

**THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH: ITS GLORY & ITS SHAME:
SERGEI HAECKEL MEMORIAL LECTURE**

by Paul Oestreicher

Dr. Paul Oestreicher, retired as Canon of Coventry Cathedral, is now Quaker Chaplain at the University of Sussex (Brighton UK). He has had a long career of ecumenical involvements with Christians East & West, some of that included in this reflective memorial. He has been on the REE Advisory Editorial Board since the beginning. This was his personal tribute, at the request of Sergei Haeckel's son Ivan, delivered at the Divinity School of Cambridge University on November 25, 2008.

Archpriest Sergei Haeckel, long Chancellor of the Diocese of the Russian Orthodox Church in Great Britain, was lecturer in Russian language and literature at the University of Sussex, and organiser of Religious Programmes in the Russian Service of the BBC. He died in 2006.

When you, Vanya, asked me to speak today in memory of your father, there was no way I could refuse. Sergei Hackel was a close and cherished friend, a fount of knowledge and wisdom, a fellow priest of warm humanity and of searching honesty, an Orthodox Christian whose liberality of mind and heart broke down many walls of partition. When Sergei came into a meeting, usually late and breathless, the atmosphere lightened in expectation of his kindly yet penetrating wit. It was never meant to hurt, but Sergei did not shy away from uncomfortable truths. He was far too human for me to paint him with a halo. He was a saint only in the sense that every penitent sinner – and he certainly was – is a saint. I know that those of you here today who had the good fortune to know him will agree that one simply had to like and to love him. However, this will not be a lecture about him.

When I began to reflect on what Father Sergei would want me to say, I came to the conclusion that he would want me to share with you – and to do it as though he were holding my hand - to share with you some of my own experience, over a life-time, of the Russian Orthodoxy which both nourished his soul and caused him deep pain. If, in no small measure, my very personal and subjective understanding owes a great deal to Sergei, if at times he enabled me to glimpse his Church through his eyes, that in no way entitles me to presume to speak posthumously for him. So, I alone am responsible for this lecture in honour of Sergei and of what he stood for. Yet I hope my reflections will reflect his spirit, for kindred spirits we were and, beyond the grave, we remain.

Friends, some of you my close friends, I have nothing to teach you today. Many of you know far, far more about my subject than I do. At least some of you will have to evaluate as insiders what I, an outsider, have decided - with considerable trepidation - to share with you. To my regret and shame, I do not even speak Russian, knowing well that language is a spiritual key that opens sanctuary doors.

What I want to share is experiential and episodic, pictures on small canvases. If a bigger picture emerges, it will be a bonus. My reflections, you will be justified in thinking, will say as much about me and my prejudices (and empathetically I hope about Father Sergei) than about my subject. This is all about a love affair. Love, I need not tell you, is never far from its opposite, a dialectic you will no doubt appreciate.

One more dedication at the outset, for Sergei would wish it. I must embrace in all I say the awesome memory of Father Alexander Men, murdered in no good cause. He lives on as an icon of

holy humanity. He is one personification, and there are many others, of the glory of Russian Orthodoxy, of light shining into Russia's darkness and our darkness.

Setting the Scene

At the back of the stage are two large canvases. Everything is played out against them. One is Tolstoy, the other Dostoevsky. I read them, though not exhaustively, before I was twenty. At twenty three I left my New Zealand home town of Dunedin to continue my study of political philosophy in the capital, Wellington. Parents exchanged children. Tanya, the daughter of the pastor of the Russian community in New Zealand, Archpriest Alexei Godayev, was moving to Dunedin to study medicine. She was welcomed by my parents and I by hers. Tanya would live in an exiled German Quaker home; I, a Russian Orthodox one. It was, for me, a kind of total immersion in a new culture and spirituality. A sign of how deeply this has stayed with me is that this morning, when making the sign of the cross at prayer, as I have done ever since, I did it the Orthodox way. It is much more than a piece of personal ceremonial. It is, for me, every time, an unspoken prayer for Russia and the Russian Church. And, this morning also, as on every morning if I can get it, the first food I ate was kasha.

I had already decided to train eventually for the Anglican priesthood but, for a time, I was part of the Russian parish in Wellington. The church was inside a very modest timber bungalow. It was simple, but beautiful. There was none of the splendour I was later to encounter in Russian cathedrals but, from day one, the liturgy became part of me. In no time I was recruited to serve, and to this day I owe my skill with incense and my love of it to Fr Alexei's tuition. It was there that I learnt my sense of the numinous that, in a different way, had also become a reality in the silence of a Quaker meeting.

Father Alexei was, perforce in New Zealand, part of the Church in Exile, his archbishop in Sydney. But his heart was with the Moscow Patriarchate. He had in no way broken emotionally from the Church in Russia. No doubt he was untypical of the exiled church, but he was as open intellectually and ecumenically as I much later found Sergei Hackel to be. Part of him was still in the village of his childhood. He had, as a young chemist in post-World War II Austria, married a German wife who had become, in her piety, more Orthodox than the Orthodox, a deeply religious, almost forbidding mother figure who ruled the home as an Orthodox matriarch. Father Alexei, whose week-day job was as a lactic chemist with the New Zealand Milk Board, was secure and relaxed in his faith. I was reminded of him when I read the story of Metropolitan Anthony walking out of vespers in the middle of Holy Week to go shopping. Father Alexei's wife, like many a holy babushka, would have looked daggers at that. Father Alexei read avidly and widely in Russian, English and German: the Eastern Fathers, the thinkers of the Russian intellectual emigration in Paris and in America. He introduced me particularly to Nicholas Berdyaev. *The Origin of Russian Communism* became a seminal work in my studies. Beyond all that – like Alexander Men – his reading and thinking was wide and heterodox. Other religions were not heresy to him but there to be learned from. I began to appreciate something of the strengths of a mode of spirituality that does not depend on theological formalism, and a priesthood that does not know the meaning of systematic theology. Father Alexei would burst into my room and share some nugget of wisdom he had discovered. It did not need to correlate with anything else.

Much later, however, I began to see the dangers too of a Church reliant for its life on timeless tradition and a wonderful mystical liturgy with few other firm anchors. For the wisest, that's more than enough, and for the holiest, the startsi, love suffices anyway. But for the rest? I was to get to know that rest in Soviet times, sometimes too well. When a host of young bishops have no

theological and intellectual grounding, as is now the case in the post Communist era, little wonder that things are as they are. But I generalise, for I am sure that there are admirable exceptions whether known to the outside world or not. And I do not mean just bishops.

Father Alexei ended his days at the New Zealand seaside, a very old widower, still open to new ideas, still with shining eyes, supporting and living with a young religious artist, not an icon painter, but much influenced by Russian mysticism. His daughter Tanya worked for years as a GP in one of the poorest parts of London and then returned to New Zealand as a naturopathic doctor and healer, something of a prophetess in an ecological spirit-filled garden.

Working with BCC Advisory Committee for East-West Relations

I was, as a result of my year in a Russian home, not quite unprepared for many encounters with Russia and its Christians when, in 1964, I was invited to be the first secretary to the British Council of Churches' Advisory Committee for East-West Relations. A Quaker political thinker, Richard Ullmann, who had initiated the Committee, had suddenly died. I was asked to step into his shoes. His pamphlet *The Dilemmas of a Reconciler* was, at least initially, to be my guide book. The Committee was made up of experts on the Communist-ruled countries of Europe. I began to see my parish as beginning in East Berlin and stretching to Vladivostok. A Quaker Trust financed the Committee and my job. Russian expertise was on hand in the persons of Sir John Lawrence, Michael Bourdeaux, and Sergei Hackel. John Arnold was in the chair. I am very happy that both Michael and John are here today.

The Cold War was at its height. How do I sum up the dilemma of that period? It was to hold the balance between a commitment to peace when the threat of war was real, and at the same time to be an advocate of the persecuted and voiceless. To get that absolutely right was almost impossible. Keston College, bravely led by Michael Bourdeaux in the face of much ecumenical critique – my own often included – knew clearly where it stood, on the side of the persecuted. Encouraged by Canon David Paton, the Church of England's key foreign policy advisor and a China expert, my head told me that the mutual demonising of East and West was the primary thing to be opposed. From the outset I believed in what much later came to be called Ostpolitik. I believed that maximum engagement with the Communist East was the long term recipe for the peaceful defeat of a tyranny that no longer, in my view, deserved to be called Socialism. Any thought of its violent defeat could only spell total disaster. My dictum was: peaceful change through rapprochement, both by state and church.

It was Sergei who helped me to activate that dictum in relation to the Russian Orthodox Church. That is how our friendship began. But one of the implications, agreeing to be the British member of the Executive Committee of the Prague Christian Peace Conference - whose policy was framed by the Russian Orthodox Church, which in turn was in the hands of the Kremlin (here I somewhat oversimplify) – this role sat uneasily with my simultaneous membership of the Council of British Amnesty of which, in the 1970s, I became chairman. My heart was more with Amnesty than my head, and incidentally therefore also with the work of Keston College – even if I did not say so very loudly. The dilemma between ecclesiastical diplomacy and human rights advocacy was constant and never fully resolved before the Cold War ended. Both approaches were essential. The Helsinki accords ultimately made them more consonant.

Prague Christian Peace Conference

My Russian counterpart was none other than the formidable Metropolitan of Leningrad, Nikodim, the Moscow Patriarchate's foreign minister. He was, among many other things, in a

position to dictate the Christian Peace Conference's policy. It would be impossible to say that he and I were friends, but we were sparring partners who respected each other. I was, in official terms, a very young Anglican priest, albeit with an official title. He was almost equally young, but an Archbishop and more. It sometimes felt to me like David and Goliath. At least it helped a little that when in Russia on official business, I never took off my priestly white summer cassock. At the All-Christian Peace Assembly in Prague in 1964, Nikodim and I clashed head to head. I led a delegation of some twenty representatives of the British churches, not delegates but influential individuals. A predictable resolution - written no doubt by the ever-present behind the scenes state agents - was proposed by Nikodim. It condemned the ideological anti-communism of the West, in other words the demonisation of the East by the West. After consultation with my colleagues I went to the microphone and said that the British delegation could only support the resolution if, in a second paragraph, it equally condemned the Communist demonisation of the West. Participants from other western countries, including a significant American group of distinguished academics like Professor Charles West from Princeton, agreed with me. The Soviet-imposed pattern of unanimity in decision-making was shattered by my intervention.

There was deep disquiet. What would happen? Nikodim went to the podium and to general amazement announced: "I apologise for the resolution and withdraw it". I knew immediately what that might cost him and went to the podium and embraced him, to the standing applause of the 800 or so people present. At subsequent meetings I knew that such opposition at the right moment was what the best of the Russian and other East European Christians secretly hoped for. We could say what they could not. In some senses this was undiplomatic. It was the role I chose to play in the East. In the West my critique was of western Cold War policies, but that did not appease Fr Paul Sokolovsky, the Patriarchate's 'man in Prague' and his KGB masters. He told the KGB I was probably an agent of western intelligence. No doubt he believed it, seeing me as the same kind of plant that he was.

In the West I was an active and leading figure in a peace movement that was often a thorn in the side of the NATO establishment. But in the East, as I knew only too well, the word 'peace' had become an empty political slogan of state propaganda. The West had its politically equivalent slogan: 'freedom'. Many Christians did not see through the hollowness of both slogans. Even so, both the affirmation of 'peace' in the East and of 'freedom' in the West were not totally hypocritical. Nevertheless, when a half truth is presented as the whole truth, it becomes a lie.

Pavel Sokolovsky visited England in 1967 and was invited to appear in Manchester on BBC TV together with Professor Milan Opocensky, a highly intelligent and astute Czech Christian who later became General Secretary of the World Reformed Alliance in Geneva. On a long foggy night I shared a taxi ride back to London with the two of them, with a punctured tyre on the way. With a long time to talk, I finally lost my patience with this Russian priest, and perhaps unwisely Dr Opocensky took my side. "How could you tell such lies to the British public about the Church in Russia? At least admit to us you did it under orders." Perhaps that wasn't fair. Sergei Hackel in his reflective way would have kept his peace. Father Sokolovsky, together with his East German counterpart, Gerhard Bassarack, saw to it that I got my come-uppance.

Early in 1968 Dr Jaroslav Ondra, the weak but thoroughly decent General Secretary of the Christian Peace Conference, arrived at my London office. "Paul", he said, "Nikodim has made plain to me that if I fail to persuade you to resign from the leadership of the Christian Peace Conference, I will lose my job". So, for his sake, I resigned. Perhaps they really did think they'd got rid of an MI6 agent. Sadly, when the Soviets invaded Prague in August of that year, Slavek Ondra was fired anyway. This time I could not help him. The honourable if sometimes naive founder and father of

the Peace Conference, Professor Josef Hromadka, died heartbroken at the end of the dream of 'socialism with a human face'. Pavel Sokolovsky died too, when a Soviet plane bringing him back to Prague, crashed at the airport, killing all on board. He still features in my prayers. For who am I to judge him?

Russian Orthodoxy at the Edges

Somewhat surprisingly, I was, for a while, still given visas to the Soviet Union. I was, even more surprisingly, asked to lead a delegation of young British trade unionists invited by the Komsomol, the Young Communist League. That was a steep learning experience, my only totally secular visit, no cassock this time, but most of it hardly within the scope of this lecture; except for one free evening with no one to keep an eye on me. It was in Kalinin, half way between Leningrad and Moscow. I asked, is there an open church here? People were very vague, but pointed in the direction where, at the edge of town, there was said to be one. So I walked and walked and walked. It was mid-summer and light until late. Finally I found it, and knocked on a door nearby to ask for the priest. It was not the priest's house but a woman opened the door who was his friend and spoke good German. She took me to his house. She interpreted and we talked deep into the night. He shared with me the experience of many years in the Gulag without a trace of bitterness. His joy at meeting me, I can hardly describe. This I realised once again was the Russia that lives from the certainty that Christ is Risen. Christos Voskrese. When finally I rose to go, when we had prayed together, he went to a cupboard and took out a priest's cross. "It was with me through my imprisonment. I want you to have it and to wear it." "I can't take your cross" I said. "Please do" he countered, "I'm an archpriest now and have a finer one." I took it, treasured it, but never wore it. When a priest friend of mine was imprisoned in South Africa, I sent it to him. To me this was the ecumene of the martyrs, the true witnesses, who already inhabit the Kingdom where national and confessional borders do not exist. My friend David in post-apartheid South Africa still wears that Russian cross, now as an Anglican bishop.

My late-night encounter with Father Oleg is replicated by others. On every visit to Moscow I had the addresses of people at the edge and of the wives of prisoners. If only I had been able to pay more such visits. They enriched me in Russia as they did in South Africa. They could not be kept secret. I knew that one day such a visit would, perforce, be my last until the system was no more. Our friend John Lawrence (and only he) believed that that would happen within his lifetime. It did, just.

The moving story at the edge of Kalinin deserves another, that is also very human. I should not romanticise the priesthood in Russia - or anywhere else. This is a Volgograd story, Coventry's twin city that was better known as Stalingrad. The train journey from Moscow in a bitter winter, all flights cancelled, was long and tedious. A drunk and unpleasantly rude fellow passenger did not help to redeem the journey. Two days later, the very same man was among the clergy gloriously celebrating the Divine Liturgy. Lord have mercy, ringing through that liturgy is sung to good purpose and the Lord does have mercy, for sins much worse than that. It was the world of Graham Greene that knows no borders either. Nor does sanctity. I smiled and still do at the humanity of it all.

Memories of Metropolitan Nikodim

Not very long before his death, I helped to host Metropolitan Nikodim in London. A strange rapport was still there. We knew each other well enough for him to chide me on a hot day, without giving offence, for rolling up my sleeves: not cultured for a priest. His sense of humour

enabled him to indicate in hidden ways: "I hope you're wise enough not to take everything I say as Gospel." After all, what *is* truth? Jesus asked Pilate. When I took Nikodim and his party through customs, I carried a very heavy suitcase for him (he, be it said at the cost of his health, was much heavier). Asked what the suitcase contained, with a wide grin he joked "It is full of caviar and vodka." The customs official liked the joke and waved us through. This time, it was the truth. Only Archpriest Vitaly Borovoy, Nikodim's deputy, would use humour even more boldly to convey the truth. At an ecumenical meeting in Sweden I well remember these words in his address: "We have full freedom of religion in Russia and one day in God's good time we will even enjoy it."

Metropolitan Nikodim, on a visit to Rome, died suddenly in the arms of the Pope of only a few weeks, John Paul I. I was sad for the Russian Church and with hindsight am now even sadder. A real ecumenist, he had written his doctorate on the life of Pope John XXIII. I had little doubt of Nikodim's deep Orthodox piety, nor of the genuineness of his ecumenical understanding and commitment. Very few of his colleagues shared it, though that only became evident much later. Most, as things turned out, used the ecumenical movement when it was an asset and discarded it when they felt it was no longer needed. I had, in my own ministry, always seen the often criticised uncritical embrace of the Russian Church with all its flaws by the ecumenical movement, as an important way of opening Russian Orthodox hearts and minds to non-Orthodox Christendom in the days beyond Communist rule. That hope has been sadly disappointed.

Bishop Robert Runcie was invited to represent the Archbishop of Canterbury at Metropolitan Nikodim's funeral. Bob Runcie, we were good friends, wanted me to accompany him. Now the Soviet establishment's disapproval of me became a reality. I was refused a visa. Robert Runcie informed the Soviet Ambassador that if I could not go he would not go either. The Church of England would not be represented. That worked. We went, and it became my most memorable visit to Russia. To describe those days in what is now once again Saint Petersburg would take far too long. The seven hour-long burial of an evidently deeply loved pastor was extraordinary. The deep piety of many thousands of weeping Christians was unforgettable. In a remarkable speech, Cardinal Suenens who brought the body back to Russia – speaking French which was translated for the vast congregation – assured the faithful that their shepherd had neither been murdered nor converted to Catholicism. Of that ceremony much more could be said.

We had – Robert Runcie and I – been given an interpreter, or rather a translator, not very well versed in spoken English. The professionals were not free to respond to a sudden death which was not in the plan. Ivan Potapov was a translator of English language theology for the professors of the Leningrad Theological Academy. He volunteered that he had never been permitted to meet western visitors. He was attentive, kind, and rather uncertain. His Orthodox piety was very evident. The day after the funeral he took us to the airport. The Bishop was flying home via Moscow. I was flying home two hours later via Berlin. When the Bishop had left, Ivan asked me to buy him a meal in the more expensive restaurant for western visitors. A good idea, I thought, to buy him the best in hard currency. The restaurant was almost empty. He headed for the furthest corner.

Ivan Potapov and Amnesty

"Will you help me?" he said. "I have to write a report on the Bishop and you for the authorities. I have never done such a thing and don't know what to write." I wondered, is this some kind of trap? "Sorry I said, I really can't write your report for the Soviet security system." "But you haven't said or done anything worth reporting" he said. "Just write all you can remember" I said and added the question: "What were you told about us?" "Nothing very special about the Bishop, but I was to watch you very carefully as you were not to be trusted." I smiled. I knew that. "I'll tell

you, Ivan, why they don't trust me. I'm the Chairman in England of an organisation that works to set political prisoners free. It's called Amnesty International." At that he looked at me as though I was an apparition. "Is that possible? Amnesty International and you!" "Have you heard of it?" I said. It was my turn to be surprised. "Heard of it? If it was not for Amnesty, I would still be in prison." And he proceeded to tell me his story. Not much food got eaten. At Leningrad University where he was studying English six students had staged a demonstration in 1968 against the invasion of Czechoslovakia. They were – if my memory is accurate – sentenced to twelve years in prison. Thanks to an Amnesty campaign, they only served half that time. Now Ivan was under something close to house arrest in a village outside Leningrad and permitted to bring his translations to the Academy every two weeks. Because of Nikodim's untimely death he had been instructed to translate for the Bishop and me – and then to report.

It was a meeting neither of us could ever forget. Ivan has since died, died far too young. He sent me cards on feast days and I sent him English novels, with of course no political content. I have an Easter card from him with me now. Here, once again, I had met in a brave lay Christian the glory of Orthodox Russia, a witness to justice and to decency.

Sergei Haeckel Memorial in Petersburg

Soon after Fr Sergei's death his relatives in Russia, secular unreligious Russians, organised a memorial meeting in Saint Petersburg at which I was the only religious voice. My wife and I had time for museums, for Bach's Christmas Oratorio in full which is rare, wonderfully sung, and also for glorious liturgy and the finest liturgical choir – I was told – in Russia. Yet somehow it did not ring true. I knew what Metropolitan Anthony felt on his visits to Russia, faced with such grand, gilded theatrical liturgies, when he longed for holy simplicity. My feeling that Jesus would walk in and walk out again was made stronger by the expensive luxury cars with darkened glass, drivers waiting, engines running: the new Tsarism, Putin's Russia, yesterday's KGB with a capitalist face. Church and State once more in unholy alliance.

My prayer and dream was that the Russian Orthodox Church would have been chastened and renewed after years of suffering. Instead, together with the even more imperial Church in Exile, the public face of Russian Orthodoxy is of the Church in 1905 or 1917, its face turned inwards, its distrust of western churches undiminished and, as if nothing had changed since the days of the Tsar's court, with nationalist fervour blessing the weapons that killed women and children in Chechnya. To my friend Sergei, that chauvinist throwback was intensely painful. He had joined and promoted the Orthodox Peace Fellowship, founded by Jim Forest, American peacemaker and devout convert to Orthodoxy; realities that were worlds apart.

Even sadder is the fact that the Russian Orthodox Church's anti-judaism has remained largely unaffected by the horrors of Babi Yar and of the Shoah. This is something I cannot pass over lightly. It is too close to my life and, it must be said here, to Sergei's. To many, even of those who knew Sergei well, he did not feel free to reveal his own Jewish antecedents. Given the daring liberality of his views, he was left feeling that to reveal his Jewish background as well would compound his problems, perhaps even be his undoing in his Church, even in Britain. I cannot help but say, in that context, that the name of Bloom – Blum - on a shop front in Fr Sergei's birthplace Berlin would, in 1938, have led to broken glass. Suffice it to say that Metropolitan Anthony Bloom of blessed memory never denied and never confirmed his own Jewish roots. To underline all this, although I have no proof and know that I could be wrong, I think that Fr Alexander Men would still be alive today, had he not been born a Jew. To be labelled a free thinker is one thing, to be labelled a Jewish free thinker is another. I do not think that the fact of my Jewish grandparents has made

me paranoid.

The Glory and the Shame of the Russian Orthodox Church

I could tell a similar tale of my own or of any other church. The English story would have to be told in shades of grey, in the colours of mediocrity. In the Russian story, secular as well as religious, there are fewer shades: both the light and the darkness stand out starkly. I hope – in the light of my experience – that I have managed to show that. My friend Sergei is among the many sinners and saints who have helped me to see it and have thereby enriched my life. In the words of St. John's Gospel – and I am certain this is true of Holy Russia: "the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it."