Possible Impact of Orthodox Perspectives on Secular Europe and Human Rights

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I am pleased to contribute some reflections to the last issue of *Religion in Eastern Europe*. From its first appearance in 1981 as *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe* it was a significant and valuable resource for the team at Keston College in the UK, the centre for the study of religion in communist countries set up by Michael Bourdeaux, where I was the head of research. It has been good that there have been a number of regular publications which have focused on this part of the world in both the communist and the postcommunist periods. The journal of which I am editor, *Religion, State & Society*, started life in 1973 as *Religion in Communist Lands*, the in-house scholarly publication of Keston College. Since the end of communism the scope of the journal has widened to cover all parts of the world, but we retain our traditional focus on Eastern Europe in the context of postcommunist developments and the expansion of the European Union (EU).

Paul Mojzes was himself one of the first to write about the implications of the transition from communism to postcommunism, in for example his book *Religious Liberty in Eastern Europe and the USSR: Before and After the Great Transformation* which he wrote as early as 1991. Describing the “Great Transformation” five years later, Paul said “it still continues at this time, since it is not at all clear what ‘Post-Communism’ actually means.” When asked in the 1970s what he saw as the consequences of the French Revolution, Chinese premier Zhou Enlai is reported to have said “it’s too early to tell.” Here, another sixteen years after Paul’s comment, it is still to early to define postcommunist Europe; but I would like to identify a few developments which have stood out for me as particularly significant, centring around the themes of fundamentalism, secularity and human rights, with particular focus on Orthodoxy in Europe and the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), my own area of specialisation.

The ‘Cold War’ stood in contrast to today’s ‘Liquid Modernity’.

In communist times religion was seen within the context of two opposing ideologies. Traditional areas of legitimate concern to religions were thus willy-nilly placed in a larger confrontational political framework. One such concern was ‘peace’. Did peace mean primarily absence of conflict within and between...
political entities, or did it involve a quest for individual and communal freedoms and rights as an essential element? Some sought reconciliation through, for example, Christian-Marxist dialogue and official religious structures; others highlighted discrimination against ordinary believers and the persecution of dissidents as matters of high concern. Paul Mojzes was of course a leading figure in dialogue; Keston College was widely perceived to be primarily concerned with persecution and dissent. Gradations and nuances tended to be effaced by over-simplified accusations of “fellow-travelling” or “anticommunism”, products of the bipolarity of the time.

In the period since the early 1990s the ‘two camps’ of the period of Cold War polarity have been replaced either by ‘one camp’ (as in Fukuyama’s The End of History) or by ‘many camps’ (as in Huntington’s The Clash of Civilizations). In 2003 Bishop Ilarion Alfeyev, speaking on behalf of the ROC to the institutions of the EU, noted that the hitherto traditional multipolar political world gave way after the Second World War to a bipolar world in which liberal democracy was set against communism; since the end of communism the world has become politically monopolar, but there still exist “polarities of civilization, the tension between which not only continues, but increases daily.” Increasingly, these “polarities of civilization” have been seen in terms of religion. One of the main preoccupations of the presidency of Vladimir Putin has been Russia’s security, and from the very start the possible involvement of religion in security issues was recognised. A new law on combatting “extremist activity” was adopted in 2002; it included specific reference to religion. In December 2002 a draft paper on the prevention of religious extremism in Russia named several specific confessions as threats to Russian national security. The document attracted strong criticism from religious leaders. The most likely result of implementation of such a project, they maintained, would not be national security, but “an increase in interconfessional and interethnic tension within our country.”

Religion as such has thus taken on a new international and intranational resonance of its own. One associated phenomenon is the perceived rise of fundamentalism and the dangers associated with it. Many argue that fundamentalism is a phenomenon of relatively recent origin, and specifically a reaction to various features of modernism, including secularisation, pluralism and diversity. Others go further, seeing fundamentalism not as a reaction to modernism in general, but specifically to postmodern dilemmas: to the dilemmas associated precisely with the post-ideological age. “Religious fundamentalism is not a reversion to irrationality or an escape into a premodern past. It is a thoroughly postmodern phenomenon... The allure of fundamentalism stems from its promise to emancipate the converted from the agonies of choice.” These “agonies of choice” are a consequence of the “sceptical attitude” which lies at the heart of postmodernism and

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5 In 2002 Bishop Ilarion Alfeyev was appointed as Head of the Representation of the ROC to the European Institutions in Brussels. In 2009, when Metropolitan Kirill was appointed Patriarch, Bishop Ilarion succeeded him as Chairman of the Department of External Church Relations of the ROC. In 2009 he was made an Archbishop and in 2010 a Metropolitan.


8 “Russia: are Catholics and Protestants a threat to national security?,” Keston News Service, 11 December 2002.

9 A major Fundamentalism Project conducted in the 1990s by Martin E. Marty and R. Scott Appleby (five volumes published by the University of Chicago Press: Fundamentalisms Observed (1991); Fundamentalisms and Society (1993), Fundamentalisms and the State (1993), Accounting for Fundamentalisms (1994), Fundamentalisms Comprehended (1995)) assumes that the most important religio-political conflicts in the contemporary world involve the confrontation between traditional religion and modernity.

its “incredulity towards metanarratives”.\textsuperscript{11} Widespread in ROC circles is a perception that the main enemy of Orthodoxy today is the liberal pluralism characteristic of the secular West. This is, moreover, perceived as an aggressive world view which is now making the claim to universality which has been a traditional characteristic of world religions.\textsuperscript{12} The next step from here, for many, is to argue that the western ethos has itself become a form of fundamentalism. Western liberalism is pluralistic, favouring individual self-realisation, but in the view of the ‘traditional’ religions in Russia its ‘globalising’ agenda will lead inevitably to the erasure of all differences in the name of secularism, and the unacceptable uniformity it will inevitably impose is based on materialist consumerism rather than any religious or ethical values. According to Fr. Vsevolod Chaplin of the ROC, “The worldview of such a skeptical attitude toward all religions is also a worldview.”\textsuperscript{13} In a presentation of the view of the Moscow Patriarchate of the ROC, Bishop Ilarion Alfeyev argues that

The growth of Islamic fundamentalism over the past years is very much a reaction to the attempts at introducing liberal western standards of civilization into countries where the lifestyle does not correspond to them. All of this creates the foundations for the ‘conflict of civilizations’, of which so much is spoken and written in our times.\textsuperscript{14}

Relevant here are the various understandings in Western Europe of ‘secularity’ and ‘secularism’. Paul Mojzes has provided a helpful theoretical framework, identifying four different types of historical arrangement in Europe regarding religion-state relations and their implications for religious rights: ecclesiastical absolutism (“only one religious organization is supported by the state”); religious toleration (“religion as such is preferred and supported by the state”); pluralistic liberty (“the state is really indifferent and neutral toward religion or non-religion”); and secularistic absolutism (“religion as such is rejected by the state”).\textsuperscript{15} These options stand on a continuum between ‘pro-religion’ and ‘anti-religion’ and should remind us that religion-state arrangements can be almost infinitely nuanced. Arguably they are on a sliding scale from providing an open playing field for all world views to aggressively excluding all religious manifestations from the public sphere, as the French version of \textit{laïcité} is widely seen to do.\textsuperscript{16}

Earlier I noted that the ‘two camps’ of the period of Cold War polarity have been replaced by ‘one camp’ or by ‘many camps’. The perception that there is just ‘one camp’ has led to an increasing preoccupation with ‘globalisation’ and its harmful consequences for diversity and pluralism. However, the phenomenon of ‘many camps’ should arguably be seen not as an alternative to the ‘one camp’ scenario but as its inevitable accompaniment. Within the context of the globalising universalism of western secular liberalism, indeed, a new and unexpected dynamic is at work: an emphasis on local identities, cultural relativism and the acceptance of differences.


\textsuperscript{14} Alfeyev, \textit{op. cit.}

\textsuperscript{15} Mojzes, \textit{op. cit.}, 1996.

“Globalization itself produces variety – more accurately, it encourages heterogeneity-within-homogeneity.”\(^{17}\) It is a phenomenon which has been dubbed ‘glocalisation’.\(^{18}\) Indeed, retaining a particular identity may be the only way in which religions can remain distinctive in the globalised world:

Those eclectic and overinclusive religious movements that claim to express a universal message lose the touch of the primordial power of soil and a specifically religious quality by simply dissolving in the ‘global culture’ (many New Age movements, Scientology, Bahai). The same can be said about recent examples of Roman Catholic and Protestant \textit{embracing} strategies: the more they assume the mainstream values of secular liberal universalism, the more they lose the power of carrying a specific message.\(^{19}\)

The ROC today is concerned primarily with defending its ‘canonical territory’ and with witnessing within that territory, among the local flock, to the truth of Orthodoxy as uniquely capable of countering worldwide secularisation and social and spiritual degradation. The ROC might, then, turn inwards, adopting a ‘fortress mentality’. After all, it “stands in the minds of populace and politicians alike for something other than Christianity. It stands for nation, Russia, Motherland, tradition, ‘non-Westernism’.\(^{20}\) The ROC itself sees one of its tasks as the preservation of the cultural identity of Russians. Arguably the Putin administration would like Orthodoxy to have this as its main or only task, sidelining a concern for spirituality and salvation, as matters only too likely to result in fanaticism.

However, another possibility is that the ROC might decide to turn outwards. In the immediate aftermath of 11 September 2001, Metropolitan Kirill, now Patriarch Kirill of the ROC, spoke of the need for

a transition to the peaceful coexistence of various value systems – religious, philosophical, cultural. There are many such systems in the world... it cannot be permitted that only one of them should dominate and be considered ‘pan-human’... each value system must have its proper degree of influence upon the development of international law... if this happens, we shall knock the ground from under the terrorists’ feet. No longer will they be able to appeal to public opinion by decrying an unjust world order.\(^{21}\)

And in 2004 he said:

I am convinced that such policy [globalism] can provoke only opposition from the peoples belonging to different civilizations... What can be done in this case? I suppose that the way out lies in recognizing the right of each civilization to preserve its identity, as well as the right of each civilization to participate in an

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\(^{19}\) Agadjanian, \textit{op.cit.}, p.85.


open discussion and exert influence upon the shaping of a new code of behaviour in the world. Each civilization should be heard and should have a chance to contribute to the formation of a new international legal basis of relations between the countries.\(^{22}\)

One possibility for the future might be that under Patriarch Kirill the ROC will take its place in the global marketplace of ideas as a distinctive spiritual entity arguing for specific social policies on the basis of its distinctive understanding of man and his place in the world. This will be an initiative taken on the basis that the official response of the Moscow Patriarchate to globalisation is neither to reject it nor to embrace it, but to try to enter into a collaborative relationship with it. A traditional view of 'Europe' is that it is divided into Catholic and Protestant spheres of influence, but Greece has been a member of the EU since 1981, and other countries with significant Orthodox populations have been joining since 2004. As Nicolai Petro noted in 2005 in an article called "The Orthodox are coming!"

Thanks to the expansion of the European Union, millions of Orthodox Christians now have a seat at the table of European decision-making bodies. The admission of Romania and Bulgaria will quadruple the number of Orthodox Christians in the EU, from ten million to more than forty million, but this is just the tip of a very large iceberg. Should the EU continue to expand eastward, it could someday encompass as many as 200 million Orthodox believers, transforming Orthodox Christianity from a quaint minority into the largest denomination in Europe, with the Russian Orthodox Church as its pre-eminent political voice. This will be true regardless of whether Russia itself joins the EU, since more than half of its parishes are located outside Russia. For the first time since before the fall of Constantinople, Orthodox polities are part of the decision making structures of Europe, yet little thought has been given to the impact this is likely to have on the political complexion of Europe... Orthodox faithful expect to have their voice heard within the European political institutions of which they are now a part, and this poses a direct challenge to the secular framework of the EU.\(^{23}\)

In his exposition of the official position of the ROC cited earlier, Bishop Ilarion Alfeyev went on to speak of the potential contribution which Orthodox Christianity can make to "the formation of European civilization and its cultural identity."

It is important that people in the West realize that the Orthodox countries of Eastern Europe have a right to make their significant cultural contribution to the building of a common European home. The specifics of the Orthodox world view should be reflected in the European project - only then will it become attractive for the Eastern Christian world as well.

Bishop Ilarion pinpoints a question which will naturally arise in people's minds: "What relation does the Moscow Patriarchate have to the process of European integration if Russia is not a member of the European Union?" His answer is that the Moscow Patriarchate is 'trans-national' since it has parishes and dioceses in countries which are members of the EU (including of course the Baltic states which have joined the EU since he delivered his speech). The Moscow Patriarchate thus apparently accepts the de facto religious pluralism of the EU and a role for the ROC as just one


voice within a heterogeneous international organisation.

Over recent years various articles in Religion, State & Society (RSS), focusing on the specific question of human rights, have highlighted the likelihood that the implicit assumption in the structures of the European Union that Western Enlightenment values are of universal applicability are likely to be modified by the contribution of insights from the Eastern Christian tradition. As Malcolm Evans and Peter Petkoff suggest, focusing on the European Court of Human Rights,

It is arguable that the entire way in which we approach human rights has the effect of privileging certain forms of religious belief over others....the practical application of human rights approaches to the freedom of religion is structurally biased towards those forms of religious belief which are essentially voluntarist and individualist rather than communitarian in organisational orientation.24

And Petkoff highlights the intensifying debate between two types of jurisprudence: 'liberal' and 'communitarian'. A “communitarian” approach “offers an interesting challenge to secularist fundamentalisms. It emphasises the importance of a background culture which is able to sustain religious values in society and thus maintain religious freedom in its broadest spectrum in order to prevent the rise of a militant secularism.”25

Continuing changes and challenges in the European environment, including the end of communism and the entry of an increasing number of Orthodox countries into the EU, mean that there will be ever more encounters between differing understandings of such basic issues as human rights, fundamentalism, secularity. This encounter could become a stand-off between traditional and irreconcilable approaches; but it has the potential to develop into a fruitful debate with long-term implications for many areas of public life in an evolving Europe.

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