

PATRIARCH KIRILL AND ECUMENISM

by Barbara Hallensleben

Dr. Barbara Hallensleben, Professor of Dogmatic and Ecumenical Theology at the University of Freiburg, Switzerland, is a member of the Direktorium of the Institute for Ecumenical Studies at Freiburg University. She is also a member of the International Orthodox-Catholic Dialogue Commission. This article, appearing here in English translation, was published as "Kyrill - Patriarch der Oikumene" in Glaube in der 2ten Welt, Nr 5, 2009, 18-19, and is a meditation on a publication of texts, selected by Patriarch Kirill, starting from his time as head of the International Department of the Russian Orthodox Church, and ending with major documents from the Millennial Council of 2000 on ecumenism and human rights, which were published by the Freiburg Institute for Ecumenical Studies in early 2009.

The European Ecumenical Assembly "Peace with Justice" met in Basel in 1989. Metropolitan Alexei of Leningrad - later Patriarch Alexei II - then as president of the Conference of European Churches served as co-president of the assembly together with Cardinal Carlo Martini. Their "Message" ended with the words: "The Spirit of God, that has brought us together here, will always work far beyond our expectations. We believe, that the Spirit is at work, so that the seed that was planted here, may sprout and grow. That is our hope. That is our prayer." Indeed, this prayer was answered in a quite unexpected way. The year 1989 became the beginning of a political turning point toward more free and open encounters between East and West. Through the cooperation of a significant number of Orthodox delegates, the seeds of the Gospel of peace with justice were sown at the Basel Assembly through prayers, Bible studies, presentations, discussions, workshops, and forums. There was a tri-country march where over 5000 people, starting in Basel, walked through open borders to Germany, to France and back to Switzerland. Many delegates from eastern Europe did so with tears in their eyes. "Those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy" (Psalm 126:5). From that common witness of faith a power emerged that made the peaceful political transformations possible.

Shaping Experiences

The time for sowing in tears had begun long before. It was the seed of the martyrs, the hundreds of thousands who had given their lives for their faith during the time of the totalitarian communist regimes. "The blood of Christians is the seed" said Tertullian, that patristic father from Africa (*Apologetics* 50,13). This was experience world within which Patriarch Kirill grew up - persecution and prison for his father and grandfather, both of whom were priests, and the resultant poverty, the unjust tax debts that even the son made payments on for many years. "And I thank God for that, because as a result I never could link priestly service to material prosperity."¹ As monk, priest and then bishop, Kirill was constantly being tested and torn, caught between being true to his faith, seeking to maintain a minimum of room to function as church, and the inadequate solidarity shown from the West. "Had they been successful in proving that the church had committed political offences against the state power of that time, then without doubt she would

¹ Kyrill, Patriarch von Moskau und der ganzen Rus', *Freiheit und Verantwortung im Einklang. Zeugnisse für den Aufbruch zu einer neuen Weltgemeinschaft*. Institut für Ökumenische Studien der Universität Freiburg Schweiz, 2009. 239pp. p.12.

no longer exist, then they would have dealt with the church as they did with the political opposition."² "Too often it was also true, that our fellow brethren abroad did not take note of gross problems in the Soviet Union."³

In the midst of this super weight of responsibility, this personal history is marked by a deep joy, an unimagined creativity and power, to make the impossible possible. There was the opening of theological education for women, when no one yet considered their services possible, through Kirill's role as director of the theological academy in Leningrad. There was the opening of new churches and congregations already in the 1980s, the unheard of dynamic of the renovation not only of church buildings, but of people as "living stones" (1 Peter 2:5). Then came the access to modern media, Kirill's TV program running since 1994. There was the Church claiming public space, as articulated in the "Social Conception of the Russian Orthodox Church", which was composed by Kirill's team and endorsed by the Bishops' Council of 2000. As early as his ordination speech as bishop in 1976, Kirill placed service for the unity of the Church at the center of his task, revealing himself thereby as student of Metropolitan Nikodim, whom he had already served as secretary during his time of studies. "Strive for the unity of the church, there is nothing greater than that" was a citation he took from St. Ignatius of Antioch's letter to Bishop Polykarp of Smyrna, Kirill continuing: "In humility I take up this counsel of the holy church father as primary thread for my future ministry. I consider it a special sign of divine providence, that I was able to participate in the ecumenical movement, through whose help I was able to have fellowship with brothers and sisters of other confessions."⁴

Challenging Critique

How did it come about, that this patriarch, who publicly confessed his commitment to the ecumenical movement at a time when it brought him no advantages in the western press, is now suspected of anti-ecumenical views? During the third European Ecumenical Assembly in Cluj 2007, the then Metropolitan Kirill's speech elicited controversy. One delegate, in reaction to the Metropolitan's words, composed the following lines:

Why should I be surprised?
A battle over modernity!
I want to be a Christian in this world
In my town - and gladly!
Will bear witness in politics
And in democracy
In the culture, and with reasonableness
But without freedom - never!

What is striking is how the key words from the sermon of the Patriarch - freedom and public witness - are turned against him here. Who knows better than Kirill, that freedom of faith can not be suppressed by violence, nor can it be produced with violence, that the witness of the Gospel is not limited to an inner churchly sphere, but that it seeks to transform the entire Oekumene - the entire globe. It is precisely from these highly sensitive core convictions that he directs his straight forward criticism against the "West". In its "liberalism" and "secularism" he discerns distortions of "freedom" and "openness". The Patriarch respects the pluralism of world views and maintains the rules of a culture of dialogue. That is, he chooses to speak, to argue, to take

² Ibid. p.15

³ Ibid. p.16

⁴ Ibid. p.3

initiatives, brings people together under questions held in common. He does not merely speak, but encourages his church to act. The "World Assembly of the Russian Peoples", scarcely known to us, has generated an organizational structure in many large Russian cities, where church and state representatives seek common solutions to social problems. So the church is not merely focused on self-maintenance, but finds itself in service to society, in a way that may not be defamed as mere dream of being a state church.

Those critical questions of the "West", are more understandable when seen as similar to those of self-critical voices from the "West". Such a fundamental ambivalence about a secular world view is coming today not only from an eastern perspective. Does not the so-called democratic ideal now maintain an uneasy balance between egoistic interests and a surfeit of bureaucratic documents, that feigns normalcy, when, fundamentally speaking, a situation of extreme emergency has become the norm?

In its recognition of secularism, of the worldliness of the world, the Church has no difficulty. Christians are convinced that the world is indeed what they have always confessed, not something that needs some interpretive system to constitute itself. For that reason they can reconcile themselves, not merely out of necessity, with a secular state, but support it decisively, seeing the secularization as fruit of the Christian history of the west, indeed to seek to learn from secular achievements. The Patriarch, however, raises questions that we have long asked ourselves: Does a secular world order signify a guarantee for the free exchange between differing confessions and world views, in order to reach consensus on how to structure our common living space for the common good? Or does the secular serve as pretext for exclusion, the excommunication of such confessions from the public sphere? Then the secular would tend toward a tendentious, totalitarian exclusivist world view. It is this latter variant, and solely this, that the Patriarch critiques.

With his thoughts Kirill stands within the best traditions of western ethics and political philosophy. He begins with notions of common good and commonweal, not because he disparages individual freedom, but because he, like Aristotle, presupposes a common goal for the individual and for the political community. So the Patriarch is not speaking only of ethics as philosophy, or as theological reflections on the formation of norms. What matters for him is the *Ethos*, the communally achieved structure of the good life for humans. Here too he is among the best of contemporary political thinkers, such as the Heidelberg philosopher Rüdiger Bubner, who emphasizes: "To the degree, that the rationalization process does not result in widely accepted forms of living, in which reason becomes evident for everyone, the Enlightenment dialectic will be strengthened."

Concept of Ecumenism

Kirill is truly a patriarch of ecumenism. That is why he shifts the perspective from a church political balance to that of the welfare of the Oekumene, the inhabited earth. Debates within Christianity now tend to circle around issues about the forms of living in the modern world. From this perspective, the centuries long major differences between Catholics and Protestants in the western Church get relativized, in favor of the bigger query put by the eastern Church to western Christianity: Have you not made your peace too easily, with insufficient critique, of a civilization, in which conceptions of the human and a social concept are no longer compatible with the standards of the Gospel? The movement for Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC), following from the Basel Assembly, shares that critical challenge. Viewed from such a horizon, the issue of ecclesiology is also changed. "The Orthodox Church is the true Church of Jesus Christ" (p.186) - this confession affirmed by the Moscow Bishops' Council (2000) is not directed primarily

against other churches. It seeks to affirm much more, that the Church of Jesus Christ is truly present in history, it is not mere ideal or utopia. The Church as lived community, not merely as churchly teaching, is what Christians offer the world community. Hence they address questions that today belong to the entire Oekumene: How does one, within a secular state develop consensus for common, binding public values, how does one convey them from generation to generation and renew them? Is the contemporary nation state the best model, for protecting human rights as civil rights and to allow them to unfold? How can a nationally structured church, in light of migrations and religious inter-mixing, contribute to identity formation that integrates national elements as well as relativizes them?

Unmistakable in the policy of the Moscow Patriarchate is its highly developed trans-national self-understanding of the church. The political collapse of the Soviet Union was not seen as sufficient reason, to foster church divisions according to new national borders. The Patriarch bears the title "of Moscow and all Rus'". It is not the nation state designation Russia, but the mission territory of Christianized Rus' that it has in mind. So the Russian Orthodox Church participates in the ambitious witness of the church toward a world community, that is not driven by competition and self-idealization. What kind of 'home' are we able, under these conditions, to assure for dissidents and those of other faith - and what degree of 'homelessness' are we prepared to take up on that behalf?

Translated by Walter Sawatsky