

## **Book Essays and Reviews**

**Hieromonakh Pavel Stefanov, *Istoria na Ruskata pravoslavna tserkva prez XX vek. [History of the Russian Orthodox church in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century]* Shumen (Bulgaria): Izdatelstvo "Aksios," 1997, 141 pp.**

The history of the Russian Orthodox Church in the 20th century is little known in Bulgaria. Prior to September 1944 when the country fell under communism, all that had appeared in pamphlets and obscure articles was dismissed as biased and deliberate distortions of truth, and was met with scepticism and disbelief. From 1944 through 1989, (era of the Bulgarian Communist regime) the subject became virtually a tabu. Now Hieromonakh Pavel Stefanov, Theology professor at the University of Shumen, has published a brief survey of church-state relations in pre-revolutionary, Soviet, and post-Communist Russia, which, in substance and in details surpasses anything and everything that pre-war anti-Communist propaganda had presented as a horror story, even though he does not dwell too much on statistics. Step by step, he leads the reader through government-staged orgies of terror, where patriarchs, metropolitans, bishops, priests, monks and nuns are unceremoniously dispatched or vanishing in jails and gulags, while the church leadership, agonizing in frustration, is continuously seeking a *modus vivendi* with the atheistic authorities, to insure the survival of the church.

The brevity of his study - some 141 pages in a pocket-size paperback - is counterbalanced by his rapid progression from one key event to another, from one leading personality to another, all of them woven into a coherent narrative of terror, with enough information to grasp the magnitude of the communist anti-Christian crusade. The subservience of the church to the imperial authority in tsarist times and the more recent cosiness between Patriarch Alexey and the President of Russia, Boris Yeltsin, both discussed by Stefanov, pale before the Soviet onslaught on the church establishment.

In a cool, matter-of-fact scholarly approach the author has escaped the traps of political propaganda and has given to the new generation of Bulgarian students of Russian history a new, true vantage point on the realities in the Soviet Union where the church is concerned. Father Stefanov's study is a text book example of how an obsession with a philosophical doctrine may lead to a *sui generis* holocaust, as obsession with "scientific" doctrines of biological racism led to the crematoriums of Auschwitz. Methodically he has followed the hopeless attempts of the Russian church leadership to accommodate to the demands of the modern Leviathan, seeking to preserve at an enormous cost, the precarious institutional structure of the church for better times. The church responded to the relentless pressure of Soviet authorities to cut down Christian presence in the country and eventually to obliterate all religions, with legions of martyrs and confessors refusing to surrender their mission. Stefanov has reduced this gigantic confrontation to manageable dimensions and has shown that the atheistic assault on Christianity, in its Eastern Orthodox version, carried out with unprecedented brutality and barbarism, is one of the unredeemed crimes against humanity in our age. His readers will wonder not how the Church survived, but that it survived at all. At the end the author calls attention to the dismal failure and dissipation of communism, and its atheistic excesses in the whirlwind of the crashing fall of the Communist system in Russia. The reader will surely feel that this evil should never again recur in the civilized world.

Father Stefanov should have entitled his study "Church-State Relations in 20th Century Russia." In page after page, in subtitle after subtitle, he discusses events, documents, personalities and policies, where the underlying theme is state against church, the ever changing, but always in focus government policies for destruction of the church. By restricting its activities, by decimating its leadership, mocking its message to render it irrelevant for an age of "science," by closing and desecrating its shrines and manipulating every internal dissent born out of desperation for mere survival the state pursued its objectives with deadly determination. Stefanov, however, has put all that in proper perspective by making the reader aware of the tenacious resilience of the Orthodox Church in the face of overwhelming odds and, at the end surviving all the blows inflicted on it and outliving its merciless persecutor.

The Soviet policies for suppressing the church and abolishing all religious bodies were rooted in the Marxist philosophy of materialism which defined religion as an opiate of the masses. The legal basis for implementing these policies was framed in a decree of 12 June 1922, requiring all religious institutions to register with the authorities as a prerequisite for their existence (p. 39). This Decree was used by the government to suppress, to manipulate and blackmail the church leadership for obtaining political commitments, in effect a politicization of the church, which amounted to dishonorable compromises. In 1991 the Dean of the School of Theology at the University of Sofia, Prof. Totiu Koev, when referring to the ordeal of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in Communist times, told this writer: "Compromises were made! We had to make compromises, in order to survive." Father Stefanov has illustrated this necessity for compromise, where the Russian church leadership was concerned in far worse circumstances than its repeat performance in Bulgaria after 1944. His review of the accommodationist pronouncements of Patriarch Tikhon, placed under arrest and then mysteriously dying in 1925; of his successor Metropolitan Petr as locum tenens of the patriarchal office, imprisoned for 12 years and then executed by a firing squad, and, after him, Metropolitan Sergey, later Patriarch, are a testimony for the martyrdom of the Russian Church. Stefanov has clearly sought justifications for their accommodationism and capitulation to Soviet authorities, even though their sacrifices at the time were not appreciated by much of the rank and file of the church following.

Much more complex are the problems of the peripheral church groups on the Russian religious scene - the opportunists (Obnovlentsi - advocates of renewal), who sought to turn the church into a subservient tool in the hands of the Soviets; the intransigents, who escaped to the Catacombs and ended in gulags or faced the executioners; and the exiles, who set up a parallel Synod at Karlowatz, Yugoslavia, later moving to the United States. The Obnovlentsi were destined to fail for lack of support among the religious masses. The Catacomb fugitives met with their destiny for martyrdom. But the exiles were another matter. Father Stefanov has dealt easily with the first two groups, but as to the exiles, he has failed to appreciate their dilemma. They could not but view the patriarchal Church as an agent of the KGB (or its predecessors), a price which had to be reluctantly paid for the Church's mere survival, and they could not submit to orders from Moscow issued in the names of Patriarchs or Holy Synods. Such orders were seen as dictates of the KGB. The exiles accused the church at home of betrayal of its mission and questioned

its canonicity. The Moscow church authorities denied the canonical status of the Synod abroad.

This mutual questioning of each other's canonicity continues even to this day, nine years after the fall of communism. Father Stefanov does not seem to have come to grips with this dilemma, especially where the exiles are concerned, and supports the view from Moscow. The independent observer of this family crisis in the Russian Orthodox Church will inevitably recognize the truth that in those days of trial, 1917-1989, both the Patriarchate and the exiles have acted correctly in circumstances well beyond their control, and that after the big change of 1989 they should have embraced each other as fellow martyrs for the same cause, the cause of the Russian Orthodox Church. But to hold the surviving canonical church in Russia responsible for what the Bolsheviks did to it, or to hold the exile Synodal Church responsible for rejecting orders from Moscow, coming through the patriarchate but originating in the KGB, is, in both cases, unfair to each of them.

Prof. Stefanov's book on the Russian church in the 20th century is an analogical portrayal of the crisis in the present day Bulgarian Orthodox Church. The schism in Sofia, instigated by the governing anti-Communist coalition of the United Democratic Forces (UDF) in 1992 and still sustained under the provision of Article 16 of the Communist Law of Confessions of 24 February 1949, a copy of Lenin's Decree of 12 June 1922, is an unexplained paradox. Our author has not mentioned this parallel, has not noticed this analogy, but it stands out as a judgement against those persecuting the church in Sofia with laws and principles tailored by the worst enemies of religion and Christianity in our times. It all comes down to the perennial ambition of the state to control the church - in a Communist or democratic environment, especially where the constitutional principle of separation of church and state is no more than a lip service to democratic institutions.

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