affiliations—have played key roles in prompting and shaping international humanitarian assistance. Academic institutions during the Cold War deployed the life of the mind—including the religiously informed mind—in intellectual diplomacy to foreign civic and academic organizations. U.S. military chaplains help shape tactics and on-the-ground practices, and bridge cultures in religiously sensitive environments. Additionally, the long history of non-profit foundations' support for think tanks, academic institutions, and other

initiatives provides a useful model for helping to sustain the vitality—and independence—of such non-government efforts.

CONCLUSIONS.

This essay has argued that deeply held political and cultural assumptions may account for miscommunication between Russian and Western leaders. The cultural-religious perspectives of Dugin and Russian leadership under his influence are so “other” to the Western, secular mind that significant corrective action will be required to achieve meaningful communications between Putin and leaders in the West.

Whatever other actions President Trump intends to take to “drain the swamp,” the current Administration needs to include efforts to fill the God gap in U.S. diplomatic efforts. In the short term, this should include better use of qualified NGOs and think tanks beyond the list of usual suspects. Longer term, this will require repopulating the national security bureaucracy with many more people who have expertise—including that derived from personal devotion—of the religious issues at play in various geo-political contexts and who are capable of thinking outside the secular worldview increasingly dominant in American culture. This will be a formidable staffing challenge. But as daunting as it may be, closing the God gap is a necessary step to improving communication with Russia and other important actors in international affairs. P

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Endnotes

1 This paper is based on the author's opening remarks at the symposium, “Religion in Russian Geo-Political Strategy,” held at Patrick Henry College on February 11, 2017. The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of Patrick Henry College or any of the author's previous employers.

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North. Joscelyn Godwin, *Arktos: The Polar Myth in Science, Symbolism, and Nazi Survival* (Kempton, IL: Adventures Unlimited Press, 1996).

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21 As a result of the 2016 U.S. Presidential elections, Dugin has modified his stance somewhat. Although having predicted for decades the demise of the West and particularly the U.S., his reaction to the election of Donald Trump has been that it may actually “change the course of world history.” Following the 2016 Presidential election, Dugin has attempted a rapprochement of sorts, declaring the end of his anti-Americanism. Henry Meyer and Onur Ant, 2017.

22 Laruelle, 125-6.

23 Richard Slaughter, 2004.

24 Laruelle, 125-6, 132.

25 Dugin's primary criticism of German national socialism under Hitler was that it was overly played to Germans and was not broad enough to encompass the larger European community. Marlene Laruelle, *Russian Eurasianism: An ideology of empire* (Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson Press, 2008), 128.

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27 Laruelle, 130-131.

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