

IN SEARCH OF COMPROMISE BETWEEN “THE LIBERALS” AND “THE ORTHODOX”

by Alexander Verkhovsky.

Dr. Alexander Verkhovsky, a sociologist, is director of SOVA-Center, which has been monitoring the Russian press for any publications related to religion and society. This article discusses the above statements by Bulekov & Kyrlezhev from a seminar sponsored by the European Union in Strassburg in November 2006. More on the SOVA Center appeared in REE June 2003.

Presentations by Hegumen Philaret Bulekov and Alexander Kyrlezhev at a seminar on Evolution of Moral Principles and Human Rights in a Multicultural Society in Strasbourg, November 2006 clarified the position of the Russian Orthodox Church in arguments about the concept of human rights. We can even suggest that the presentations, particularly A. Kyrlezhev’s, while they probably represented the authors’ personal perspective, also helped to advance and further clarify the Church concept of human rights. Without reproducing their presentations (available from our website <http://sova-center.ru>), we will proceed directly to critical remarks or, more precisely, to questions and comments which arise from reading both texts.

Both authors follow Metropolitan Kirill in insisting that the classic concept of human rights is based on a secular understanding of a human being, and this concept is rooted in the absence (“death”) of God. It is true from the historical perspective: anti-clericalism was closely connected with social movements which affirmed, in the “long” XIX century (i.e. between the French Revolution and the beginning of World War I), the classic principles of human rights. But we should also point out the inaccuracy of this observation: the Founding Fathers of the United States were not anti-clerical at all, just like all English politicians of the XIX century, and also many European democrats of the same period.

Anti-clericalism was characteristic of the stormy European modernization – that is why it is so relevant for today’s Russia, where modernization is still in progress. As to the West (in a broader sense, including Russia) and the concept of human rights evolving here (so far, it evolves primarily in the western world – a fact not really contended by anyone), anti-clericalism is not so relevant here any more.

Today’s perceptions of natural law have evolved as an opposition to positive law, rather than divine law. Therefore, where God is not mentioned in a certain law, it does not mean that the authors of the law choose to ignore God, but rather it means that they see law as a secular instrument. To remind, the term *secular* means “not specifically religious” – rather than “denying religion” or “anti-religious”.

There is another historical inaccuracy in both authors' presentations. They insist that the notion of human rights was established in a situation of certain moral consensus – e.g. marriage as a union between one man and one woman – however today there is no question of moral consensus, due, inter alia, to massive migration flows bringing people of other cultural traditions to the western world. Hegumen Philaret also says that solutions today should be sought on a global, rather than European scale. Therefore he suggests we must seek compromise and build a new concept of human rights.

In part, he is certainly right. The concept of human rights continuously evolves amidst stormy debates, far from any kind of consensus. It is also true that a multicultural society – which has virtually been achieved – raises new issues. But it would be wrong to say that things used to be different before: serious moral and cultural differences existed at all times. But at other times, these differences were not the same as today, whereas issues we find important today were not even addressed or conceptualized before. Concepts are built around debated issues, and initially they divide, rather than unite people. Similarly, the concept of human rights originally evolved in opposition to other, more traditional perceptions.

We may argue – and Kyrlezhev touches upon this issue – whether the same antagonism continues (or is revived) or do we deal with radically new phenomena which emerged as part of de-secularization and globalization. This argument, however, is unlikely to have a significant impact on solutions, general as well as specific.

As far as a global compromise concerning the concept of human rights is concerned, no compromise of a global nature appears possible at the moment, and it would be better to begin our search for compromise on European (again, in a broader sense) soil, better prepared for it.

Kyrlezhev describes a conflict between the liberal-democratic ideal of society built “from the bottom up” and the ideal of Christian brotherhood, where society is built “from the top down” with God as its source. Understandably, such ideals cannot but conflict. However, manifestations, rather than ideals, exist in the real world, and this diversity of manifestations is what we have to deal with. In modern times, Europe did not abandon the Christian ideal – rather, it abandoned the urge to build a “Christian World” literally here and now – an urge it had pursued earnestly, but unsuccessfully, in the Middle Ages.

It is also significant that at least in Eastern Orthodoxy and Roman Catholicism the construction of society “from the top down” does not proceed directly from God, but rather through the Church – a hierarchy by its very nature. Naturally, it conflicts with the modern society constructed “from the bottom up”. This contradiction, however, is insoluble only if

either model (or both) seeks to prevail totally over the other. Where such ambitions are not present – or where they are too far from realization – both ways of constructing a society coexist, and in fact, have always coexisted. The only difference is that in the Middle Ages, the “top down” approach prevailed in social and political as well as an ideological sense, and now the opposite is true.

We can assume that a hypothetical “liberal type” (it is understood that pure types do not exist, but we will make an approximation for the purpose of this discussion) prefers the “bottom up” approach, because it ensures better protection of conventional human rights, political democracy and market economy. In contrast, a hypothetical “orthodox type” prefers the opposite, because following a religious tradition is more important for an orthodox than all of the above. How do we resolve this conflict?

Modern liberal democracy gives a clear, unambiguous answer – the choice lies with the majority, which also makes sure to minimize discomfort to the minority – while preserving the fundamental human rights and avoiding more discomfort to the majority (it is again, an oversimplification – if only because in real life, society is never clearly divided into majority and minority).

It is clear that in modern secular societies “orthodox types” cannot de-facto form a majority (in democratic countries, a majority, even though it may consist of orthodox believers, does not behave as an ideal “orthodox type” – cf. the situation in Italy or even in Greece), but just as any minority, they can actively demand treatment which might reduce their discomfort.

Kyrlezhev suggests a concept of “religious space” where an individual constructs his or her world differently than in a “secular space” and he uses these terms to describe a conflict between “orthodox” and “liberal” types. But is this collision really insoluble in the framework of prevailing (in principle, if not totally) liberal democracy?

Admittedly, it is impossible to create perfectly parallel spaces with no conflicts or collisions between them, but it is possible to separate them to a maximum extent. This appears to be a way to compromise – a sort of compromise discussed by all authors who represent, directly or indirectly, the Russian Orthodox Church.

To separate different spheres of individual life, societies need to promote self-regulation, e.g. in the framework of certain organizations or network-based communities. Religious life should not be confined to private space in a literal sense.

What does the Church find missing in the status of private association – a status usually offered to the Church by secular societies? A private association is free to live its internal life, in accordance with its own statutes, and legally promote its ideas in any sphere

to the outside world. Admittedly, there have been attempts to deny religious associations this right, subjecting them to additional restrictions as opposed to other non-governmental associations. For example, religious groups are banned from running for elections. In fact, such restrictions are remnants of anti-clericalism, which have no reasonable justification today. (Politization of religion may be dangerous, but we can see that bans are not effective: for example, in Turkey, tough anti-clerical measures did not prevent a religious political party from winning the elections, and the democracy did not collapse. Counteraction to faith-motivated political radicalism must be based on general rules, applicable to all). Apparently, the same is true of other restrictions.

Maybe, the Church is missing the status of a public law corporation – something that has been written so much about? Registration of marriage is one example. Self-regulation, again, is a potential solution; a wide range of institutions – and even individuals – may be authorized to perform such functions (access to such authorization should be open in principle, albeit within certain limits), so that no one can complain of discrimination against non-believers or against any type of believers. This sort of pluralistic system of marriage registration exists, for example, in the US. It allows, as we can see, for establishing certain minimum general requirements, acceptable, *inter alia*, to religious organizations.

Of course, solutions of this type need additional research and wide consultations. However, it appears that compromise can be achieved easier through an extension of social freedom, rather than through experiments in “de-modernization.”

Like some other authors, A. Kyrlezhev and Hegumen Philaret in their discussion of ways to reach compromise on human rights refer to the concept of group (or collective) rights. They are certainly right: group rights can be used effectively for a modern interpretation of traditional Christian concepts.

Kyrlezhev notes that secular and religious-minded people interpret these “third generation” human rights differently. Apparently, he means, once again, different attitudes to the anthropological foundation of the human rights concept. Of course, there may be practical differences as well (e.g. Hegumen Philaret appears to be against affirmative action, whereas most secular proponents of group rights are strongly in favor of it). However, leaving the details and the anthropological foundation – which is rarely referred to in practice – aside, we can see a basic similarity between the interpretation of group rights by ROC and ethnic organizations: both refer to the interests of a certain undefined group (i.e. a group which cannot be clearly defined either from the external or from the internal perspective, but which nevertheless appears clearly identifiable at the level of rhetoric) and present such interests as group rights.

I am certainly one of those people who – as Hegumen Philaret rightly observes – reject group rights as inconsistent with individual rights. It is clear that any rights, just like any interests, may come into conflict. However, when the rights of an individual conflict with the interests of a group (even if we call them rights), individual rights should be preferred, because they may be deeply rooted either in religion or in another ideological system, whereas group rights are based on dividing people according to certain collective characteristics. Such divisions, however, are not true to reality – if only because they exclude people with double, undefined or changeable identities – therefore, they threaten individual freedom. However, I realize that reaffirming individual rights only is not a dominant tendency in the Western world today, so it is practically possible to reach a compromise between “liberal” and “orthodox” views in the sphere of group rights.

It is a totally different matter that there have been no concrete proposals to this effect so far, and everything which has been proposed boils down to mere declarations and allusions to a need of finding a legal consensus between the West and the “Islamic world” (although I would rather stay away from such global aspects of seeking a compromise).

It appears that progress towards a compromise will be easier and faster if we do not question the foundations at the onset, but rather proceed from the established legal and overall environment, trying to modify it in a direction acceptable to all parties seeking a compromise. As noted above, we can describe the process as gradually abandoning the remnants of anti-clericalism (but not secularity) and promoting self-governance in society to allow more freedom and space to religious communities and organizations, among others.

RECENT NEWS ON RELIGION

New Life is Springing from the Stump - The Moscow congregation St. Peter und Paul celebrates its 15th birthday

M o s c o w – On September 3, Moscow’s St.Peter-and-Paul-congregation joyfully celebrated the 15th anniversary of its resurrection. In his sermon, Bishop Siegfried Springer (Moscow) compared the congregation’s traumatic history with a tree stump. But the ELCER head (“Evangelical-Lutheran Church - European Russia”) assured: “The tree has been gravely damaged by historical circumstances. But thanks to God’s goodness – new life is springing from the stump!” By now, the old tree’s remains have grown into a respectable tree with branches and twigs offering parishioners “plenty of space for the varying expressions of life and human development”. According to the Bishop, of vital importance for the future is that “the believers stick together and remain rooted in the Holy Scriptures and in the active trust of Jesus Christ”. In 1936 Pastor Alexander Streck and the entire church council had been arrested, deported and later killed. Following these traumatic events and decades of humiliation and deprivation, the congregation was able to reconstitute itself in 1991 and begin meeting again at its traditional location.

The congregation’s pastors, Dimitri Lotov and Gottfried Spieth, were responsible for the liturgical segments of this memorable service. They were assisted by two guest pastors: Alexander Raeder of Yaroslavl, Russia and Harry Asikov of Tblissi, Georgia. A choir directed by Eduard Hubert from the Lutheran congregation in Bayreuth-Altstadt, Germany provided the musical surroundings.

The Peter-and-Paul-Church hails back to 1626, the present cathedral was consecrated in 1905. Following its expropriation and the start of inappropriate usage in the late 1930s, the congregation’s house of worship was finally returned 15 years ago. Restoration work has been continuous since then. The main sanctuary has been sufficiently restored to offer a dignified atmosphere for worship services. The Sauer organ, a historical treasure transferred from Moscow’s destroyed St.-Michael’s-Church to St. Peter and Paul, is making glorious music following its major restoration.

Moscow’s St.-Peter-and-Paul-Cathedral is home to a congregation of the same name and is also seat of the ELCER-bishop. This church consists of 170 congregations and groups, making it the largest provincial church belonging to ELCROS, the “Evangelical-Lutheran

Church in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Central Asia”. ELCROS is headed by Archbishop Dr. Edmund Ratz in St. Petersburg. - *ELCER Press Release (September 7, 2006)*

Retaining the Proven – Assuring the Future

Synod of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church - European Russia

M o s c o w – The Evangelical-Lutheran Church - European Russia’s (ELCER) 13th synod took place in the Moscow suburb of Pushkino from November 6 to 9, 2006. Its primary topic was the charitable work of the church. In his report, Bishop Siegfried Springer (Moscow) reviewed events of the past 18 months, which included more than a few meetings with representatives from partner churches as well as persons from the realms of politics and business. He mentioned building projects, church anniversaries, dedications and the installation of pastors in Moscow, Samara, Saratov, Gussev-Gumbinnen, Volgograd, Syktyvkar and Tomsk.

The delegates also met in working groups to discuss the issues of missions, children’s and youth work, marriage and the family, the role of women in the church and building construction. The discussions resulted in conclusions which should further improve and stabilize the ELCER’s organizational structure. A new version of the church’s legal statute was voted in, including the creation of a consistory, which will be a major grouping along with the synod’s presidium and the Bishop’s chancellery. The new consistory will include the Bishop, his deputy, the head of the Bishop’s chancellery, the synod president and his/her deputy as well as two elected members from the conference of superintendents.

Following lively discussions, the synod passed a resolution accepting a statement from the Bishop entitled “Regarding Same-Sex Relationships and So-Called Marriages”. The deliberations made clear that the paper was not reacting to a problem apparent within the congregations themselves, but rather that the ELCER was defining its place within the family of world Lutheranism. Not only does the paper reject formal acts of consecration for homosexual couples, it also makes clear the discrepancy between the ELCER and those churches performing such ceremonies. It states: “Synod resolutions permitting acts of consecration for homosexuals alter the root teachings and life of the church and contribute to its destruction”. The criteria for gaining access to Holy Communion were also discussed in this context.

The issue of women's ordination was covered briefly and debated. Short reports described the ELCER's charitable activities. These are to be tied into a central structure with the long-term goal of founding a charitable foundation. Delegates agreed that the ELCER must address the evangelistic challenges of the 21st century. The conference of superintendents was asked to develop a concept for sustainable, future-oriented activities.

Referring to Job 14:1-6 in the closing communion service, Bishop Springer spoke on the underlying fears of humankind stemming from the unresolved issue of meaning. Salvation from eternal lostness is found only in the cross of Christ.

Despite trying external conditions and the regrettably-inadequate funding of pastors and building projects, this synod showed that the ELCER, which is the largest provincial church belonging to the St. Petersburg-based ELCROS, the "Evangelical-Lutheran Church in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Central Asia", desires to stay its course in total obedience to God's Word. The ELCER consists of 170 congregations and meeting groups divided into 12 superintendent's districts. The Bishop's seat is located in Moscow's St. Peter- and Paul-Cathedral. - *Pastor Gottfried Spieth, ELCER Press Release, Moscow, November 10, 2006.*

Films on Social Topics Sought - St. Petersburg film forum scheduled for late March

by William Yoder

M o s c o w – A Russian film forum is searching until 1 March for high-quality films no older than 2003 on social topics. From 30 March until 8 April 2007, "Vremya zhits" (Time to Live), Russia's first major film forum on topics of social relevance, will be holding its events in St. Petersburg. The programme is geared to viewers under 30 years of age and deals with issues such as drug and alcohol abuse, Aids, prostitution, smoking, child abandonment and poverty. The very first forum held 31 March and 9 April 2006 featured 120 films from 20 countries ranging from China to the USA; 38 showings were held. The first forum attracted a mostly-young audience of 24.000 persons; an additional 10.000 had seen some of the films by 20 April.

The 10-day event involves much more than non-stop movie showings. Concerts, seminars and discussion forums with filmmakers and public personalities complement the showings. Its makers intend to be more active than reactive: The initial forum included an art exhibit and a day for athletes on the topic of healthy living.

St. Petersburg seems ideally suited to films of this nature. Very high rates of addiction are coupled with local politicians, universities and non-governmental organisations committed to helping solve the country's social ills. Coordinator Alexander Belenkii (Moscow) states: "Raising funds is always a highly problematic endeavor. But a year ago the Petersburg municipality donated much advertising and offered us one of the city's largest movie theatres." Until now, the forum has had to survive without paid employees. No honorariums are paid to those who offer films, yet the top prize includes a cash payment of 5.000 Euros. The best short film in 2006 was "Leroy Cleans Up", produced by the German Armin Velkers. Stefan Spielberg also entered films in the contest a year ago.

Following the forum, much effort is placed into showing the best films throughout the country. Usually in conjunction with seminars and discussion forums, the prize-winning films of last year were shown in cities such as Moscow, Rostov-on-Don, Yaroslavl, Krasnoyarsk, and even in Habarovsk and Sakhalin in the Far East.

Belenkii reports that films clearly evangelistic in character – the "Jesus" film for example - usually face locked doors in today's Russia. Access to schools is becoming increasingly difficult, yet prisons and jails remain open for the showing of films on self-betterment. The forum for this reason appeals to general spiritual and moral values. That makes it possible not only for Orthodox priests, but also for Rabbis and Imams to contribute. The forum's leadership has strong Charismatic and Baptist ties. Yet Metropolitan Vladimir of St. Petersburg gives the forum his blessings and sees to it that Orthodox clergy are involved.

The forum's President is V. I. Holodov of St. Petersburg. Coordinator is the Moscow Baptist and classical percussionist Alexander Belenkii. Film offers and queries should be addressed to: Forum Time to Live, ul. Karavannay 12, 190011 St. Petersburg, Russia, tel/fax 007-812-572-1063, 007-950 027 1058 or 007-917 539 2925 in Moscow, E-mail: newvolna@inbox.ru, webpage: <http://Time-to-live.ru>.