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The Russian Orthodox Church and the Soviet State - Part I

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It is difficult to document what mutual influence or even interaction exists between developments within Orthodox theology on the one hand and Marxist science of religion on the other. It is however certain that they take cognizance of each other and precisely record and analyze changes in each other's sphere. What follows is an attempt to show by a number of examples that such mutual careful analysis under the signs of glasnost and perestroika could become the basis for ideological opposition developing into cooperative partnership through constructive dialogue.

1. The Russian Orthodox Theology of Peace, Justice and the Integrity of Creation

In the West, the opinion still prevails that for years the activities of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) with regard to peace and justice had always been in the interest of the Soviet government. This view leaves only open whether the peace work of the ROC is a tactical concession to the lords of the Kremlin, for which the church in turn is granted certain rights in other areas, or whether one joins Alexeiev in the belief that "this campaign (for peace) turns the Moscow Patriarchate definitely into a mouthpiece of Communist propaganda."1

There is a grain of truth in such a statement, namely, the all too understandable fact that in a country with an atheist doctrine of state any sociopolitical activity of the ROC needs to adapt somehow to the official Soviet view of the world situation. Yet not everything by far that the ROC says and does in its peace work entirely corresponds to the interests of the state. What interest would be at stake for a state based on atheist principles that representatives of different faiths, of all things, who in 1977 met in a peace congress in Moscow, were seen to go for a walk on the Red Square in their traditional garb, thus showing explicitly to the population how much alive the religions still were whose death had been heralded for decades?
“What interest would a state ruled by the Communist Party of the Soviet Union have in the Orthodox Church continuing to emphasize in its statements that it is sin and the evil nature of human beings that have brought the scourge of war upon humanity, a belief that is quite contrary to the Communist view that the root of today's threat of war lies in the nature of capitalism and imperialism?2

In their lectures and papers representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate have frequently said that not only the West but both sides were responsible for reducing or increasing international tensions. As an example let us cite a speech of metropolitan Nikolai of Krutitsy and Kolomna who is said to be a particularly zealous representative of the official line. What he said as early as 1959 before the Bureau of the World Peace Council sounds today as topical as then.

“We see that in the peoples' struggle for peace, even the notion of war and everything connected with preparing for it has been entirely discredited. Nowadays there is not a state, not a government, that openly advocates war. Nevertheless we are faced with the fact that an extremely intensive arms race takes place which both sides justify by invoking motives of self-defense. What does this contradiction mean? When we look for an answer we must recognize that there are deeper reasons that stand in the way of the East and the West trusting each other.”3

This recognition that something has to happen on both sides, brought Nikolai, almost thirty years ago, to say that the creation of an "atmosphere of mutual trust" was "the main task of the peace movement." He believed that this would be best achieved by "intensifying the East-West contacts," by multiplying personal contacts and "by exchanging feelings, moods and ideas." He also believed that "contacts between Christian churches" were of special significance.4

In the Orthodox view, the theological basis of the peace work cannot be found by the exegesis of individual biblical passages. The type of controversy now raging in the Federal Republic of Germany between theologians and politicians on whether individual statements of the Sermon on the Mount can or must be considered to be the basis and guideline of all Christian activities, including those in the political realm, is not imaginable in Orthodoxy. Orthodox theology used much more comprehensive arguments: "the understanding of the Russian Orthodox Church on issues of war and peace must spring from the light of the faith in the resurrected Christ, the Lord, who vanquished untruth, enmity and death. The ROC widens this understanding by examining the biblical Revelation and enriches it by the doctrine of the Holy Fathers and the experience of its millennium of history."5

a. Reconciliation in Christ's Salvific Work

At the center of all theological reflection on peace activities is faith in Christ's salvation, in his victory over evil and the reconciliation of human beings with God thus made possible. As war is a sign of fallen humanity, a consequence of its sinfulness, peace and reconciliation are
inseparable. Unlike in Western theology, where legal categories of guilt and atonement prevail in the concept of reconciliation, sin in Orthodox theology means above all separation from God, forfeiture of the community with him. "Fallen humanity has been alienated from its origins, is in discord with its Creator, in contradiction with the salvific order set by the Creator. This already is the reason why life in sin means absence of salvation, not only because God at the end of times will punish the guilty." Rather, what applies is the statement of the Church Father, Ireneus of Lyons: "God does not punish the guilty themselves but the punishment comes down upon them in the form of them being deprived of all salvation . . . , not as if the light would punish them for their blindness, rather, blindness itself constitutes their disaster."6

War is a consequence of the absence of salvation that comes upon people due to their own sinfulness; and, like all the evil in the world, war is a misuse of powers or capacities, i.e., a distortion of the God-willed order of reality. According to the late Nikodim, Metropolitan of Leningrad and Novgorod, war in particular shows the dire consequences that befall human beings as a consequence of the separation from God: "Human beings at war are destroyers of God's plans, they trample God's highest, most precious gift—life."7 More than ever war shows how much humanity as a whole and, with it, nature, indeed all of Creation, suffer from sin. Through the saving event that springs from God's loving initiative human beings are enabled to become reconciled with God and to reestablish peace among themselves—even though they are responsible for the fatal separation, and unable to find the way back to God on their own. It is left to the individual's free will to decide whether to remain on the path to disaster or to receive the gift of God's peace.

Human beings make this decision not only on the basis of rational arguments; what counts more are the experiences they have with God. Just here lies the significance of the worship service, the Eucharist in particular. The eucharistic communion with God is not of this world, but it is nevertheless real, a super-human and super-worldly reality that anticipates something of the "becoming like God", which is the aim of Christian life in the Orthodox view. After communion, Christians are still human beings who will sin again but something of the divine reality has taken place within them and this cannot remain without consequence for their further conduct.

In Metropolitan Nikodim's words, "Freely accepted, the general gift of reconciliation becomes the property of individual human being and exercise a beneficial influence on their spiritual and moral lives. The special state of the peace of mind, peace with God and, as a consequence, peace with oneself, is manifest in the external activities of human beings. Like the soil's humidity gives life to plants, the inner peace of the soul most certainly has the effect of
setting up good mutual relations among people." I see in this connection between reconciliation and peace work a close parallel, including terminology, to the Lutheran dialectics of justification and sanctification as expressed in the link between Articles IV and VI of the Confession Augustana. The "certainty", indeed "inevitability" with which inner peace works in human relations, as the "soil's humidity gives life to plants", corresponds to the "inner necessity" with which good works necessarily grow like fruit from faith (bonos fructus gerere!)

b. The Social Character of Reconciliation

The words of Metropolitan Nikodim just quoted show that the acceptance of God's offer of peace not only changes the lives of individual people but has an effect also on the people around them, and even has the world in view. God's design, God's aim, according to the Orthodox, is not that individual persons change their ways and are thus taken out of an altogether unredeemed world and saved, but rather the consummation, the glorification of the world and thus the redemption of all its inhabitants.

"God's work of reconciliation began, it is true, with an individual person: Jesus Christ, and the Early Christian Church was like an island of peace in the midst of passion, hatred and malice; but since then it has been the churches' role to be the leaven for the world. Without this leaven, without the church's transfiguring power, the world is but a three-dimensional quantity that has no living unity. It is a slow process, for only a 'little leaven' (Gal 5:9) goes in a big lump that needs to be leavened to make the dough but this process is irreversible." 9

This emphasis on the social character of the work of reconciliation corresponds closely to the Lutheran understanding of justification as an event of worldwide dimensions. According to Rom 1:17, God's righteousness is God's own creative power brought into the world in the form of the gospel; God's rule as God's right to prevail in a world that has fallen away from God and yet, as God's Creation, inseparably belongs to God. In Rom 10:3 God's righteousness illustrates the significant moment when "the creative, inchoate, right of the Creator that spans the eons, and is happening today as the Word personified in Christ, this right of the Creator to and over his Creation" ultimately prevails never against, but always for the world: "Even his judgement out of which his new creation arises is only a passage through God is work which has the aim of redeeming the world." 10 God's right to God's Creation is realized in the new humanity. The Christian congregation as this new world, however, is not a self-sufficient new creation but, according to II Cor 4:21, "the summons of those who are called to serve that is to represent righteousness in the old world." Thus God's righteousness, in a comprehensive understanding, is altogether the "cosmic power and the manifestation of the Creator God that appears in (Paul's) word, calls to service and includes justice and the new Creation." 11
For the church to fulfill its task of being a true leaven in the world with a view to the latter's entire reconciliation with God, it must, on the one hand, bring its own inner life into accord with the order of peace willed by God. This is done, in the Orthodox view, mainly by following the directions contained in Holy Scriptures and the Ecumenical Councils. On the other hand, each individual church must endeavor to be at peace with the churches of other countries and other confessions in accordance with God's will. For this reason, the representatives of the Moscow Patriarchate continue to point to the close connection existing between their work in the ecumenical movement and their commitment to peace.

Yet God's offer of reconciliation is not confined to the church itself. Rather, it applies to the whole world. Wherever people labor for the good to prevail, they work consciously or unconsciously for God's kingdom: "God's kingdom includes the whole sphere of what is good and true in all the different manifestations of human life. It is also beyond the boundaries of the church that the constant renewal of the world takes place, a renewal which comes about through the synergistic working of divine grace and human freedom." For this reason, Christians, as those who know God's will, are most particularly responsible for the situation of humankind and must struggle wherever they are for peace and justice, the highest order of God for the common life of humanity. Of course, they will encounter obstacles, "but undoubtedly the world will nevertheless perceive the efforts of the Christians, and will be transformed to an extent known to God, through the influence of this light of the church."13

c. Asceticism as Struggle Against Evil

This struggle for peace and justice and against war, according to Orthodox theology, is an important component of the struggle which is waged against evil in the world in other areas as well. According to Eastern Christianity, one means in this struggle has always been asceticism—asceticism viewed, however, not as an additional means, or a work of faith, but rather, as a "demand on the whole life" of every Christian. "Asceticism is to be seen as a structured entity of means to achieve virtue and perfection. It is a voluntary exercise for body and soul in piety and in combat against the temptations of the evil one." This struggle against evil occurs in peace work, too; for this reason, the commitment to peace can be said to be a form of Christian asceticism available to us today.

If peace work is understood as a possible form of asceticism, and asceticism in turn as a means of breaking with sin and accepting God's offer of reconciliation, then the commitment to world peace is in the service of the reconciliation of human beings with God. The awareness of the
close interrelations between the struggle for peace in the world and reconciliation with God, according to Orthodox theologians in the Soviet Union, is a characteristic of Christian peace work which can and must hold good and must be maintained in the cooperation, say, with humanists and atheists. "Peace work, in accordance with Christian doctrine, means transformation of the earth to the benefit of all humanity living in it, transformation of human life itself on the well-ordered earth in order that the kingdom of God be revealed in greater fullness."\textsuperscript{15} N.A. Zabolotski characterizes this human striving for a peace that is possible in the world as the "search for a perfect state of the world and humanity, the search for new dynamic forms which will show more clearly how Creation and its aims correspond, which will make even more manifest how the image and likeness of God are placed in the human being, the pinnacle of Creation."\textsuperscript{16} Even with a basic difference, which must not be ignored, existing between God's peace and peace in the world it remains true "that the Christian struggle for earthly peace will go to improve living conditions on earth, and, hence, that this Christian work is in the service of the eventual reconciliation of the world with God. Understood thus, the peace work of the ROC in the Soviet Union as a whole is neither a mere concession to the Soviet state nor even the implementation of orders given by the Kremlin government, but, rather, it is a basic concern of the church."\textsuperscript{17}

2. Developments within Marxist Science of Religion in the USSR

Thus the struggle of the ROC for peace, justice and the protection of life is very close to "earthly" or this-worldly concerns and this makes it difficult for its opponents to maintain the thesis of religion being an opiate. In turn, there are developments within Soviet scholarship of religion that seem to indicate a turning-away from dogmatic atheism. To appreciate these new accents, we need briefly to look at the classic atheism which now as before is political dogma, in the USSR.

a. Main Characteristics of Soviet Atheism

One aim of Soviet ideology is that religion disappear from human thinking and from human civilization. This dismantling of religion is part of the Party program and is promoted by means of state policies. Due to this political dimension, Soviet atheism differs from Western atheism which it accuses, in fact, of being limited to a denial of the concept of God. In the Soviet Union, theoretical and scholarly atheism is, so to speak, a later complement to political atheism, it is the "intellectual sublimation of a political necessity."\textsuperscript{18}
In fact, the denial of religion on the basis of dialectic materialism is at first a theoretical affirmation that does not necessarily lead to embracing an offensive policy against religion. Thus Marx’s critique of religion with his philosophical refusal of the concept of God is still far away from the atheist propaganda and antireligious struggle that is waged in Soviet ideology. For this reason, scientific atheism in the Soviet Union is more than a philosophical negation of God; it is the basis of a total, categorical denial of religion: "Even individual belief in God, even a church that has withdrawn from society into pietism and liturgy, do not fit into the ideological monoculture of communism."19

The categorical nature of Soviet atheism is manifest in its considering itself as the only true unbelief and refusing to accept other forms of atheisms said to be inconsistent and unscientific: inconsistent because they deny religion only theoretically and do not fight it in practice; unscientific because they are not based on the ontology of dialectical materialism. The confessional aspect of Soviet atheism is in line with its categorical nature. Unlike agnostics or skeptics whose atheism is personal and individual, communists must be confessing atheists: "Ideological atheism is not a private conviction resulting from individual skepticism or existential doubts. It is organized unbelief. It has its own confession of faith, its own works on doctrine. It is publicized with much propaganda and rites. In many ways ideological atheism can be likened to a religion confession."20 Referring to Dostoyevsky’s Idiot, W. v.d. Bercken illustrates this interpretation: "The Russians do not become normal atheists. No. For them atheism is simply a new belief. They believe in it without recognizing that they believe in nothing. So great is our need to believe in something." That this attitude still prevails is shown by the reply given to the God question put by the Party Secretary in Alexander Zinoviev’s book, Yawning Heights, "We are often asked whether God exists. We answer this question in the affirmative: Yes, God does not exist."21

b. Departure from Dogmatic Atheism

Behind the scenes, so to speak, of this official Soviet doctrine, trends can be noted within Marxist science of religion that lead to a more differentiated view. Basically, the classic Marxist critique of religion has been confined to a sociological argumentation based on the thesis of the dying away of religion through the removal of class rule in socialism. With regard to Marxist-Leninist theory, it seemed that by and large the topic of religion had been done with. Meanwhile, however, practical experience in political everyday life in the socialist countries has resulted in new and more thorough studies on the phenomenon of religion.22 This reversal, that began around
1964, is part of a more comprehensive philosophical change in thinking that, in essence, has to do with perceiving human beings as personalities. Along with the traditional term of "scientific atheism", the concept of Marxist science of religion increasingly appears as a partial discipline of philosophy. This goes hand in hand with a greater differentiation and specialization that has led to a distinction between the disciplines of philosophy of religion, sociology of religion and psychology of religion.

The Roots of Religion

An extended discussion has taken place in recent times about the roots of religion in light of the fact that even after decades of socialist rule religion continues to exist. A distinction is made between the roots of religion based on societal existence and those based in social consciousness: the gnoseological and psychological as opposed to the social roots.

Social or class roots of religion are based, for one thing, on human impotence vis-à-vis nature and, for another, develop as a consequence of the growing injustice in class society, an injustice that is compensated for through religion. Historically, these roots can be overcome by human control over nature and by the dismantling of antagonistic class society.

Things are different with regard to the gnoseological roots. For A.D. Sukhov in his seminal work, Religion as a Social Phenomenon (Moscow, 1973), the question of the gnoseological roots of religion amounts to asking "how, under the influence of certain social factors, does the process of the formation of religion take place in the human consciousness." Sukhov comes to the conclusion that "the gnoseological roots are given with the existence of thinking human beings and will continue to exist in Communist society because they are based on the structure of thinking." For this reason, he argues, religion cannot merely be the product of false understanding that is, of a false cognitive content. It cannot be only a behavior pattern of the ignorant. According to Sukhov, even in socialism the structural conditions persist so that consciousness can form gnoseological roots of religion but only latently since the social basis for the formation of religion continues to dwindle. As early as 1966 N.A. Gorbachev had made similar observations concerning the question of scientific atheism: "The fact that under Communism the conditions for the formation of religion are absent does not permit the conclusion that the gnoseological possibility of a religio-idealistic interpretation of reality disappears." These quotations show quite clearly something of the Soviet view on the phenomenon of religion: "A few years ago statements as those by Gorbachev and Sukhov with their distinction between
conditions and possibilities with regard to the formation of religion would hardly have been possible.\textsuperscript{26}

The case is similar with regard to the perception of the psychological roots of religion. In accordance with Lenin, who had referred to the presence of the gnoseological roots of religion as qualities of the individual consciousness (i.e., the subjective component of the human psyche) which promote the formation of religion, K.K. Platonov defines the concept of the psychological roots of religion as follows: "The psychological roots fo religion are those specific marks of individual and group consciousness that determine the possibility of the formation of phenomena of religious psychology."\textsuperscript{27} He criticizes the current theory of religion by noting that too little account has been taken of the fact that phenomena of religious psychology, "social and historical conditions being equal, are solely determined by general human marks of the psyche (of the individual consciousness)." "For the individual consciousness is also the psyche of the human being as a personality."\textsuperscript{28}

Consequences of the New Approach

These statements by Soviet scholars of religion show that the psychological roots of religion do not simply disappear as consequence of changed social conditions, because they are determined by general marks of the human psyche, and these continue to be operative in socialist society. According to Platonov, it is important that believers be treated individually by the socialist ideology: "The nature of personal treatment can be reduced to the thesis: all external conditions that influence people arw mediated through the inner marks that make up the human personality." For this reason, he says, it is not sufficient to be familiar only with the social influences on human personality. "If one wants to know about the reasons for the religiosity of a concrete personality one needs to be cognizant of the personality him/herself."\textsuperscript{29} Z.W. Balevich goes even further when he states: "Contrary to the assertions of some atheists who deny the specificity of religious feelings, religious experience has no analogy to other experiences of adult people. This is the reason why representatives of theology make claims that there is an 'other world' that is quite different and able to stir the faithful."\textsuperscript{30}

This realization is quite new for the Soviet science of religion. Not too long ago, such utterances would have caused a storm of indignation. Religion is now no longer merely ideology in a negative sense, but ideology and psychology. These studies do not explicitly say to what extent religiosity is genuinely part of human nature. This would seem to follow from what they say; but it would raise a few ideological problems. For this reason, the Soviet science of religion
continues to state that it aims at improving the materialist understanding of religion and thus at making scientific and atheist work in practice more effective. Research, it is claimed, is important above all for the "proper establishment of a system of measures that will assure the victory of the scientific atheist ideology." To reach this goal it is necessary that science of religion "penetrate deeper and deeper into the essence of its subject and operate with the entire theoretical apparatus provide by modern social sciences."

This aim—apologetic from a Soviet point of view—shows not only a certain embarrassment—fear of their own courage?—on the part of the authors, but illustrates quite clearly that it will be hard for the new aspects to prevail against dogmatic views: the ultimate consequence would be that a changed view of the phenomenon of religion could call into question basic tenets of historical materialism. All this should not prevent us from recognizing that there has been a change in the view of religion, to take it seriously and consider new tendencies to be possible, with the aim of establishing a better basis of understanding and a more objective discussion.

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2 Ibid., p. 462.
3 Ibid., p. 463.
4 Ibid.
5 P. Sokolovskiy, cited in ibid., p. 465.
6 Voelker, op. cit., p. 466.
7 Cited in ibid.
8 Ibid., p. 467.
9 Ibid., p. 468.
11 Ibid., pp. 76f.
12 L. Voronov, cited by Voelker, op. cit., p. 468.
13 Ibid., p. 469.
14 N. A. Zabolotskiy, cited by Voelker, p. 470.
15 Ibid., p. 471.
16 Ibid., p. 472.
17 Voelker, op. cit.
19 Ibid., pp. 122ff.
20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., p. 129.
22 The results of such studies were presented by Ruth Zander, "Neuere Aspekte im marxistischen Religionsverständnis," in which she presents materials found only in Russian-language periodicals and books. A shorter version appeared under the title, "Abkehr vom dogmatischen Atheismus," in Kirche im Sozialismus (West Berlin), No. 3, 1978, pp. 15-28. Subsequent quotes are according to this article.
23 Cited by Zander in ibid., p. 17.
24 Ibid.
25 Ibid., p. 18.
26 Zander, ibid., p. 19.
27 Cited by Zander, ibid., p. 19.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., p. 21.
30 Cited by Zander, p. 22.
31 Sukhov and Mitrokhin cited by Zander, p. 28.