

8-2003

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Mikhail Sergeev

University of the Arts, Philadelphia, PA

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Recommended Citation

Sergeev, Mikhail (2003) "Liberal Orthodoxy: From Vladimir Solov'ev to Fr. Alexander Men," *Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe*: Vol. 23: Iss. 4, Article 2.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol23/iss4/2>

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**LIBERAL ORTHODOXY:
FROM VLADIMIR SOLOV'EV TO FR. ALEXANDER MEN¹**

By Mikhail Sergeev

Dr. Mikhail Sergeev, a frequent contributor to REE, teaches philosophy at University of the Arts, Philadelphia USA.

Introductory Remarks

In our contemporary world of intensive communications words are constantly changing their meaning and often require redefinition. The term “liberalism” is one such word, and its content is broad enough to be understood quite differently in various contexts. Here this term will be applied to the project of the European Enlightenment and to the adaptation of the main divisions of Christianity – Orthodoxy, Catholicism and Protestantism – to Enlightenment thought.

I will proceed by turning to the Enlightenment project and defining its relation to religion and the problems of statehood. My thesis is that the Enlightenment initiated a systemic crisis for the Christian religion, which in the area of politics has led to the separation between Church and state. I briefly discuss then how Protestantism and Catholicism have adjusted to this liberal religio-political program. Finally, I trace the development of liberal trends in Russian Orthodoxy by focusing on the line of thought initiated by Vladimir Solov'ev. In the discussion of his followers—Trubetskoi, Bulgakov, Losskii, Fedotov—attention is paid to political philosophy, especially to the idea of democracy and the separation of religion and state, which found its explicit defender in Fr. Alexander Men.

The Project of the Enlightenment

As one of the scholars of the Enlightenment, Ernst Cassirer wrote,

If we were to look for a general characterization of the age of the Enlightenment, the traditional answer would be that its fundamental feature is obviously a critical and skeptical attitude toward religion.²

With certain reservations many contemporary scholars, including, for instance, the American author Peter Gay, share this premise. In his two-volume study of the Enlightenment he argues that its thinkers “used their classical learning to free themselves from their Christian heritage.” Their worldview, in Gay’s opinion, represented “a volatile mixture of classicism, impiety and science [which made them] modern pagans.”³

The critical stand of the Enlightenment thinkers toward religion, it seems to me, needs further clarification. Unlike their Protestant predecessors who questioned the sacred tradition but never the scriptures themselves, the Enlightenment philosophers challenged the Bible and, therefore, shook the foundations of

¹ A version of this paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Mid-Atlantic American Academy of Religion in March 2003 in New Brunswick, NJ.

² Ernst Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1960, p. 134.

³ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation*, vol. 1, New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1973, p. 8.

Christianity. While the Reformation represented the structural crisis, the Enlightenment became the systemic crisis for the Christian religion.

The beginning of this phase was signaled by the critical attitude toward the Bible by the three main currents of the Enlightenment thought. First, the Christian scholars put the Bible under the scrutiny of the historical-rational method in order to demonstrate the truth of their tradition. The father of modern biblical criticism, an Oratorian priest Richard Simon wrote his *Critical History of the Old Testament* (1678) to defend Catholicism from Protestant critical attacks. The rules of criticism were applied to the New Testament as well, and as the eminent Leipzig exegete Johann Ernesti argued,

all books, whether divine or human, are to be treated in the same manner: the Scriptures cannot be understood theologically if they have not first been understood grammatically; criticism is a matter of philology, or it is nothing.⁴

Next, in England the philosophy of Deism also questioned the Bible but for another reason. Deists “conceived of nature as an entirely orderly system, undisturbed by miraculous intervention, which was governed by unfailing laws.”⁵ Such an outlook left little space for the specificity of the revelation recorded in the sacred books. As Matthew Tindal wrote in his *Christianity as Old as the Creation* which was widely known as the “Deist’s Bible,” “as God is entirely free from all partiality, his Laws must alike extend to all Times and Places.”⁶

Finally, in France the materialists and atheists, who belonged to the third and most radical current of Enlightenment thought, abandoned the scriptures because of their convictions. Enlightenment materialism whose “most notorious expression was in the short but incisive *L’Homme machine* (1747) of La Mettrie,”⁷ reduced the spiritual sphere to material reality and rejected life after death, human immortality, and the existence of God. As another French thinker, Diderot who began as a Deist but later turned to atheism mentioned in his *Addition to Philosophical Thoughts*, “we must say that faith is a chimera and has no existence in nature.”⁸ Naturally, materialists considered sacred scriptures as lacking any authority. They thought of the Bible as a purely human invention, a document that testifies to man’s search for power rather than for love of God and salvation.

Separation of Religion and State

As an adjustment to the systemic crisis of Christianity the Enlightenment thinkers developed a new attitude toward religion, its role in society and its relation to

⁴ Quoted in Paul Hazard, *European Thought in the 18th Century. From Montesquieu to Lessing*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1954, p. 68. See here also a short overview of the New Testament exegesis in Germany: pp. 65-73.

⁵ S. C. Brown, “The ‘Principle’ of Natural Order: or What the Enlightened Sceptics did not Doubt,” in *Philosophers of the Enlightenment*, ed. S. C. Brown, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1979, p. 60.

⁶ Excerpts from *Christianity as Old as the Creation* by Matthew Tindal in *Readings in the History of Christian Theology*, vol. 2, ed. William C. Placher, Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1988, p. 89.

⁷ Alfred Cobban, *In Search of Humanity: The Role of the Enlightenment in Modern History*, London: Jonathan Cape, 1960, p. 115.

⁸ Denis Diderot, *Addition to Pensées philosophiques*, quoted in Lucien Goldmann, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment: The Christian Burgess and the Enlightenment*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973, p. 75.

the state. They made a case for universal tolerance and argued that freedom of conscience should be granted to all members of society whatever religion they profess, if any. “Discord is the great ill of mankind, and tolerance is the only remedy for it,”⁹ said Voltaire. He was also convinced that a “sect, of every kind, is a rallying point for doubt and error.”¹⁰ And since, unlike in science, in religion one cannot prove by experiments the ultimate truth of one’s convictions, religious beliefs must be tolerated and limited to the private life of an individual.

The practical instrument for securing such a state of affairs was the separation of religion and state. Again, as Voltaire put it, “the authority of the clergy is and can be spiritual only... [it] should not have any temporal power” while the civil government “must permit no enterprise which puts the members of society in external and civil dependence on an ecclesiastical body.”¹¹ This way the proper balance between religious and secular institutions is maintained, a balance that prevents these institutions from corrupting each other.

The first among Christians to advocate the freedom of faith and conscience and to accept the principle of separation between religion and state, were Protestants. A French Protestant scholar Pierre Bayle was one of the early defender of religious freedom back in the 17th century. As Cassirer notes, Bayle’s advocacy of religious freedom was

not intended to serve any particular faith, but [established] a universal, purely philosophical goal and [represented] a principle, which is equally valid and binding for every form of belief.¹²

Another Protestant thinker, the “patron philosopher of liberalism” John Locke in his *Letters Concerning Toleration* set up this principle on a solid theoretical ground by distinguishing “the business of civil government from that of religion, and [settling] the just bound that lie between the one and the other.”¹³

As a German scholar Ulrich Im Hof pointed out, “Catholicism found it harder to come to terms with the Enlightenment.”¹⁴ He saw the “greatest public triumph of the Catholic Enlightenment [in] the dissolution of the Jesuit Order”¹⁵ by the papal decree in 1773. In the intellectual sphere liberal Catholicism was represented by the thought of a French priest Felicité de Lamennais (d. 1854). Thomas Bokenkotter writes in his *A Concise History of the Catholic Church*:

Once you accept the liberal idea of separation of Church and State, Lamennais argued, then you must necessarily accept the rest of the liberal program: freedom of education—because without it true religious freedom and freedom of thought could not be safeguarded; freedom of the press—since a Christian must believe in the power of truth rather than trusting in censorship [and]

⁹ Francois Voltaire, “Reflections on Religion,” in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, ed. by Isaac Kramnick, New York: Penguin Books, 1995, p. 130.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 117.

¹² Cassirer, *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment*, p. 167.

¹³ John Locke, “A Letter Concerning Toleration,” in *The Portable Enlightenment*, p. 82.

¹⁴ Ulrich Im Hof, *The Enlightenment*, trans. From German by William E. Yuill, Cambridge, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1994, p. 174.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 177.

complete democracy, demanding universal suffrage as the only way of achieving these freedoms.¹⁶

Among the three main Christian confessions, Orthodox Christianity in Russia was the latest to come to terms with the Enlightenment project and to adapt itself to its doctrines. It took almost a century for the Russian intellectual tradition to develop a trend of religious thought, which would later crystallize as liberal Orthodoxy.

Liberal Trend in Russian Orthodoxy

The renewal of Orthodox Christianity in Russia along the lines of the liberal Enlightenment is usually associated with the name of Vladimir Solov'ev (1853-1900). Solov'ev was a philosopher, poet and mystic who devoted himself to reconciling the "faith of the fathers" with the advances of modern civilization. He began as a follower of slavophilism, a trend in Russia's intellectual tradition, which aimed at defending the truth of Orthodoxy against Western forms of Christendom. Soon, however, he modified his initial views and tried to bridge the slavophiles with the opposing camp of the westernizers. Solov'ev argued that Orthodox Christianity must reaffirm its unique identity not by undermining Western civilization, but, on the contrary, by having absorbed new developments in Western culture, especially modern science and philosophy. A standard contemporary anthology of Russian thought portrays Solov'ev as neither a slavophile nor a westernizer, but a thinker who "can be viewed as the ultimate reunion of the two tendencies, though purely on the religious plane."¹⁷

Solov'ev's thought went through several phases—the preparatory, the theocratic or utopian, and finally the apocalyptic.¹⁸ In spite of his intellectual openness and willingness to accept what is best in modern civilization, however, neither period shows Solov'ev's appreciation of a democratic political system, which became the landmark of the Enlightenment project. In his mature years Solov'ev dreams about theocracy, which he understands as the religio-political union of the Russian tsar and the Catholic Pope. Even in the last years of his life, which are marked by Solov'ev's disillusionment with his utopian theocratic ideas, he does not develop sympathy for democracy.

The next generation of religious thinkers in Russia were already more receptive to democratic political ideals. In the 20th century many of Solov'ev's followers not only embraced them, but also attempted to justify their convictions on the ground of their religion. One of those émigré thinkers, Georgii Fedotov, for instance, saw the roots of democracy not in Ancient Greece and Rome, but in the heritage of the Old Testament, which contains one of the most ancient critiques of monarchy. In his article "Foundations of Christian Democracy" Fedotov contrasts the charismatic authority of popular leaders described in the *Book of Judges* to the

¹⁶ Thomas Bokenkotter, *A Concise History of the Catholic Church*, New York: Doubleday, 1990, p. 265.

¹⁷ *Russian Philosophy*, 1965, ed. by James M. Edie, et al., Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1976, in 3 vols., vol. III, p. 55.

¹⁸ See, for example: Pr. Evgenii Trubetskoi, *Mirosozertsanie Vl. S. Solov'eva* [*Vl. S. Solov'ev's Worldview*], 2 vols., Moscow, 1913.

hereditary kingship defended in the *Book of Kings*.¹⁹ Another religious philosopher and a constitutional democrat, Nikolai Losskii tied his democratic convictions with his religious philosophy of hierarchical pluralism.²⁰

Evgenii Trubetskoi and Fr. Sergii Bulgakov advocated a program for Christian democracy also. In one of his articles written at the outset of the 20th century Trubetskoi argued, “if Russian democracy does not take shape as Christian democracy, Russia will definitely and irrevocably perish.”²¹ A Christian “understanding of democracy,” he continued, “lays as the foundation of the sovereignty of the people the unshakable moral principles and first of all the recognition of human dignity, the unconditional value of human personality as it is.”²²

Fr. Sergii Bulgakov discussed the problems of religion and politics in his works from the same perspective. In one of his articles about Christian politics he pointed out, for instance, that the ideal of “human liberty and mutual respect (*svobody lichnosti i uvazheniia cheloveka k cheloveku*) must be the guiding norm of Christian politics in the domain of both political and economic relations.”²³ The form of government that comes closest to this ideal, according to Bulgakov, is a

federative democratic republic [which] must safeguard the natural sacred rights of a person, freedom of speech, freedom of conscience, freedom of communication between people, in other words, freedom of unions and associations, etc., and must eliminate estate (*sosloviye*) and any other privileges that violate the equality of the people before the law.²⁴

It was Fr. Alexander Men, however, who would later, already in the second half of the 20th century, link these ideas with the separation between Church and state as the ultimate guarantee for the achievement of human liberty and self-realization.

Fr. Men’s Political Philosophy

Fr. Men (1935-1990) was a Russian Orthodox priest and religious thinker in the Solov’evian tradition who was born and lived all of his life in the Soviet Union. Both his public service as a priest and his religious writings aimed at spreading the Gospel to the Soviet intelligentsia—people who were often deprived of any religious education. On the example of his own life and thought Fr. Men was demonstrating how a two-thousand-year-old tradition could be renewed, made alive and related to contemporary problems of secular society.

¹⁹ Georgii Fedotov, “Osnovy khristianskoi demokratii” [“Foundations of Christian Democracy”], *Polnoe sobranie statei* [Full Collection of Articles], vol. III, YMCA-Press: Paris, p. 139. Here and later I use my own translations of the quoted passages from Russian into English.

²⁰ See, for example: Nikolai Losskii, “Organicheskoe stroenie obshchestva i demokratiia” [“Organic Structure of the World and Democracy”], *Sovremennye Zapiski*, 1925, vol. 25; and “V zashchitu demokratii” [“In Defense of Democracy”], 1926, vol. 27.

²¹ Evgenii Trubetskoi, “Dva zveria [“Two Beasts”], in *Smysl zhizni* [The Meaning of Life], Moscow: Respublika, 1944, p. 302.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 303.

²³ Sergei Bulgakov, “Neotlozhnaia zadacha (O Soize khristianskoi politiki)” [“An Urgent Task (On the Union of Christian Politics)”], *Khristianskii sotsializm* [Christian Socialism], Novosibirsk: “Nauka”, 1991, p. 32.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 33-34.

Fr. Alexander wrote his most important theoretical works on the history of religions, humanity's cultural heritage and a variety of Christian subjects.²⁵ His *magnum opus* is a study of the life and teaching of the founder of Christianity.²⁶ As for Fr. Men's views on religion and politics, they are not contained in one definite volume, but are scattered throughout many of his books, essays, interviews and conversations. Some of these works have been compiled and published posthumously.

Fr. Men's political philosophy was developed unsystematically but in a straightforward manner and can be reconstructed from those various sources. In general, he spoke against the intrusion of secular authorities into the spiritual domain and *vice versa*. "Religion must not be associated with the state," he pointed out, "because the state is the organ of enforcement (*nasiliia*), while religion is the sphere of free spirit."²⁷ In his essay "Religion, the 'Cult of Personality' and the Secular State" Fr. Men traced the history of Church-state relations within Christianity. He discussed the abuses, which resulted from the intervention of either side into the domain of the other. He put a special emphasis on the "ruler-worship cult" which had been developed on the basis of what he labels as "magi'sm"--a belief in "an eternal cosmic order to which human beings have to submit, but over which they can exert influence by performing certain actions, namely magic rituals."²⁸ Mag'ism, as Fr. Men suggests, "was essentially antagonistic to religion" for it was based not on the selfless love of God, but on "the idea that, through magic, cosmic forces can be compelled to serve the selfish interests of human beings."²⁹

Christianity divorced freedom from power, religion from politics by separating "its own domain – 'God's domain' – from that of 'Caesar'." "In light of the Gospels," Fr. Men argues, the very ideas of 'state religion' or 'Christian state' are very doubtful and arguable."³⁰ In fact, addressing

the apostles as members of the Church of the New Testament, Christ says 'You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. *It shall not be so among you; but whoever would be great among you must be your servant*' [Matt. 20:25-26].³¹

Later in another context Jesus would reaffirm this point:

My Kingdom is not of this world. Were My Kingdom of this world, My servants would be fighting for Me so that I am not handed over to the Jews (*za to, chtoby Ia ne byl predan iudeiam*).³²

²⁵ A short version of Fr. Men's many-volume study of the history of religions was published recently as *Istoriia religii [History of Religion]*, in 2 vols., Moscow: "Forum-Infra-M," 2000. See also his *Mirovaia dukhovnaia kul'tura, khristianstvo, tserkov'. Lektsiia i besedy [World Spiritual Culture, Christianity, the Church. Lectures and Conversations]*, Moscow: Alexander Men's Foundation, 1995.

²⁶ Alexander Men', *Syn chelovecheskii [Son of Man]*, 3rd ed., Moscow: Alexander Men's Foundation, 1998.

²⁷ *Otets Alexander Men otvechaet na voprosy [Fr. Alexander Men Answers the Questions]*, Moscow: Alexander Men's Foundation, 1999, p. 266.

²⁸ *Christianity for the Twenty-First Century. The Prophetic Writings of Alexander Men*, ed. by Elizabeth Roberts and Ann Shukman, New York: Cfontinum, 1996, p. 115.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 122-123.

³² Alexander Men, *Syn chelovecheskii [Son of Man]*, pp. 276-277.

Since the emperor Constantine's edict of Milan of 313 C.E., however, the Church was closely associated with the secular state. This long period in Christian history is marked by intolerance and oppression. The post-Constantinian age that begins with the separation between Church and state in modern times, according to Fr. Men, brings new opportunities to the Christians. In his book *The Origin of Religion*, he writes:

By losing connection with the state, [the Church] frees itself from the ballast of nominal followers... It is much better when a 'pagan' of any sort professes himself as such rather than when he is called a Christian to please the community (*v ugodu srede*).³³

"In any sovereign state pluralism is unavoidable," he continues on another occasion, "That is why separation of Church and state is longed for, desirable for us, the high aim, because faith is sacred, while the state is something completely different."³⁴

Concluding Remarks

The process of liberalization of the Russian Orthodox Church was greatly accelerated by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the democratic reforms in Russia. Today's leading spokesmen for Church renewal focus their efforts on the defense of human rights and freedoms. One of them, Father Superior Veniamin (Novik), for instance, discussed these issues in his recently published series of articles.³⁵ Fr. Veniamin linked the notion of human rights with the original teaching of Christ and Christian personalism in general. As the founder of Christianity instructed his followers: "Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors; only so can ye be children of your heavenly Father, who causes the sun to rise on good and bad alike, and sends the rain on the innocent and the wicked."³⁶

This admonition, as Fr. Veniamin suggested, gives a religious justification to the modern notion of civil liberties, primarily the freedom of conscience and social tolerance. In his opinion, it was the Christian religion that formed and cultivated the sense of the utmost importance of human individuality. In Christianity human beings are commensurate with the Divine through the incarnation of the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, which combines both the Divine and human natures in perfect balance, indivisible and without merging. "No other religion but Christianity," says Fr. Veniamin, "elevates (*rassmatrivaet*) a human being so high, and only Christianity unfolds the mystery of the concrete."³⁷

³³ Alexander Men, *Istoli religii [The Origin of Religion]*, Moscow: Alexander Men's Foundation, 2000, p. 22.

³⁴ Fr. A. Men's *Answers the Questions*, p. 221.

³⁵ See, for example: Father Superior Veniamin (Novik), "Po obrazu i podobiiu" [In the Image and Likeness], *Continent*, no. 74 (1993); "O pravoslavnom miroponimanii" [On the Orthodox View of the World], *Voprosy filosofii*, no. 4 (1993); "Aktual'nye problemy rossiiskogo pravoslavnogo tserkovnogo soznaniia" [Topical Problems of the Russian Orthodox Ecclesiastical Consciousness], *Voprosy filosofii*, no. 2 (1999).

³⁶ *The Oxford Study Bible. Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha*, ed. by M. Jack Suggs et al., New York: Oxford University Press, 1992, The Gospel According to Matthew 5:43-45.

³⁷ Father Superior Veniamin (Novik), "O pravoslavnom miroponimanii" [On the Orthodox View of the World], *Voprosy filosofii*, no. 4 (1993), p. 140.

In addition, the sacredness of any human person is derived from a belief, common to all monotheistic traditions, that humans were created in the “image and likeness” of God. This famous scriptural formula proclaims the worth and dignity of all people, as Fr. Veniamin writes in another article, and “makes it possible to comprehend the democratic social system as being the most compatible (sootvetstvyushchuiu) with the Christian worldview.” Democracy, he continues, has a supra-natural character since it is found neither in the animal nor in the primitive world [which is based] on the principle of domination of the most powerful. And it is exactly the protection of the weak, their equal rights that is the nerve of contemporary democracy.³⁸

Apart from his and other liberating theological voices, the establishment of liberal Orthodox education has also marked the last ten years in contemporary Russia. St. Andrew’s Biblical Theological College (BTC) in Moscow is one of the pioneering institutions in that field, and it is now open for its tenth academic year. BTC stands in the tradition of late Fr. Alexander Men and represents a blend of confessional and secular institutions of higher learning. It is committed to open religious education and is promoting inter-confessional, inter-religious dialogue and free discussion.³⁹

Since the establishment of democratic political institutions the Orthodox Church in post-soviet Russia is in a constant process of reinventing itself, rediscovering its role in society and formulating a social doctrine that meets the challenges of modern times. At the Jubilee Bishop’s Council of the ROC meeting in Moscow in August 2000, it adopted a document, which is titled “The Fundamentals of Social Conception of the Russian Orthodox Church.” This document is aimed at the official exposition of the Orthodox Christian social doctrine. Independently of how one looks at its statements,⁴⁰ the fact that the ROC has finally decided to make this important and long awaited step may seem as a promising sign of renewal. One can only hope that it is the first in the upcoming series of measures that will make Orthodox Christianity in Russia more compatible with the spirit of modern civilization and culture.

³⁸ Father Superior Veniamin (Novik), “Aktual’nye problemy rossiiskogo pravoslavnogo tserkovnogo soznaniia” [Topical Problems of the Russian Orthodox Ecclesiastical Consciousness], *Voprosy filosofii*, no. 2 (1999), pp. 133-134.

³⁹ More on this in “Russian Orthodoxy Open to Dialogue: A Conversation With the Rector of St. Andrew’s Biblical Theological College, Dr. Aleksei Bodrov,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, vol. 37, no. 1 (2000), pp. 71-73.

⁴⁰ For different perspectives on this document see: Walter Sawatsky, “Russian Orthodoxy Faces Issues of the Day and the Century – Church and Society, Religious Pluralism, Martyrs and Mission,” *Religion in Eastern Europe*, vol. XXII, no. 2 (2002), pp. 1-15; Charles C West, “The Russian Orthodox Church and Social Doctrine – A Commentary on Fundamentals of the Social Conception of the Russian Orthodox Church,” *Religion in Eastern Europe*, vol. XXII, no. 2 (2002), pp. 16-25; Fr. Benjamin Novik, “Analysis of ‘The Fundamentals of Social Conception of the Russian Orthodox Church’,” *Religion in Eastern Europe*, vol. XXII, no. 5 (2002), pp. 1-15.