

## **REPORT ON INTER-RELIGIOUS DIALOGUE IN MOSCOW**

by John T. Pawlikowski

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In [early October 2000] I participated as Vice President of the International Council of Christians & Jews in a consultation organized by ICCJ's Russian national unit FACING EACH OTHER in Moscow. The consultation, organized by Dr. Rafail Feinberg of FEO, took place at the Russian Academy of Sciences' Central House of Scholars. Some eighty people representing the Russian Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim and Buddhist communities took part. The only Protestant in attendance was Dr. Friedhelm Pieper, General Secretary of the ICCJ.

The opening session of the consultation was chaired by Cyril, Metropolitan of Smolensk and Kaliningrad and Chairman of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department of External Church Relations whom many regard as the future Patriarch. Statements were presented from His Holiness Patriarch Alexiy II, by the Chief Rabbi of Russia Adolf Shayevitch, by Archbishop Tadeus Kondru\_iewicz (Apostolic Administrator for Latin Catholics in European North Russia), by the Chairman of the Council of Muftis of Russia and by the Chairman of the Central Spiritual Board of Muslims of Russia (Sheikh Rawil Gainuddin and Sheik-ul-Islam Talgat Tadjuddin respectively), by Dr. Leon Feldman representing the World Jewish Congress and IJCIC, and by myself representing ICCJ. While generally generic in nature, all these statements endorsed the notion of dialogue. This represented, I'm told, the first such joint endorsement by the major religious figures in Russia.

The rest of the session dealt with problems in education, overcoming intergroup conflict and the like. They did not in the main deal with specific theological issues in the interreligious conflict. The final session focused on Islamic-Jewish dialogue in Russia. There was also an important round table on Jewish-Christian Relations in Russia that included an address by N.A. Pecherskaya,

Rector of the Higher Religious and Philosophical School in Saint Petersburg, a pioneer in interreligious dialogue in Russia.

The conference took place at the stately Central House of Scholars of the Russian Academy of Sciences, formerly a residence for the nobility. It was covered by press and television media in Moscow, including a joint television interview featuring Metropolitan Cyril and Chief Rabbi Shayevitch.

A luncheon for the major figures present at the consultation included statements from the city government in Moscow which co-sponsored the consultation, from the papal nuncio, from Friedhelm Pieper of the ICCJ and from several Orthodox and Muslim leaders.

At four o'clock in the afternoon about fifteen of the key participants were taken to the official residence of Alexiy II in Moscow. There the Patriarch and Metropolitan Cyril presided at a rather formal session which began with a brief statement by the Patriarch. Ten of us were then invited to offer our reflections on the importance of dialogue. Afterwards there was a response from Alexiy in which he reiterated his support for dialogue. Nothing earth-shattering from a Western perspective but Russians say it was a breakthrough in terms of the Russian Orthodox Church. In my presentation I spoke of the need for concrete activities relative to textbooks, seminary education, liturgy and preaching. Dr. Feldman urged greater ROC involvement in Jewish-Orthodox dialogue and urged the Patriarch to send a high-level delegation to the next session of the IJCIC-Orthodox dialogue to take place in Athens with the support of the Greek Government. Professor Jean Halperin made a strong plea for ROC support of the dialogue (speaking in fluent Russian).

**Some further observations:**

1) The ROC recently issued its first comprehensive statement on Russian social questions. Modelled somewhat on official Roman Catholic social statements, it contains an endorsement of dialogue. This is the first such statement by the ROC since the fall of Communism. Some interpret it as an encouraging sign of the ROC's new commitment to social engagement. Others see it as a recognition of the weakness of the ROC, despite the widespread rebuilding of churches and monasteries, in terms of civil society. Russian experts told us that last Easter only two per cent of ROC baptized members took part in Easter services. There is also a phenomenon that I heard at the consultation of people identifying themselves as "Orthodox nonbelievers." It may be that the new trust towards dialogue is motivated by a desire to forge a coalition with Jewish and Muslims groups (Muslims number some 20-30 million in Russia with one million plus in Moscow) against "liberalism" (i.e., secularism). It is not entirely clear that the ROC has fully committed itself to democratic civil society.

2) On Friday of last week President Putin (whom many Russians still view with uncertainty although somewhat more positively of late) summoned Chief Rabbi Shayevitch and a leading Muslim leader to his office to discuss Russia's stance on the current conflict in the Middle East. Some see this as a breakthrough in terms of the role of religious groups in the state since only a few years ago the state was putting Jews and Muslims in jail rather than consulting with them.

3) On Friday Friedhelm Pieper and I were taken for an extensive tour of the newly rebuilt Cathedral of the Divine Savior (a real rival for St. Peter's!), the largest mosque in Moscow where we arrived at prayer time and the Lavra monastery (an hour and a half outside of Moscow) which is the spiritual center of the ROC and where the seminary of the Moscow Patriarchate is located (which we visited). This trip also afforded us the opportunity to view living conditions in the country which are definitely below those of Moscow which today is quite a vibrant city.

4) The ROC issued an official press release about the consultation and in particular about the session with Patriarch Alexiy II. This again was taken by the Russians as a very positive sign. Clearly the ROC did not want to hide this conference from its membership. Quite the contrary.

I would be pleased to answer any questions that people might have about the conference and our impressions. We will have to see whether the follow-up matches the positive rhetoric of the consultation. - John T. Pawlikowski