Russian Christians and the Conflict in Ukraine

Ekaterina Smyslova

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree

Part of the Christianity Commons, and the Eastern European Studies Commons

Recommended Citation

Available at: http://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ree/vol35/iss2/9

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ George Fox University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Occasional Papers on Religion in Eastern Europe by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ George Fox University. For more information, please contact arolfe@georgefox.edu.
RUSSIAN CHRISTIANS AND THE CONFLICT IN UKRAINE

By Ekaterina Smyslova

Ekaterina Smyslova is an attorney in Moscow, Russia.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another (John 13: 35).

Russian and Ukrainian Christians at Odds

One of my Russian friends, a leader of an international ministry, recently shared with me her confusion. One of our good common friends, a Ukrainian woman of deep faith and a world-class trainer of trainers, has strong anti-Russian views. In contrast, my Russian friend believes that Russian policy toward Ukraine is blameless, and crazy people who do not understand this cannot be welcomed as team members. It is a pity that now it will be impossible for us to have valuable training sessions in Russia led by a Ukrainian trainer.

Sadly, the Christian NGO, “Russia without Orphans,” no longer cooperates with its counterpart, “Ukraine without Orphans,” because Russian and Ukrainian leaders of these two charities disagree about the situation in Ukraine. Are our political disputes worth the cost of a home for thousands of orphans? Disagreements over Putin’s policies in Ukraine are taking place in all international ministries in Eurasia, and longstanding relationships and partnerships are being broken. What is going on, brothers and sisters? What are our priorities? How can we place our political views higher than issues of faith and mercy? If God is love, how can we consider that we know God if we are unable to love our neighbors unconditionally?

St. Seraphim of Sarov advises us, "Acquire a peaceful spirit, and around you thousands will be saved." Isn’t it the goal of any church or mission to lead people to salvation? How then can we expect that our ministry will be successful if we do not have peace in our soul, and if we lack love even toward our Christian co-workers?

1 Reprinted from the East-West Church and Ministry Report, 23 (Spring 2015): 1-3, with the permission of the editor.
2 http://mirvam.org/2014/09/05/al’yans-rossiya-bez-sirot-zamorozil-so.
The Russian Media on Ukraine

I know that believers in both countries now live under the heavy influence of secular mass media. Russian state-controlled mass media advance the idea that a fascist junta seized power in Ukraine. This junta, bribed with Western money, callously butchers peaceful people. Every day all Russian TV channels show bloody pictures illustrating the malfeasance of the junta. It motivates Russians to go to Eastern Ukraine as volunteers to rescue local people dying there because of the fascists. In such a context anyone lifting a voice against Russian interference in Ukraine provokes social condemnation.

Few in Russia believe that Ukrainians, driven to extreme measures by corruption and grim poverty, participated in Maidan protests and demanded political change of their own free will. It is also hard for Russians to believe that Ukrainians want to distance themselves from Russia in favor of the bureaucratic-oligarchic capitalism of the West.

Succumbing to Mass Media

I remember when I was making my first steps in Christian life I was greatly surprised by clergy advising believers not to watch, listen to, or read secular mass media. I now know that such a discipline would help us keep the Gospel in our hearts and would protect us from brainwashing by secular propaganda. As I observe our mass media fostering hatred I remember the “March of the Calves” by Bertolt Brecht:

Following the drum
The calves trot
The skin for the drum
They deliver themselves.
The butcher calls. The eyes tightly closed
The calf marches on with calmly assured step.
The calves, whose blood has already been shed in the slaughterhouse
In spirit they march along in their ranks.

Are we as Russian believers calves answering the butcher’s call, or are we lambs entrusting ourselves to the Good Shepherd of Heaven and following Him?

Shall we blindly accept the opinion of secular authorities and act according to their expectations as unfortunate Christians did in Nazi Germany? Or shall we act as ambassadors of love and peace sent by our heavenly Father into this world of sorrows?
In the beginning of the conflict in Ukraine, Russian believers were seeking guidance from church leaders who responded simply: “Just pray for the authorities and for peace.” As a result, secular authorities have shaped the political views of Russian believers on the situation in Ukraine. In the face of the anti-Ukrainian public mood of hatred, we need to be reminded that the Gospel warns us: “You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings” (I Corinthians 7:23).

“Symphonia” in Theory and in Practice

Historically, Russians have been accustomed to church and state having different areas of responsibility. Prior to 1917 relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the state were based on the principle of “symphonia,” the mutually supportive arrangement between secular and religious powers developed by 6th century Byzantine Emperor Justinian. According to this understanding of the distribution of authority, both church and state are established by God. The priesthood is in charge of “heavenly matters,” but state authorities are in charge of “worldly matters.” The state supports the church and integrates Christian values into secular legislation while the church acts as the voice of conscience to the state and its rulers.

“Symphonia,” however, did not mean church and state were equal in authority. Muscovite Metropolitan Philipp attempted to rebuke Tsar Ivan the Terrible, and Patriarch Nikon attempted to challenge Tsar Aleksey Mikhailovich, but both churchmen came to very sad ends for their trouble. Later, Peter the Great refused to appoint a successor to Patriarch Adrian and in effect abolished the patriarchate and converted the Orthodox Church into a department of a state with the tsar as its head. State control of the Orthodox Church became so complete that opposing the state came to be seen as a sin, and independent thought of any sort came to be regarded as both a challenge to the church (heresy) and a challenge to the state (treason). Russian Orthodox believers were—and many still are—certain that the only proper public and political activity is patriotism and support for positions taken by the state. For Protestants in Russia facing persecution and discrimination, a demonstration of loyalty to state authorities is a matter of survival.

Taking into consideration all of the above, it is easy to understand why the absolute majority of Russian people do not even consider the need for any questioning of national mass media. The possibility of disagreement with the policy of President Putin toward Ukraine does
not even occur to most people. A majority of the Russian population is ready to sacrifice whatever is necessary for the implementation of his ideas and to actively oppose any dissent.

The Russian Orthodox “Social Concept” Doctrine: A Blueprint for a Prophetic Church Challenge to the State?

Might this popular passivity and uncritical acceptance of the political status quo ever change? I believe there is reason to hope so. In the 21st century the Russian Orthodox Church has entered into a new stage in its development. It now motivates laity to take an active role in missions and in social and political life. The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church declares: “In participating in government and political processes, Orthodox laity are called to base their work on the norms of the gospel’s morality, the unity of justice and mercy (Psalm 85:10), the concern for the spiritual and material welfare of people, the love of the fatherland, and the desire to transform the surrounding world according to the word of Christ”

Furthermore, Orthodox social doctrine holds that the church even has the right to participate in political processes: “If the authorities force Orthodox believers to apostatize from Christ and His Church and to commit sinful and spiritually harmful actions, the Church should refuse to obey the state. The Christian, following the will of his conscience, can refuse to fulfill the commands of the state forcing him into grave sin. If the Church and her holy authorities find it impossible to obey state laws and orders, after a due consideration of the problem, they may take the following action: enter into direct dialogue with authorities on the problem, call upon the people to use democratic mechanisms to change legislation or review the authority’s decision, apply to international bodies and to world public opinion, and appeal to her faithful for peaceful civil disobedience.”

Therefore, every Christian not only has the right but must take a proactive role in social and political issues. In Russia today the principle of the civic responsibility of Christians is supported by Orthodox as well as Protestant churches. However, in choosing our response to any given social or political issue, we should take care that our actions are in conformity with the Gospel. Above all, we must ask ourselves, “Are our judgments and actions grounded in love?”

“Above all, love each other deeply, because love covers over a multitude of sins” (1 Peter 4:8).

---