

**THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND SOCIAL DOCTRINE: A COMMENTARY
ON *FUNDAMENTALS OF THE SOCIAL CONCEPTION OF THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX
CHURCH*.**

by Charles C. West

Charles C. West has had a long career as Professor of Ethics at Princeton Theological Seminary as well as serving as Dean before his retirement. He became familiar with Eastern Europe while doing doctoral studies, and became active in CAREE from its beginning. He is associate editor of REE, chair of CAREE, and remains active in ecumenical relationships as a Presbyterian.

To begin with, let me say how grateful the world Christian community should be for the appearance of such a document as this. It is not the first expression of Orthodox, or even Russian Orthodox social thought in the century just past. Before the Revolution of 1917 and after, thinkers such as Sergei Bulgakov, Peter B. Struve, Nikolai Berdyaev and many others tried to give new direction to the faith and life of the church as they interacted with Marxism and Anarchism on the left and with secular humanism in western capitalist forms on the right. Orthodox participation in the ecumenical movement from the beginning - Berdyaev has been especially important here - has influenced social thought in east and west. But here for the first time, since the Byzantine Empire Walter Sawatsky says, we have an Orthodox Church statement, with the authority of the bishops behind it, giving guidance to the faithful and to the world. It takes its place as an authoritative Orthodox voice alongside the Papal encyclicals from 1890 on, and statements from Assemblies and Conferences of the World Council of Churches, and world confessional bodies, in the ecumenical dialogue. We can only be grateful to God that this voice is now in the conversation.

How, then, do we understand this voice and respond to it? This writer cannot pretend to be an expert on Orthodox Christianity or the life of the Orthodox Church. I must leave others to analyze the social, ecclesial, and theological interplay that led to the formulations in this document. I take it as it is, as the voice of the Russian Orthodox Church. I listen to it as a Reformed Christian with ecumenical experience, engaged in the same search for a faithful witness to God*s judging and redeeming work in the 21st century world. From this perspective, outside the ecclesiology yet inside the faith, the questions below are raised.

To begin with, and underlying all the other questions: what is distinctively Orthodox in the theology and ethics of this document? More specifically, out of the history, the piety and the faith of the Russian Orthodox Church, what has emerged to cast our common search for a Christian ethic in a new perspective?

The document itself does not address this question. Partly this is because it was designed for guidance to the Russian Orthodox Church itself and not as a contribution to ecumenical dialogue, but also, I suspect, because Orthodoxy, especially Russian Orthodoxy, has not made this question central to its self-understanding. In most areas, especially those dealing with personal and family ethics, but also in ecology, economics and even politics, the statement deals with issues and uses arguments that are familiar throughout Christendom, generally on the conservative side. In its use of Biblical sources, its preference for Divine law over natural law and its understanding of the sinful directions in human reason, it approaches Protestantism. In its positions on marriage, family, abortion, sex (including homosexuality), and education, it shares, with some exceptions, Roman Catholic positions. In dealing with labor, property, science, ecology and globalization, it shares perspectives and unsolved problems common to all Christians. In doing so, it struggles with the interaction of Gospel with law, of grace with commandment, of freedom in Christ with the discipline of discipleship, that concerns us all.

Still, there is a difference. Let me introduce it with a quotation from a Russian Orthodox scholar who taught at Oxford, Nicolas Zernov, describing what he called, in some contrast even to Byzantium: “the originality of the Russian approach to Christianity” “The Russians were extremely ritualistic, but singularly unclerical; they assigned importance to holiness but had little notion of ecclesiastical subordination. They were conservative yet allowed considerable freedom of interpretation; they were strictly Orthodox, but understood the term rather as stressing devotion to the beauty and glory of worship than in the sense of correct doctrine.”¹

I quote this, because it expresses so much of my own experience with Russian Orthodox believers, monastic, lay and clerical. The heart of Orthodox Christianity, I have been told many times, is in the liturgy, where the drama of salvation is enacted and celebrated, where that drama becomes the reality that embraces and sanctifies the world. The life and worship of the church is doxological, not critical. Theology is a part of that doxology, and ethics grows more out of

¹*The Russian Religious Renaissance of the Twentieth Century*, New York 1963, p. 37.

inspired holiness than out of analysis of Divine judgment and grace in the relativities of a sinful yet promising world.

The style of the Bishops* Statement is certainly different from this. It is an authoritative document, “reflecting the official position of the Moscow Patriarchate on relations with state and secular society”(p.1) and designed to direct the clergy and instruct the faithful, in a way analogous to the Roman Catholic papal encyclicals. Its method borrows much from western analysis, both Christian and secular. Yet there is a difference in spirit. It expresses itself, I suggest, in two ways.

First, there is a direct simplicity to much of the argument that contrasts strongly with similar statements from Christian churches elsewhere, in the West or in other continents. It moves from Biblical foundations to current moral positions, with some historical references between, but without the painstaking analysis of the natural and the supernatural that characterizes much Roman Catholic thought, the dialectic of sin and grace, in Protestant reflection, or the tension of Gospel with non-Christian culture which is central to Christian social ethics in Africa and Asia. In a sense this is doxological ethics, of a kind found elsewhere only in Evangelical and Pentecostal Protestantism. (Perhaps Baptists and Orthodox in Russia are not so far apart after all!) It bears with it all the spontaneous discipleship, and all the dangers of exclusive - dare I say sectarian? - legalism that have divided Christians in other parts of the world. Every part of this statement will be challenged and questioned - its Biblical interpretations, its ecclesiology, and its treatment of personal and social ethics. What will be the response of the hierarchy, and of the dissenters, when this critical reflection happens? Will it produce schism, as has happened on far less substantive grounds before? Or is this the first step toward a deeper, fuller, understanding of the social witness of the church, to be corrected and developed by the discipleship of the faithful? The Russian Orthodox Church enters a new stage in its life when it officially enters the field of social ethics. The liturgy after the liturgy will not be so easily defined as the liturgy itself

Second, there is in this document an understanding of the church and its relation to culture that is, indeed, not only Orthodox, but Russian. On the one hand “the Church is a divine-human organism”(p.2) as the body of Christ, combining Christ*s divine and human natures, and sharing in Christ*s mission of service sacrifice and salvation for the world. The Church is “not yet perfect in her divine-humanity, for on earth she has to struggle with sin and her

humanity,”(2) but it is the people of God called to ministry and mission in various ways “not only through direct preaching, but also through good works aimed to improve the spiritual-moral and the material condition of the world around her.”(3) This is a universal mission, transcending and transforming the life of nation and cultures, as the concluding sections of the document, on science, culture, education and international relations clearly demonstrate (pp.70ff). An Orthodox doctrine of the church has been brought into encounter with 21st century society in a way that enriches not only Christian social ethics, but also the ecumenical dialogue about ecclesiology, which cannot be separated from it. Let me return to this below.

On the other hand there is in this statement a theology of culture and nation that is, I suggest, peculiarly influenced by Russian history and experience. “The Church unites in herself the universal with the national” it declares, and therefore “Orthodox Christians, aware of being citizens of the heavenly homeland, should not forget about their earthly homeland.”(p.5) The document draws on the Old Testament drama of the chosen people as a model to be incorporated into the life of the church universal, with relation to every people. Nation, understood as an ethnic community wherever it lives, or a territorial unit, in either case defined by a special cultural tradition, it should be an object of love in response to God*s love. The Christian patriot “is called to preserve and develop national culture and people*s self-awareness.” Furthermore, “When a nation, civil or ethnic, represents fully or predominantly, a monoconfessional Orthodox community, it can in a certain sense be regarded as the one community of faith - an Orthodox nation. (p. 7)

There is a problem with this. It too easily sanctifies religious nationalism. To be sure the statement itself warns against this, but provides no theological safeguards against it. In an unfortunate transfer of images, the union of nation with the chosen people in ancient Israel becomes the model for a “symphonic relation”(p. 10) between church, culture and state in the whole of Christendom in the Byzantine empire, and then for an idealized vision of one nation, Russia before Peter the Great. The bishops realize that the ideal was never truly realized, even in Byzantium, but it remains the dream and the standard. But they miss the message to Christendom of the continuing existence of God*s chosen people, the Jews, in their midst over the centuries: that no culture, however informed by the Gospel, is without self-centered corruption, and that no nation is sanctified even by a Christian culture. Otherwise all the demons that the bishops would exorcise - aggressive nationalism, xenophobia, national exclusiveness and inter-ethnic conflicts -

will flourish as they have till now, under the aura of Christianity. The church*s mission is to inspire the culture - or the cultures - of a nation - or a community of nations - and to bring them into the presence of Christ at the same time so that they may be faithful expressions of the judgment and grace that transform them.

In other parts of the document the bishops recognize this, in fact if not in theory, and develop a different approach. The section on culture (pp.72 - 75) treats it as a secular enterprise into which the church enters with its transforming universal message, sometimes assimilating it, bringing it back to its religious roots, sometimes pointing its practitioners toward its true human end, “to cultivate people*s souls, including their own, seeking to restore in them the image of God distorted by sin.”(74)

The strongest expression of this approach is, however, in the sections on church and state, law and politics. In the historical analysis of church-state relations (pp.10-13), various patterns of relation between nation and church are developed, with discriminating judgment on each. The “Protestant doctrine of territory and established church” in the 17th to 19th centuries is criticized as a corruption of the “symphonic” relationship of earlier times, though it was precisely an attempt to give expression to that concept among the English, Scottish, Dutch, Scandinavian, Swiss and German peoples of the time.(pp. 11-12) But the basic doctrine of church and state in this document could almost have been written, in criticism of all religious nationalism, Protestant, Catholic or Orthodox, by a committee of Reformed and Lutheran theologians. The state is by God*s ordination a worldly institution, an “essential element of life in the world distorted by sin”(p.8), to restrict evil and support good. The church prays for it and Christian obey it within this earthly and temporal context, but the church does not try to take over or dictate the functions of the state and demands that the state not interfere with the life of the church. Within this clear distinction the church may collaborate with “representatives of the secular authority”(1 6) in promoting justice, as part of its salvific mission. The document lists sixteen areas in modern society, most of them familiar to us all, where, in modern society, this should happen.² The church also intercedes with government for the needs and rights of individuals and groups as a part of its ministry. At the same time the church must refrain from

²The exception is the last on the list, “Opposition to the work of pseudo-religious structures presenting a threat to the individual and society.” The early Reformers would have agreed with this, and would have meant by it Roman Catholicism. Whom do the Orthodox bishops mean?

party politics, waging war, or participating in secret intelligence. “The church remains loyal to the state, but God*s commandment to fulfil the task of salvation in any situation and under any circumstances is above this loyalty.” The Church must also assert the priority of Divine law over the laws of the state, and reject human law when it opposes “the absolute Divine norm”(p.21).³ Christians must obey the law of the state, “regardless of how far it is imperfect and unfortunate”(p. 14), but when to comply with it “threatens his eternal salvation and involves an apostasy or commitment of another doubtless sin before God and his neighbor” the Christian must “speak out lawfully” against the law or if this is not possible, engage in civil disobedience.

All of this is common heritage. At two points, however, questions need to be raised. The first concerns the question of freedom of conscience and other human rights. The bishops find in the rise of this legal principle a sign that “society has lost religious goals and values and become massively apostate and actually indifferent to the task of the church and the overcoming of sin.”(14) “As secularism developed, the lofty principle of inalienable human rights turned into a notion of the rights of the individual outside his relations with God.. In this process the freedom of the personality transformed into the protection of self-will.... In the contemporary systematic understanding of civil human rights, man is treated not as the image of God, but as a self-sufficient and self-sufficing subject.”(22) In short the concept of human rights is the product of a humanist secular ideology which takes no account of the roots of human freedom in the divine image, in Christ*s conquest of the enslaving powers of sin and in the work of the Holy Spirit. The church must recognize that its legal status in a non-religious society is based on this doctrine, and must demand that the state not propagate convictions or take actions that erode personal, family or public morality, insult religious feelings, or damage the cultural and spiritual identity of people who believe differently about the basis of human freedom.

The problem with this point of view is that it is, historically and spiritually, only half right. Human rights and freedom of conscience do have roots in Enlightenment humanism. They are subject to the self-centered corruption that undermines Christian faith and freedom, but also are influenced by the values of a humanist world view strongly influenced by its Christian heritage. But their deeper root is precisely the Reformers* affirmation of Christian freedom over

³It is interesting that the document makes no use of natural law here and criticizes it because “in its constructions [it] did not take into account the fallen humanity.”(23)

against ecclesiastical coercion, and its later refinement in democratic participation in the governance of church and society. It was an acute understanding of the work of sin in uncontrolled power, whether in church or society, that led the Reformers and their heirs to enshrine human rights in the constitutions of the United States and other countries. The bishops of the Russian Orthodox Church recognize this danger in government but insufficiently, alas, in the church. They would do well to develop a theology of human rights which recognizes the human political freedom as essential to the control of sinful power and a context for the deeper struggle for the human soul both personal and social, which is the real work of the church.

A second question concerns the role of the hierarchy and the laity in giving direction to the church in society. Who is “the Church”? Section III, 10 & 11 say explicitly that it is the hierarchy. “The Church*s contacts and cooperation with the highest state authorities are carried out by the Patriarch and the Holy Synod directly or through representatives who have powers confirmed in writing.”(p. 18) On the other hand, in Section IV on church and politics, clergy and laity are encouraged to participate in political life based on “the norms of the Gospel*s morality, the unity of justice and mercy (Ps. 85:10), the concern for the spiritual and material welfare of the people, the love of the fatherland and the desire to transform the surrounding world according to the word of Christ.”(p.27) They can do so according to their own convictions and make their own decisions, and without identifying either with the stand of the church or expecting a “special blessing” on their activity. Christian Orthodox political organizations are also not under church control but are expected to consult the church and coordinate with the church*s positions.

This sounds very much like the actual situation in other countries with a Christian tradition, but it leaves open a basic question: what participation does the politically active laity have, if any, in the formulation and reformulation of the social positions of the church? What will happen when, in the business of seeking the public good, active Christian groups come to positions on one issue or another, at odds with the hierarchy? In most countries with a Roman Catholic or Protestant background, a dialogue is continually going on between the leadership of the churches and their active lay members which leads to a continual reflection on and revision of teachings such as this document represents. Will this happen in the Russian Orthodox Church, and if so, what form will it take?

In conclusion, let me take three comments a step farther.

First, the question of the relation of human sin to human power, and the relation of this to the witness of the church. The Bishops* Statement recognizes in places the corruption that power brings to even the most moral persons and cultures, but it does not build this awareness into its social ethic. Indeed the role and problem of power is almost absent from its analysis. Therefore the role of repentance and justification by grace alone also does not play a role. Nor does the moral complexity of action in a sinful world, whether in politics, in business, in personal life or the life of the church, come into focus. It is almost as if Communism, with its drastic attack on Russian culture and religion, had no roots in Russian history, but had been some external catastrophe manufactured by the sins and failings of others. Nikolai Berdyaev was profounder in his time.⁴ The Orthodox Church needs to find prophets today and make them at least philosophers and theologians, if not bishops.

Second, in contrast to the careful attention given to church-state relations, there is no significant economic analysis in this document. The sections on work and on property are standard Christian ethics, but with almost no relation to employment and working conditions in either the socialist society of Russia*s past or the capitalist forces at work today. No guidelines are offered toward the control and guidance of economic forces beyond general concern for equitable distribution of the fruits of labor and for private property as a public stewardship. Even in dealing with the promise and threat of globalization in the final pages, the concern is for the preservation of national cultures rather than with economic exploitation and domination. Here again, the real world of powers that confronts the church and its members, and the real temptations to economic sin and injustice, are not confronted.

Finally, where does the Church go from here? With this statement she has entered the field of theological reflection and guidance on ethics and society that is at heart ecumenical. The document does not mention other churches or Christian traditions, except for occasional criticism, but it is now part of the dialogue that includes them. Already we are talking about common problems, moving from Scripture through tradition into contemporary society out of different ecclesiastical experiences but in obedience to the same Lord and proclaiming the same Gospel. What do these differences mean for our understanding of the work of the Triune God in the 21st century? What can we learn from one another, and what have we to offer to one another

⁴Cf. among others *The Origin of Russian Communism, The Russian Idea, The End of an Era.*

in this mission and this ministry? Perhaps we should pursue this dialogue now in earnest, leaving to the Holy Spirit its consequences for the church in which we live and in which we believe, but which we understand so differently.

