

ORTHODOXY AND ECUMENISM IN EASTERN EUROPE TODAY

by Leonid Kishkovsky

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You will recall some media images from early January when leaders of the Orthodox churches gathered in Bethlehem to inaugurate the observance of the year 2000 among the Orthodox churches. It was a significant event, at least in terms of image, that the Orthodox primates were able to come together, even though there are some pretty serious internal difficulties, within and among the Orthodox churches. I believe only two were missing - Patriarch Petros from Alexandria (Egypt) was apparently ill, and Patriarch Ignatius in Damascus simply could not come to Palestine or Israel because of the political situation between Syria and Israel. A few days ago a Russian coming for a WCC conference had his Syrian visa from the end of last year, but was thereafter in Israel and Palestine with Patriarch Alexei II of Moscow, and the Israelis stamped his visa. So when he arrived at the Damascus airport, he was not admitted. Patriarch Ignatius of Antioch was missing for that same reason.

In addition to the Patriarchs and other heads of churches, some of the countries involved were also represented by their presidents. This was a rather unprecedented and unusual sign that in many societies, in which the majority of the population are Orthodox, there has been a very significant, dramatic change in the last ten years. Obviously we could not imagine in 1989 that the President of the the Soviet Union or the President of Romania or the political leaders of new states like Ukraine and Georgia would have attended. In the case of Russia it was Mr. Yeltsin, who had just resigned, who was asked by acting President Putin to represent the state. This

presence of political figures is clearly a sign that in post-communist societies religion, which used to be suppressed or marginalized, has come to the public arena. It is now very visibly present in the public arena.

The presence of the church in the public arena is not always a beautiful sight, it sometimes includes the presence of nationalism and extremism. Nevertheless it is clear that religion has entered the public arena, and it is of advantage to the political leaders to be associated with the church. Before we get too nervous about that, we should remember the words of American presidential candidate George Bush in a recent debate when he identified himself completely with the Christian faith, doing so at least partly for political reasons. Therefore when we assess and analyse such phenomena in the public square, we should recognize this is not an unknown factor in the West, in the United States in particular.

Authentic Revival and Rebuilding of Orthodoxy

The post-Communist era certainly has been one of difficulty and disruption, of new life and some hope, including very significant difficulties and conflicts within the societies themselves, and also within the churches in Eastern Europe. The nationalism that has emerged as at least a partial substitute for communism, has been connected with various forms of fundamentalism, at least in the religious communities. These phenomena in turn have created some internal social conflict within Orthodox churches, hence conflicts of vision and identity.

First a few words about the authentic revival and rebuilding of religious life after decades of outright persecution and marginalization. Here are some symbolic statistics. In Moscow about a dozen years ago there were only 49 churches open for worship. Today there are between 350-400. A dozen years ago there were five theological schools in the Russian Orthodox church, today there are over fifty. A dozen years ago there were about seven thousand churches in the territory of the Soviet Union, a very small number, today there are approximately three times that number in the same territory. The revival is real. It is supported by some societal forces in each of the relevant states, but some of these developments are opposed by other forces in the relevant states. I would say that at the ground level, most of the

revival comes from the desire of the population to have the churches open, the desire to have an education in theology, the desire and thirst of people for spiritual orientation. When you think about your own church in the United States and think about this kind of growth in the same period of time, even during very prosperous times, you can imagine the economic difficulties that would accompany such growth in the sheer number of church parishes, theological schools, dioceses, etc. When you transpose these figures to the post-communist setting, to the disruption, the poverty for large parts of the population, then you can sense how difficult it is to find the funds simply to rebuild the parish, to paint the icons, to publish the music, to get the teachers who can teach, even to find the priests.

Large numbers of priests have been ordained without education, because the church has not been able to keep up with the demand for clergy. In each case the church has required that the man involved promise to continue his education. But in most cases that is very difficult, when you consider the very heavy loads, just in terms of performing the sacraments, baptisms, weddings, funerals, the load that a parish clergyman carries in those circumstances. So education, unfortunately, has been postponed, or has not been readily available for a new generation of clergy. There are indeed many more theological schools, though also with a shortage of teachers and materials. Nevertheless some training is occurring and one can hope that in a generation or two the question of education will have been addressed constructively.

New Converts and the Fundamentalism Phenomenon

Now we hear a lot about proselytism, about mission and evangelism. Usually we hear about it in terms of the evangelism and mission which sometimes turns into aggressive proselytism by those coming to post-communist societies from abroad, from Western Europe, especially from America, and interestingly enough, from South Korea. This has been a factor in the political and religious scene, a factor for tension. What I also want to point out is the presence of new converts in large numbers within the Orthodox churches. The growth that has occurred simply could not have taken place on the basis of those who were faithful believers ten or twelve years ago. It occurred because many new people have come into the Orthodox Church.

In some of the churches, especially the Russian church, the presence of converts in large numbers, who all possess the zeal that converts have, is part of the driving force that has created the phenomenon of fundamentalism. These new converts to Christianity, who came from point zero in terms of their knowledge of faith and of Orthodoxy, often reach for those things which are perhaps not at the real core of the religious faith. They are more likely to be enthused about the outward trappings, about the connections with culture, with national heritage, the connections with the rebuilding of the nation. When we see the coolness and sometimes hostility towards other Christian bodies, this has to do with the zeal of new converts within the Orthodox church itself. A similar phenomenon has been occurring in other Orthodox churches in Eastern Europe. This has been a reality that is not static, but with a changing dynamic.

Let me cite two events that reveal some sign of change and I hope that the optimism that I will offer here will be vindicated in the years ahead, though not without some steps backward as well as forward. I came away from a recent trip in February 2000 with distinct hope that this difficult time is being addressed and handled in constructive ways. In November 1994 in Moscow there was a conference called with the blessing of the Patriarch, but not organized by the church, rather by some new movements, some new schools of theological instruction, within the Orthodox church. They were blessed to convene a conference which I attended. The tone of this conference is best characterized by a phrase which I used during an intervention in the proceedings. After listening to what was transpiring for a day and a half, I described what I was hearing as "spiritual Bolshevism". Although this was a conference of Orthodox Christians, of priests, lay theologians and a number of lay people, the tonality, direction and orientation of the conference was really about cleansing and purging the Orthodox church, about eliminating from it those trends of liberalism and modernism that the conservative side of the spectrum saw. Several clergymen whom I knew personally, were particularly targeted in denunciation after denunciation. These were clergy who had written some non-standard essays and books, in terms of a revisioning or of an effort to understand anew the role of Orthodoxy in today's Russia. They were clergy who had been experimenting, in one

particular case especially, with the introduction of vernacular Russian rather than continuing to use Church Slavonic in the services. This was Father Kochetkov. Father Alexander Borisov was being denounced for his contacts with the so-called modernists, and also for a book which he had just published, which was a collection of essays written during the previous ten years. These were rather free reflections on the contemporary situation of the Orthodox church. Hence they contained some self-criticism and there were some unfortunate expressions and turns of phrase (from an Orthodox standpoint). The denunciations, however, were utterly rigid and I felt completely justified in calling them spiritual Bolshevism, because it was an attack against an “enemy” who was to be destroyed. So it was very similar to the political purges of various communist systems. I guess this did not make me popular, but it did make the news.

The zeal I witnessed was being fueled in part by new converts. I inquired about some of the loudest speakers and discovered that only a few years ago they had been very alien to the church, were perhaps communists or Komsomol. They had come into the church, whether sincerely or not so sincerely, and now were speaking in this spiritual Bolshevik style from the podium, attacking theological opponents within the Russian Orthodox Church.

When I was back in Moscow in February 2000, I managed to attend part of another conference, one fully sponsored by the Church officially. There were only about a hundred attending and the theme of the conference was “Orthodox Theology on the Threshold of the Third Millennium”. I might note that the conference in 1994 was entitled “The Unity of the Church” - they were purging the church in order to ensure its unity. At this recent conference there were only three guests from abroad, the other two were part of the Russian Orthodox Church, which I am not. One was an American who has lived in England almost all his life, now a bishop (Basil Osborne) living in Oxford, and the other was a lay theologian, Dimitri Shakhovskoy of Paris. There were sessions on Biblical studies, on Patristics, on liturgical life and so on, making an effort in various sessions to address problems in Russian life, in Russian theological education, in as lively a way as possible.

The really symbolic session for me was the one on Patrology, because the two speakers were a study in polarity. One speaker was Father Valentin Asmus, who has been a believer probably from his early youth. Interestingly, his father was a very well known Marxist philosopher. The son converted to Christianity and became a theologian and a priest, teaching in the Moscow Theological Academy. Perhaps his conversion was in a certain way a rejection of his father's beliefs, so in that sense the zeal of the convert might apply to him as well, at least in terms of the motivating force for what he says and writes. The second speaker was Father Ilarion Alfeyev, a young theologian who has already written six or seven books of very good quality on Patristics. He has also written a general introduction to Orthodox theology for popular reading and I consider it one of the best books that is available at that level. His other books are very scholarly. Father Ilarion Alfeyev has his doctorate from Oxford. When he returned to Russia he found that he was not welcome to teach in the Moscow Theological Academy, because he had been touched by the virus of heterodox teaching, though his teacher in Oxford was an Orthodox scholar, Bishop Kallistos Ware. Of course Oxford is clearly not an Orthodox environment. Metropolitan Kirill of Smolensk, the Chair of the Department of External Relations of the Orthodox Church, recognized this man's talents and brought him into his department, where he is now the head of the secretariat on ecumenical affairs.

Father Ilarion Alfeyev and Father Valentin Asmus both gave presentations on patrology. What startled me because I fully expected the sparks of polemics would be visible quickly, was that in fact the different orientations, which were still clear, were nevertheless reaching for language that could be the language of dialogue between these points of view. That Father Ilarion Alfeyev would reach for common language did not surprise me, but that Father Valentin Asmus also did so, surprised me. What I found really telling in the presentations on the role of Patristics in the Russian Orthodox Church, was that both speakers gave excellent papers really looking at nuances, at sub-texts, at contexts, and neither one of them was over simplifying or reducing the matter to simple formulas. Perhaps of the greatest interest was the perspective offered by Father Asmus because he chose in a sense to identify a challenging issue. Father Asmus insisted that for Orthodox to simply reject the

Western Patristic heritage, meaning the Latin Fathers, was a very foolish enterprise. After all, said he, very many, even most of the Latin Fathers were in faith Orthodox - this was before the schism of 1054. Furthermore, he pointed out that the Third Ecumenical Council in drawing up a list of authoritative fathers consisting of twenty names, included about four of the Latin Fathers. And, Father Asmus went on to point out, among the four is Saint Augustine whom Orthodox theologians love to reject. 'So', said he, 'if you want to reject Augustine in any complete or final way, you are actually going against an Ecumenical Council of the Orthodox church'.

He even defended to some extent the figure of Peter Mogila, the famous Metropolitan of Kiev who is identified as a Latinizer of Orthodoxy. Both Father Asmus and Father Alfeyev placed the person of Mogila in the context of his day and offered the thought that one needs to know what options and models were available to Peter Mogila, to be realistic. Given the options actually available, when drawing a profile of this great figure of Orthodox history, a controversial figure of the 17th century, it won't do to reduce him to the level of anti-Latin polemics, there is need to look more deeply and to see how in fact Orthodox theology and the witness of the Orthodox church were strengthened by the work of Mogila, although he also made some mistakes.

I thought these were very interesting nuances, and the impression I came away with, is that a platform for conversation is emerging. The extreme on the conservative side, seemingly, is now ready for conversation, since none of those they have been attacking are modernists, on any objective scale of Christian thought today, common ground is being developed.

I was particularly impressed by how intelligently the convenor of the committee had acted when selecting schools to be invited. Interestingly, one particular school was invited officially, a school not officially created by the church, namely the Biblical Theological Institute of St. Andrew. I had visited Alexei Bodrov's institute, really just an apartment in Moscow where they hold regular seminars. They are doing a very lively program of publications, especially translations from Western languages of some very worthwhile theological literature. It was interesting that Metropolitan Filaret of Minsk, the chair of the Synodal

Theological Commission who organized the conference, made sure that the Biblical Institute of Saint Andrew was included. I later found out that people from the institute were extremely active behind the scenes in helping to develop the concept of this conference and drafting some of papers. So there is both an organized effort by the Church to create a platform where positions can be discussed in a spirit of some amicability and common language, and I think there is a movement at other levels in society that seems to be marginalizing the really extremist radicals. They exist, they are loud, but others in Moscow with whom I checked agreed that they are beginning to lose influence. There are changes and we will have to be watching them. There are grounds for hope. Perhaps the movement from closed to open society in only a decade, at the end of the day points to greater stability in the inner life of the church.

Reasons for Orthodox Critique of Ecumenism

On the issue of ecumenism, in light of these phenomena and in light of what has been happening in other Orthodox churches, you can say in general that their critique of ecumenical life has increased. One of the factors for that has been the fundamentalist wing in Orthodox churches, but not only the post-communist fundamentalists. There is an anti-ecumenical wing in Greece that is very vocal, there is certainly one in America, the latter also energized in part by converts to Orthodoxy, some of them former Protestants. Present have been the factors of some isolationist feelings, some anti-Western sentiments, some fundamentalist movements.

In the picture of Orthodoxy given in a paper circulated at the Europe Committee meeting of the NCC, we have an accurate profile but a partial one¹. The analysis offered at the conference in Oxford on March 6, 1999 was a critique of the developments within Orthodoxy, including a claim that the Orthodox have not been sufficiently versed in ecumenical matters and language. All of this is true, but it would be too reductionist a picture for two reasons. The opening up of the communist societies to relations with the West have also opened the eyes of Christians in those

¹The reference is to a one page summary, Richard Mortimer, "CEWERN symposium on Orthodoxy", Oxford, March 6, 1999; the symposium's title was "Have the Orthodox Churches rejected Ecumenism?".

societies to realities in the West. As a matter of fact, some of them have concluded sadly that not all is actually well within Christianity in the West. Some who know well that all is not well with their own churches in the East, are also acutely aware that not all is well in the West, that they may have idealized the West earlier, and perhaps there are things occurring in Western Christianity that suggest that the Western Christian model might not be the one that actually works the best. They may not know what does work best, but they ask whether the Western model is even working for the West? Certainly they see a kind of collapse of Christian discourse in the West, they see that Western societies with the possible exception of the USA, are not only secularized, but only a tiny portion of the population is actually in church on Sunday in most western societies.

They have become aware of the fact that there is pretty deep confusion on ethical teaching in Western Christianity, and that this debate has transferred itself to the World Council setting, which has not been helpful. They often do not really regard the staking out of the homosexual ethics positions as being necessarily prophetic, or as being the best expression of ethical thinking. I would say that many of those who are tolerant among the Orthodox, who do not want to scapegoat churches, do not want to attack other people or other societies, still do not think that we in the West have developed the best debate or the best conclusions in many of these matters.

Or take the even more concrete discovery of several years ago when I assisted a large Protestant congregation in USA which brings in several persons from elsewhere in the world to talk about mission. They had hosted persons from Asia and Latin America and now wanted someone from Russia. So I facilitated the visit of two women from Moscow, who were very active in the St. Cosmas & Damian parish where Father Alexander Borisov is the pastor. These two women are busy in their personal lives, were giving much of their time to the church, and were at the time active in a hospital ministry, so they could not easily leave Moscow, but I managed to persuade them. Later they told me that one of the reasons they came was that they wanted to be in an American Protestant setting, to pick up some ideas about how the church can best work with young people. But in this large Protestant congregation

they discovered that there are no young people, that it is a graying congregation, large and wealthy, but without youth. They thought perhaps the families were all childless. Then they inquired and discovered that many children from these families simply do not come to church services. So a meeting was organized with some of the young people and the two Russian visitors, where they discovered that the church was not relevant to the youth. They might be interested in this or that activity a few times a year, but are certainly not interested in the mission of the church as it is perceived and lived in that congregation. The Russian visitors were very disappointed. They had come with the idea that there would be a thriving youth work, and they would return with new ideas to improve their own youth work. So they said to me, 'we may not be doing our work that well, and may not be sufficiently organized, but we certainly have a lot of young people in church'. So broadly speaking, the Orthodox of Eastern Europe are discovering that not all things Western work even in the West, and that in some ways they might have something to offer in Christian witness.

Theological Difficulties with Existing Ecumenical Movement

The second factor for the Orthodox distancing from ecumenism goes back a bit further. In the early seventies a book was published in observance of the 25th anniversary of the WCC, entitled *Unity in Mid-Career*². No longer in print, though still available in good libraries, the book included an essay by Father Alexander Schmemmann. I stress that it was the early seventies, communism was fully in place, totalitarianism was alive and well, the societies in the East were closed, not open, and we heard nothing about fundamentalism. Instead what we heard was that Christians were in jail for running Christian and Orthodox seminars. Nor was fundamentalism then yet a phenomenon in Greece, or for that matter in America, in the Orthodox setting. Nevertheless, Father Schmemmann writes a very soul searching piece of theological reflection on the meaning of Orthodox involvement in the World Council of Churches. He describes it in very cautionary terms, and he is working theologically, not on the basis of church politics or sociology of that particular day.

²Keith R. Bridston & Walter D. Wagoner, eds. *Unity in Mid-Career: An Ecumenical Critique*. New York: Macmillan, 1963.

His theological assessment was that there is a serious theological problem for Orthodox membership in the World Council of Churches. I will not detail more than a couple of points. He described an ecclesiological problem in that the Orthodox theological self-understanding is extremely difficult to fit into the concept of a conciliar movement, an organization that has member churches with different and even contradictory ecclesiologies.

The other dimension that he explored concerned the presuppositions and assumptions that led to the creation of the modern ecumenical movement. He made a very good case that the Western Christian presuppositions on ecclesiology were the ones that were foundational for the creation of the World Council of Churches. This means that the categories of thought, the debates that are carried on, have tended to be Post-Reformation debates. Thus the ecumenical movement has been vital for overcoming the effects of the Reformation, the divisions separating the Catholics from the Protestants and the divisions among Protestants. The WCC has not succeeded in including on an equal footing the very different Orthodox perspective.

Therefore we need to understand that the difficulties for the Orthodox at present with ecumenism are really not just passing difficulties. They reveal or bring to the surface those things that have been there all along. The Orthodox are now very free to say their piece, very free to speak their mind. Not feeling internally trapped, meaning that till 1990 really for the sake of survival it was necessary to maintain contact with the outside world. There is gratitude still for the role of the World Council of Churches, for the American churches and other churches for reaching out at that time. But they also feel that at that time they were not fully able, in theological terms, to bring forward the concerns that are authentically Orthodox concerns about the ecumenical movement and the WCC.

A New Forum?

I have just come from Damascus where there was a meeting of the WCC special commission on Orthodox participation. This came about after the Harare Assembly of December 1998, where, due to very careful work by everyone, it was possible to avoid a destructive trajectory. It was possible at least to preserve an arena for dialogue. Out of the Assembly came an authorization by the Assembly to convene a special commission on Orthodox participation. This commission consists of about sixty people, fifty percent Orthodox in membership, fifty percent from other churches. The Damascus meeting was not of the full commission (which had met in Geneva in December 1999), it was a meeting of two sub-commissions, again made up of fifty percent Eastern and Oriental Orthodox, fifty percent other churches. The staff even is divided down the middle, two staff members from Geneva were Orthodox, two were Protestant.

The commission is looking at the whole picture of organization, of ethos and style of work, of theology, and of a visionary look at the future. The purpose of the commission is to bring to the Central Committee and eventually to the next Assembly some perspectives, some proposals for changes deemed necessary in order to make the World Council an arena where in fact one set of presuppositions and assumptions does not dominate anymore, that there is room for at least two, maybe more, sets of presuppositions and assumptions theologically and ecclesially, that would make it a more equitable arena for theological and ecumenical engagement.