The social-scientific study of religion has long been dominated by theories of secularization, but less attention has been paid to processes of desecularization, which Karpov (2010), drawing on Berger (1999), defines as “a process of counter-secularization, through which religion reasserts its societal influence in reaction to previous and/or co-occurring, secularizing processes.” Existing theory states that the process of desecularization is agency driven and can be carried out “from above” or “from below” depending on specific societal conditions. However, Karpov’s theoretical framework does not explain the dynamics whereby a particular desecularizing regime—in structural and normative form and symbolic and discursive content—develops through social action and achieves hegemonic status. This dissertation seeks to fill this important gap in the literature by pursuing the following research questions: How and why, in the anomic conditions of the post-Soviet period, with its various secularizing and counter-secularizing forces and currents, did the current desecularizing regime in Russia form? And more specifically, what role did the cultural clashes between actors and activists over artistic and intellectual representations of religious themes play in its formation?
In pursuing these questions, I apply Victor Turner’s (1974; 1980) “social drama” approach as an analytical tool uniquely situated for studying the interplay between structure and agency in a comparative-historical case study of two waves of cultural clashes over artistic and intellectual representations of religious themes. The first wave of cases (1995-2000) took place under the Yeltsin regime and led to either relatively mild punishment of those who challenged the emerging religious hegemony or to unresolved social dramas while “setting the stage” for the second wave (2003-2012), which took place under the Putin regime and included the “Beware, Religion!” (2003) and the “Forbidden Art—2006” (2007) exhibitions at the Sakharov Museum, and, most famously, the Pussy Riot “punk prayer” at Christ the Savior Cathedral (2012). This comparative study demonstrates how in the course of intensifying clashes between desecularizing activists and their opponents the paradigm of radical desecularization crystallized over time into an increasingly punitive normative regime. I then analyze existing survey and public opinion poll data to assess the degree of popular support for the new regime of desecularization. To interpret the findings, I develop an original theoretical framework that synthesizes theories of secularization, desecularization, culture wars analysis, the Durkheimian dialectic of norm and deviance, the work of Agamben and Foucault on disciplinary modalities of power, and social identity theory. Ultimately, I argue that the severe punishment of the perceived “enemies of the Church” and the public support for such a punishment reflect the crystallization of a new cultural-normative system brought about by the Russian desecularizing regime characterized by a symbiosis of the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian state. This dissertation thus makes an original and unique theoretical contribution by showing how desecularization’s social actors and activists redefine cultural and political norms by defining secularist, anti-clerical orientations as deviant and by criminalizing them.