

MEET PTS



PROFESSOR JOHN BURGESS RETURNS TO RUSSIA THANKS TO SECOND FULBRIGHT AWARD

Congratulations to the Rev. Dr. John Burgess, who has won a second Fulbright Scholar award! Pittsburgh Seminary's James Henry Snowden Professor of Theology, John will return to Russia in September, where, building directly on his 2011 Fulbright research on the rebirth of Orthodoxy in Russia, he'll engage in further study and lecturing, this time at the state university in Belgorod—a town of 400,000 residents 400 miles south of Moscow.

"I argue for a third possibility: that religion can contribute to ways of understanding and practicing freedom that protect individuals from social manipulation yet strengthen social relationships and social wellbeing."

John's research project, "Spiritual Freedom: The Holy Elders in Late Soviet Russia," actually started this summer, as he also received a grant for work at the University of Illinois—Champaign-Urbana. There, investigating "islands of religious freedom" in the Soviet Union, he sought to begin answering questions such as "Where did believers find a degree of freedom to express and live out their faith even under the conditions of totalitarianism?" "How did they form 'spiritual families' whose members worshiped together underground and cared for each other?" and "And how has this legacy influenced the contemporary Orthodox Church's vision of parish life?"

"This work has made me aware not only of the Orthodox Church's immense suffering under Soviet communism but also of believers who discovered a deep inner capacity to remain spiritually free in the face of persecution," John says. And he's become "especially intrigued by the Orthodox 'holy elders,'" who gathered spiritual families around them, offered spiritual counsel, and cultivated oases of spiritual freedom. "Often living in remote areas and in the underground, they were reputed to have powers of clairvoyance or even healing. Their charismatic authority represented an alternative to a church hierarchy that had little free space and constantly had to accommodate itself to state interests," John notes.

By the 1960s, the communists were no longer striving to eliminate the church as a public institution. The state nevertheless made participation in the church socially disadvantageous. "While priests were able to preach and celebrate the sacraments, they knew that they were under constant government surveillance," John observes—"Contact with holy elders helped many of them find a spiritual freedom that sustained their faith and ministry."

In Russia, John will conduct interviews with priests and laypeople who lived through the late Soviet period. "Because this generation is now elderly and passing away, I believe that it is critically important to hear and record their stories before it is too late. How and where did they find spheres of spiritual freedom under conditions of state oppression? How did they organize their lives around certain holy elders or other spiritual leaders? What strategies did believers develop for dealing with state officials and church hierarchs?" John will ask them these questions and others.

John's project will make significant contributions to current discussions of religion and society in both Russia and the West. "A commitment to freedom and a commitment to religious belief may seem contradictory to many people today," he says. "Secular thinkers often associate religion with narrowmindedness and intolerance rather than with freedom. For religious believers, the word 'freedom' may suggest unrestrained license rather than obedience to the divine will. I argue for a third possibility: that religion can contribute to ways of understanding and practicing freedom that protect individuals from social manipulation yet strengthen social relationships and social wellbeing."

Further his project will contribute to current philosophical and legal scholarship about religion and freedom. "Much of this literature frames religious freedom in terms of a right. Too often, however, this literature ignores a more basic set of questions: How does a person live in freedom even when external circumstances are oppressive and limit or eliminate a legally guaranteed right to religious freedom? How do people cultivate this kind of inner, spiritual freedom, and how does it reframe the way they think about a right to religious freedom?"

We eagerly anticipate the new book John will write after his upcoming Fulbright year—a book that will enlighten our appreciation for our Russian Orthodox brothers and sisters in Christ!

For further background, see John's book *Holy Rus': The Rebirth of Orthodoxy in the New Russia* (Yale University Press, 2017), which synthesizes his research from his 2011 Fulbright Scholar award.

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