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Challenges of being Orthodox in Russia: Education as Missionization in Magadan

Abstract: Understanding the growth of the Russian Orthodox Church has been complex since the break-up of the Soviet Union, characterized by an opposition between the mass public and government support of the Church and the low member attendance to its services. Magadan, an urban center in the Russian Far East, where no churches had been built before 1991, proved to be an ideal place to test this seemingly paradoxical situation: How does religion “grow”, both in foundational changes and ritual participation, and what impact does the church have on local patterns of religious practice? The city’s Soviet history, when believers went underground and conducting religious rituals in secret, created circumstances that influenced the social setting today, when many Orthodox faithful are self-educated in the church tradition. As the Church has steadily become an official authority, similar tendencies by Orthodox members to ‘keep away’ from the official church remains. Concurrently, there has been a surge of interest in Orthodox cultural topics, in the form of popular media and educational programs offered to children and adults. This thesis focuses on this trend of people educating themselves and becoming more oriented to Orthodox culture, this being a new form of missionizing, to oneself and to others. From the perspective of the Magadan diocese, the enthusiasm behind cultural elements of Orthodoxy serves to remedy their problem of low participation from Orthodox members. However, will self-missionization increase church engagement or will this provide an opportunity to continue the long-standing pattern of disassociating from an increasingly authoritarian church?