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Trust God, But Lock Your Car

By Michele A. Berdy

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Сам Бог велел: It's fate

With religion in the headlines and on the tip of everyone's tongue these days, I've been inadvertently brushing up on Russian expressions that invoke or refer to the All Mighty.

Some of them are very common. Others are more obscure but have been dusted off to be used as verbal weaponry in the utterly terrifying social-religious-political-cultural-class war that began on Aug. 17 in Russia.

Is someone dumping Kool-Aid into the water supply?

In any case, one expression you might come across these dark days is Бог шельму метит (literally, "God marks a scoundrel"). Dictionaries explain that шельма is from the German schelme (rogue), which came to Russian via Polish. Sometimes the native word плут (swindler, rogue) replaces the highly suspect foreign import. The idea is that a scoundrel has some kind of distinguishing mark that makes him readily identifiable. To be honest, I've

never liked this expression much. It smacks a bit too much of inquisitional searches for birthmarks. And speaking of inquisitional behavior, today the mark of evil is most likely to be a T-shirt. Sartorial caution advised.

Вот тебе Бог, а вот и порог (literally, "Here's God and here's the threshold") is a way of sending someone packing: There's the door, buddy — now use it. These days it is used to urge people who have different political views to leave the country. Суд решил. Не нравится? Вот тебе Бог, а вот и порог (The court made its decision. You don't like it? Take the next plane out).

The folksy Бог не выдаст, свинья не съест (literally, "God won't give you up, and a pig won't eat you") is a way of invoking divine protection: When God is on your side, you have nothing to fear. This is now the retort of the righteous. Твои угрозы меня не пугают. Бог не выдаст, свинья не съест. (Your threats don't scare me. I've got God on my side, and no one can harm me.)

Thankfully, not every expression has found its way into the vituperative rhetoric. A very useful and charming expression is сам Бог велел (literally, "God Himself commanded it"). This is used whenever some course of action seems predestined: Сам Бог велел построить дом в этом уютном месте (How could you not build a house in this cozy spot?)

It can also be used jocularly when conditions are so perfect you'd be a fool to turn something down. У него была водка, у меня — селёдка. Сам Бог велел напиться! (He had vodka and I had herring. It was like a sign from God to get drunk!)

Curiously, Russian has several versions of the expression, God helps those who help themselves. The basic one is pleasingly alliterative and rhythmical: бережёного Бог бережёт. But there is also: Богу молись, а к берегу гребись (Pray to God, but row for the shore); and the amusing на Бога надейся, а сам не плошай (Trust in God, but don't err). This sentiment used to be rendered in English as put your trust in God, but keep your powder dry. In New York, it's rendered as: Trust in God, but lock your car.

And then there is — for now, anyway — the multicultural version: На Аллаха надейся, а верблюда привязывай (Trust in Allah, but tie up your camel.)

These days I'm thinking: На Бога надейся, но купи авиабилет (Trust in God, but buy an airline ticket.)

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