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POLITICAL ISSUES IN RUSSIAN ORTHODOX
SERMONS AND SPEECHES

by Alf Johansen

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Some Danish Lutheran preachers discuss political issues, such as domestic and foreign policy, in their sermons, and many American preachers probably do the same. Certain Western journalists have asserted that Russian Orthodox priests vigorously defended Soviet policy in their sermons, for example, by having praised Stalin and the Red Army during the war and by attacking American policy during the so-called "Cold War." What follows is a review of sermons and speeches published in The Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate. It would appear that the Russian Orthodox carefully differentiate between sermons and speeches, that they avoid politicizing the sermons, and that, on the whole, their pronouncements are not excessively political. We shall start with the early issues of the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate.

In September 1943 Stalin received Metropolitan Sergiy, who was elected Patriarch a few days later. In the same month the first issue of The Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate was published. The 1944 volume, issue no. 1 introduced a section of "Speeches and Sermons," however, in issue no. 11, a clear distinction was made between speeches (Russian: reci) and sermons (Russian: slova) of 1944, by Metropolitan Nikolay Krutitskiy, who was a member of the governmental commission investigating German atrocities in 1944. On November 7, 1944, Metropolitan Nikolay delivered a speech in the main cathedral in Moscow on the victory of the Red Army and Marshal Stalin (pp. 27-28), and a sermon in another church on the Fall (pp. 23-26) which should bring spiritual fruits of love to the life of the Christian. Metropolitan Nikolay continued to distinguish between unpolitical sermons and political speeches. His Sermons and Speeches were published in four volumes, in 1947 (vol. I), 1950 (vol. II), 1954 (vol. III), and 1957 (vol. IV). These volumes contain more than 110 sermons, each eight to nine pages long.

At the last Christmas of the war Nikolay spoke about peace. However, he did not say that Stalin was securing peace by conquering the Nazis. He spoke only about the peace of God: where is this peace which Christ left on earth when people fight people? He stated that the turbulence of a heavy storm is displayed only on the surface of the ocean. Just below the surface, however, lies a realm of quiet and stillness which the storm does not reach. The peace which Christ gave to the earth is above all a peace with God, and lives in the soul which has given itself to God. This peace cannot live in humans who steadily sin with clear conscience because they think that God forgives all, and the same is true for those who do not repent (Vol. I, pp. 23-24).

These sermons often speak about repentance. Humans can be so powerless that they cannot even repent: "Lord, open the door of repentance for me!" One can easily imagine a wanderer who is surprised by a snowstorm in the night on his way to a house where he expects to find refuge. It is very difficult for him to see and walk and when he finally finds the door his frozen fingers cannot open it, and he cries: "Open the door, I am freezing!" (I, pp. 76-77).

The sermons deal more with the suffering and redeeming sacrifice of Christ than with his resurrection: "He took on Himself the whole weight and the whole abomination of our sins in order to suffer for them on the cross at Golgotha, and through this suffering and death gives forgiveness to each repenting sinner" (I, p. 169).

At the cross Christ points to the disciple whom he loves and says to his mother: "Behold thy son." He declares her to be the Mother of his disciple and in his person to be the Mother of the whole of mankind: "I entrust to your heart and your love the whole of mankind, which is redeemed through my blood. . . . For each sinner who weeps over his sins she is the motherly intercession before her Son" (I, pp. 134-35). "Our Lord surrounded us with a whole crowd of our heavenly helpers and intercessors and we not only . . . want to imitate them (the saints) . . . but we also approach them for their blessings and support" (I, p. 140). However, these sermons deal more with Christ than with the Virgin and the saints.

The sermons often deal with the church, its sacraments and icons. When the believers die, they pass over from the church on earth to the church in heaven, which consists of the saints and the immortal souls of all Christ's true disciples. These two churches are continuously connected through prayer (I, pp. 110-11). Human suffering and repentance have redeeming power (I, pp. 163, 171). Faith teaches believers to love and even to die for their native country. Notably, however, the "day of victory" and the "German barbarians" are merely mentioned (I, pp. 93, 135).

Volumes II, III, and IV are quite similar to volume I. "Why shall we seek God's kingdom above all else? . . . If a man has gained the kingdom of God in his heart . . . he has everything, even if he has no earthly possessions--and if he does not find the kingdom of God, he has nothing even if he possesses countless goods of this world" (II, p. 32). "All that we, as Orthodox believers, have in this life, all that is happy and dear, is given to us through the power of Christ's resurrection, for our faith stands upon this miracle as upon a rock" (II, p. 265).

These sermons contain the Orthodox teaching on the guardian angel, the image of God (which in some degree has been kept), salvation and perdition, and God's love and wrath, while some other Russian theologians speak only of God's love. "When a man is surrounded by hardship, sorrow, and sickness he should remember that nothing in his life happens contrary to the will of God. The believer knows that God visits him through sickness and trials in order to bring him nearer to Himself through these things" (III, pp. 35-36). "When a man forgets to think of the salvation of his soul . . . his soul begins to atrophy and die. His memory retains no knowledge of his immortal soul, his conscience grows silent, and his heart is not frightened by God's coming judgment" (III, p. 194). Nikolay spoke about "our heavenly Father and our heavenly Mother" (III, pp. 47, 50, 177). Nikolay was a member of the World Peace Council but only once did he ask the believers to work for peace and pray for peace (III, p. 12). Christ was baptized in the Jordan River and made water a source of human sanctification (III, p. 53). The believers must not neglect their work for earthly happiness (III, pp. 121-23).

"If we were to bear the punishment for our sins according to . . . God's righteousness, all of us would perish in eternal life. . . . But the Son of God took our sins upon Himself and thus redeemed them through his death on the cross" (IV, p. 91). "The Holy Church reads the Word of God at every divine service, preaches it, and demands those who have holy books to read this Word at home" (IV, p. 158).

Metropolitan Nikolay's sermons in the volumes for 1957-1959 of the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate have not been published in book form. They resemble his previous sermons. He resigned his office in 1960 and died in 1961. These sermons deal with the Virgin and her icons (1957, nos. 2 and 5; 1958, no. 1; 1959, nos. 2 and 8), but more with Christ's birth, transfiguration, suffering, and resurrection. Nikolay's speeches often discussed world peace, but his sermons only discussed peace with God (1957, no. 6). The Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate does not contain sermons for an entire year, from 1959, no. 11 to 1960, no. 10.

Nikolay preached more about repentance, human holiness, the seven sacraments (especially the eucharist), the Holy Spirit, human sufferings and good works, the Virgin, the saints, the church, and the icons than do Lutheran sermons. Nevertheless, about one half of the contents of his sermons have content similar to Lutheran sermons.

In the 1961-64 volumes of the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate there are sermons from many different priests and theologians, although somewhat shorter than Nikolay's sermons. There are sermons on the feasts of the Presentation of our Lady (as three years old) and almost annually sermons on her Intercession and Assumption. These sermons also deal with Christ's birth, baptism (including Epiphany), sufferings, resurrection, ascension, and the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross. The sermons discuss the Holy Spirit and several saints, such as the apostle Andrew who, according to tradition, preached in Kiev. They deal with several fasts, divine and human mercy, mutual forgiveness, the imitation of Christ, living water, and prayers for the dead. World peace is only discussed in three sermons (1961, no. 5, 6, and 7). The third of these was preached at the All-Christian Peace Assembly in Prague in 1961: "the defense of peace . . . is our service to Christ. . . . Some people call themselves Christians but are actually aggressors and heralds of a 'cold war.' To them peace is as detestable as we regard every war and aggression to be."

In the 1965-69 volumes of the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate the sermons resemble those of the preceding volumes. There were usually two to four sermons in each issue. Metropolitan Nikodim, like Nikolay, distinguished between sermons on God's peace (1965, no. 3) and speeches on world peace (1965, no. 10). Nikodim was vice president [and later president] of the Christian Peace Conference, and replaced Nikolay as leader of the Department of External Church Relations from 1960 to 1977. Nikodim preached of Christ's transfiguration (1965, no. 10): "In order to reach communion with God, the human spirit must be purified and transfigured, and thus pass from the slavery of sin into purity and righteousness." Nikodim preached that human love of God must manifest itself as a self-denying love of one's neighbor (1966, no. 2) and that repentance will secure new inward powers to live in Christ (1968, no. 6). He also preached on Christian unity (1969, no. 4), on Christ's resurrection and the renovation of humankind (1969, no. 6), and again merely mentioned the "suffering Vietnam" (1969, no. 2, p. 38). Another preacher demanded that every Christian constantly read the Word of God when at home (1967, no. 6). These sermons deal with the saints, especially the Russian saint Sergiy of Radonezh, more frequently than did Nikolay's sermons. From 1968 on, patristic and old Russian sermons were reprinted in almost every issue.

In the 1970-74 volumes, the sermons did not discuss political problems or world peace. Only two of Metropolitan Nikodim's sermons briefly mention "the peace between peoples" and "the suffering people of Vietnam" (1971, no. 4, p. 39; 1973, no. 3, p. 35). Archbishop Pitirim, the editor of the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate, delivered a sermon on the daughter of Jairus: the gospel calls on humans to "arise from the dead, from the depths of their daily troubles . . . and satiate their souls" (1974, no. 2). Patriarch Pimen (elected in 1971) delivered seven sermons: 1) on the mercy of the Mother of God, 2) on the new year with its call to "moral perfection and holiness," 3) on the saints (at the feast of Christ's transfiguration he mentioned his predecessor Patriarch Aleksiy), 4) on Christ's prayer in Gethsemane, the sleeping apostles, and his suffering for the sins of humankind, 5) on Christ's holiness and love of humans, including his enemies, 6) on the close connection between the church in heaven and the church on earth, maintaining that peace on earth begins with a spiritual peace in people established by the Holy Spirit, and 7) on the redemption from sin, curse, and death.

The sermons in the 1975-79 volumes of the Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate promote world peace somewhat more frequently than previously, but the section on Sermons treated peace with God and is rather sharply separated from the section on the defense of peace. A peace conference in 1977 was mentioned. The icons of the Virgin have secured Russian victories in 1260, 1521, 1566, 1611-1612, 1812, and 1941-45 (1975, no. 7; 1977, no. 8; 1978, no. 8). One sermon deals only with the victory of the Soviet army thirty years ago and the present Soviet peace policy (1975, no. 5). These sermons deal more with the Mother of God and the Saints than with Christ. Patriarch Pimen published four sermons: on "the resurrection of the human soul" through repentance, virtue, and suffering for Christ; on the saint Metropolitan Ninokentiy, who was called "the apostle of America" and died a hundred years ago; on the Virgin's icon of Kazan which once saved Russia; and on the intercession of the Mother of God (1977, no. 9; 1979, no. 6, 10, and 11). Metropolitan Nikodim, who died in 1977, published two sermons: on Christ's incarnation and love of sinners and on Christian unity (the 1975 European Security Conference in Helsinki and the 1975 General Assembly of the W.C.C. in Nairobi are mentioned), and on the reconciliation between God and humankind (1976, no. 4 and 7). Professor Alexander Vetelev published two sermons, on repentance and on prayer for the dead. In 1949 he wrote a textbook on the Theory and Practice of Preaching¹ (359 pp.). He and died in 1976.

In the 1980-86 volumes (no. 9 is the last issue received), there are often six short sermons, as in the preceding five volumes, but a little less debate on world peace. A very short sermon commemorated

the day of the Soviet victory thirty-five years ago (1980, no. 5). In a single issue, three Easter sermons praise the Virgin as the first witness of Christ's resurrection. Patriarch Pimen published 34 short sermons, twelve for the feasts of Christ (one each on his birth, baptism, and entry in Jerusalem, three on the transfiguration, four on the shroud at Good Friday, and two on the resurrection), six for the feasts of the Virgin and her icons, and five for the feasts of the saints. However, the Virgin and the saints are also mentioned at the feasts of Christ. "Every Christian who wants salvation must meditate on the transfiguration which must be experienced by all Christians; through the sacrament of penance humans ascend the mountain of transfiguration" (1982, no. 8). At the feast of the icon of the Mother of God: "The joy of all who grieve," she listens to our prayers and intercedes and helps us; the saints are our helpers, the Mother of God our "First Intercessor" and our savior always grants her prayers (1983, no. 11). Archbishop Pitirim published ten sermons: on the mass for the dead (Russian soldiers), the New Year, Christ's suffering, human obedience (two Russian saints), Christ's ascension, the prophet Elisha, evening prayer, evening song on Christ as the light, the "called and chosen," and the guardian angel. We shall pray our evening prayer before the icons both at church and at home for the remission of the sins we have committed that day against God and people, and forgive those who have sinned against us (1985, no. 1).

About half of the sermons of Metropolitan Nikolay are translated into French and were published in Paris in 1956 (Nicolas, Sermons). Some of the later Russian Orthodox sermons are being translated into English in the English edition of The Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate which began publication in 1972.

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¹Reported in Alf Johansen, Theological Study in the Russian and Bulgarian Orthodox Churches (London, 1963), pp. 25-29.