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The Orthodox Church and the Jews

The following ten items are taken from an anthology published by the Rudomino Press in Moscow in early 1995 under the title *Pravoslavnaya tserkov' i yevrei* (*The Orthodox Church and the Jews*). The anthology covers several centuries; the items we have chosen were written between 1972 and 1995 and thus cover the more recent period.

The editor of the anthology is Aleksandr Gurevich, who works in the religious department of the Library for Foreign Literature in Moscow (where the Rudomino Press is located). The director of the Library, Yekaterina Geniyeva, is a spiritual daughter of the murdered Orthodox priest Fr Aleksandr Men', and it is her policy to welcome to the library members of the general public who are concerned with inter-denominational and interfaith relations. The library contains over 12,000 religious books and periodicals, and the staff are involved in increasing the Library's holdings of religious literature from abroad, distributing new Russian religious literature around the world, summarising important books and articles for Russian readers and holding seminars and conferences on contemporary issues in religious life.

Aleksandr Gurevich himself is particularly concerned with Christian-Jewish relations and is an active member of the 'Rossiisky fond iudeo-khristianskikh issledovaniy' ('Russian Jewish-Christian Research Fund') dedicated to combatting anti-semitism in Russia and promoting mutual understanding between Christians and Jews. *Pravoslavnaya tserkov' i yevrei* is published under the auspices of the Fund.

Keston Institute provided some of the funding for the publication of *Pravoslavnaya tserkov' i yevrei*. In March 1995 Aleksandr Gurevich spent a month at Keston Institute as the first beneficiary of Keston's new scholarship scheme.

Conditions for Dialogue Between Jews and Christians in Russia*

ALEKSEI RUDNEV

What is the point of dialogue between Jews and Christians in Russia? Before we can answer this question we have to ask whether the dialogue can be initiated at all. I am not talking about external factors such as gathering members of the two faiths together to talk in some conference hall and then publishing the results of their discussions. Such an event may greatly influence the accomplishment of real dialogue but does not actually bring it about. The question is, can Jews and Christians living in Russia enter into genuine dialogue with one another without hiding behind abstractions and general human concerns, but remaining firmly in the territory of Judaism and Christianity?

Three problems are inevitably bound up with dialogue between Jews and Christians.

(1) There is the problem of antisemitism, which has always been a specifically Christian problem. Dialogue about antisemitism is therefore possible only among Christians (that is, between those who find some kind of religious or emotional justification for antisemitism and those who do not accept any basis for it). It needs to be stressed that antisemitism as a religious or emotional problem cannot, strictly speaking, be a theme for dialogue for the Jews.

(2) There is the problem of 'religious practice', that is, the social, moral and metaphysical consequences of one or another 'type of faith'. The discussion of this problem can form part of Jewish-Christian dialogue. It is ground on which Jews and Christians can meet as people of goodwill to talk about humanity and ethics and to 'build up the earth' together in awareness of their religious responsibility.

(3) Finally, there is the problem of faith itself – of the meaning and appearance of faith, its depth and structure, of the process of its creation and conceptualisation. Faith must serve as a source and theme for a developing dialogue in which Jews and Christians meet one another not as representatives of different national types or different religious convictions, but as people who see themselves as Jews or Christians because of their unique personal encounters with the Living God. The question is not, it would seem, about determining the nature of God or creating a common creed, but about acknowledging God, confessing Him as that Lord He chose to reveal himself as to each Jew or Christian in his or her personal faith. If the first stage of Jewish-Christian dialogue is a dialogue between Christians, and if it then becomes a

*This is a shortened version of the article 'Usloviye dialoga', *Vestnik RKhD*, no. 106, 1972, pp. 46–56.

dialogue between Christians and Jews, in the third stage it grows into a dialogue of believers who are sharing faith freely, not through superficial religious practices, not through 'being circumcised or non-circumcised', but through personal joy, courage and prayer.

Dialogue cannot begin at this third stage, however. In order to reach it the basic obstacle to Jewish–Christian dialogue must first be removed: so-called 'Christian antisemitism'. 'Christian' antisemitism is what must be discussed among Christians in the presence of Jews and could only ever be an introduction to Jewish–Christian dialogue. First of all we have to define 'Christians'. If we define 'Christians' as those who describe themselves as such, then in the majority of cases Christians are those who confess Jesus of Nazareth as their Lord and Saviour. We know from the Gospels that Jesus lived among the Jewish people during the reigns of the Emperors Augustus and Tiberius, that he shared the language and customs of his people, that his teaching concerned love and blessedness and that he called himself the Son of God. We know that his preaching provoked the anger of the Pharisees and Sadducees who forced the Roman procurator, Pilate, to condemn him to crucifixion. We know that Jesus died an agonising death but then rose and spent a little while longer on earth. We also know that the risen Jesus visited several of his disciples, spoke to them and even shared a meal with them. It is not in just any man, not in an idea or an icon, an angel or a fleshless spirit that the faith of a Christian recognises its true God, but in this actual person. It is through him that every human being finds his or her authentic definition. It is through him and him alone that God reveals himself to us as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. And this is why Christians have to discuss their relationship with the Jews and 'Christian' antisemitism in the presence of this very God and this very Man.

It is of course true that antisemitism has other faces, both non-Christian and even anti-Christian, and that it existed before the birth of Christ; but this does not detract from the problems of 'Christian' antisemitism. Its imprimatur lies on any form of conscious hatred or unconscious aversion to Jews among nonbelievers. Antisemitism is the only inheritance which Christianity too often passes on to the contemporary atheist and it is this inheritance which is the issue here.

'Christian' antisemitism is a particular emotional complex supporting a specific ideology. It has taken shape over the centuries during which Christians East and West have believed all Jews to be murderers of God and at the same time responsible for many natural and social disasters. At critical moments in history, therefore, the Jews have been subjected to persecution. For the Jew, the history of the Christian peoples over the past thousand years has been steeped in the spirit of pogrom. This has not necessarily been a physical reality but more often a spiritual reality, the air the Jews have breathed; and this in turn, it would seem, has produced in the Jews distinctive reactions to their environment which have themselves strengthened the antipathy of the Christian. In this atmosphere 'Christian' antisemitism, which was already prevalent, has taken on a higher religious sanction.

There is a 'theology' of antisemitism which is one of the solid layers of that religio-ideological foundation on which for centuries Christians have built their convictions. It is impossible to understand 'Christian' antisemitism without looking at the way in which this misinterpretation of Christianity has taken root in many Christians' understanding and practice of a faith which does not seem to have been affected by the mystery of the Incarnation. This unprecedented mystery seems to have been lost. 'The word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth' (John 1:14). This fact, incommensurable with anything else and incomprehensible in

all its paradoxicality, is still 'madness and temptation' in the eyes of many Christians. That the omniscient and almighty Lord became a simple man, uniting himself with human nature and endowing him with all the fullness of his own power, and that conscious of his freedom, which was both divine and human, this man chose the hardest of human fates, went freely to death and died on a cross, not in a metaphysical or symbolic sense, but a real, human death, humiliated and betrayed, in agony and forsaken by God, is 'madness and temptation' in the understanding of many. And because the mystery of the Crucifixion has become illusory, so has the mystery of the Resurrection. The human soul has lost its awareness of the immense novelty of what was given and revealed to mankind in the person of Jesus Christ, in His Word, His Death and His Resurrection. The Lord was weak and helpless in this world, but in Him weakness was mysteriously united with eternal power and might, and thus He will remain until the end of time, vulnerable, yet all-powerful, governing minds and hearts, guiding the nations, ruling over history, and at the same time crucified by every human sin, bearing the burden of every human fate and sharing the agony of the whole world until His Second Coming 'in power and glory'.

Do we acknowledge that the very Jesus Christ who was crucified on the outskirts of Jerusalem is our true Lord and Saviour? Do we acknowledge the very Jesus who grew up in Nazareth among relatives and friends, who walked along the streets and chatted with people, who was unhappy, who prayed, who loved the land in which he was born, who loved his people and wept over their forthcoming disasters, or does the distance of the centuries lead us into one of two common temptations: either to see Him as a mere man who obeyed the will of an unknown God, or to see Him as only the shadow of a man, an apparition behind which God was hiding? The heresy of Arianism, humanism, liberal Protestantism, 'historicism' and others have all fallen to the first temptation, but they have only ever been a stage in the processes either of coming to God or of withdrawing from Him. When faith begins to weaken it seeks rational justification for itself. It embarks on the search for the 'historical Jesus' and discovers him in the form of a leader or a dreaming idealist. Before it is destroyed completely it cannot even linger with the 'historical Jesus' but looks instead to the 'idea' of Jesus, to his principles, interpreting what 'he was really trying to say' in the spirit of existential ethics or political reformism. In the space of two to three generations Christianity becomes completely secularised. However, it is also the case that faith can grow secretly out of an ignorant godlessness taught in childhood that, having discarded Him, turns to the Jesus of the Gospels, examines Him, becomes preoccupied with Him, disputes with Him, is tormented by Him, retreats from Him and returns to Him. Then sooner or later He Himself, by a free act of grace, reveals Himself as God. In this way the first temptation, in contrast to the second, always reveals its nature, whether it be as a sign of faith's decline or a mark of its ripening and growth.

The second temptation is the temptation of Monophysitism, which is if anything more insidious and tenacious, and hence more dangerous. Its consequences are concealed; it is confidently revealed in the true creed, in tradition and in a literal reading of the Bible. Monophysitism has lost all sense of God's humanity and is infected with a 'fossilised insensitivity' to what is divine in man. It sees man as a stupid and unclean animal who must be purged and tormented in order to be transformed into an angel. It deprives man of his freedom, subjecting him wholly to the omnipotence, judgment and lordship of God, and sees the world as a trap from which man must be rescued. Yet this faith is the more ready to become the obedient slave of the world and live in service to all its masters, leaving it under the command of the prince of

this world. Scorning reason, the more unthinkingly it follows superstition and stagnation. Scorning human conscience, the more carelessly it yields to human meanness, serving human passions. But this faith as such does not fade away as 'humanistic' faith does. On the contrary, it deludes itself that through it all the secrets of the soul are laid bare and all the corners of life are filled in, whereas in fact it does not illuminate the soul or transfigure life but instead is itself transformed into their likeness, as it were sharing their sinfulness and fallen nature. It attaches itself to sacred objects and to everything heavy and earthbound – to earthly kingdoms, ceremonies, opinions and customs. It is unable to identify or interpret what is genuinely human; it confuses it hopelessly with what is divine and thus gives the highest sanction to what is unenlightened and partial in man. It sees divinity reflected in both good and evil feelings (for example, in love of one's country and of its ancient beauty and spirituality, but also in a blind hatred of strangers). It often ceases to distinguish between good and evil not only on earth, but also in heaven. In selfish greed it threatens God Himself, reducing Him to that cruel and fallen lordship which it is accustomed to respect as holy and divine here on earth. It makes real and effective use of His mercy and His anger, His judgment and His humility, so that the one who refused to call upon twelve legions of angels to save himself is transformed by the fantasies of this faith into a touchy and irritable despot. He who prayed that his murderers might be forgiven turns out to be the persecutor of prodigal sons. The one who said 'Of those you have given me I have lost none' (John 18:9) appears as the torturer of sinners. He who forbade his disciples to judge others begins to look like a small-minded and unforgiving judge both in heaven and on earth. And the earthly judges who decided all this in His Name then turned on the Jews. Cruel and indiscriminating, they became the source and basis for 'Christian' antisemitism.

Something happened which at first seems very strange. Having turned to the Old Testament and taken it on board as their own, Christians began to judge the Jews. Christian faith had been kindled by the Word of the Living Jesus Christ, by His wonderful presence on earth, His death on the cross and His Resurrection, by the outpouring of His Spirit on the day of Pentecost and the promise of His Kingdom; but Christians as it were became apostates from this blinding truth. They looked back to the old familiar picture of the world with God seated in bliss on high and man creeping along at the bottom of the abyss. The nature of this abyss was vague. It was as if their faith were running away from grace into the arms of the law, away from the joyful tidings about being a new creation and about the resurrection of the dead to a cruel hierarchy of slavery and lordship. They invented a new God, not unlike the Yahweh of the Israelites but quite different nonetheless. The God of Israel was endlessly free and righteous towards mankind, but the new god lived according to strict earthly rules. The God of Israel was a living God, continually revealing and confirming Himself from the depths of His being, but the invented god was cold, immutable and authoritative in a very earthly way. It was this slander of God which led to so many distortions of Christianity and became Christianity's stumbling block. The seeds of godlessness were sown here; for godlessness, whether humanist or positivist, has always been tempted by a false idea of the might of God. It has set itself up against God and mocked Him; has despaired of Him; but has never succeeded in discovering the true secret of His might. The Lord said 'all power in heaven and on earth is given to me' (Matthew 28:18). Even the weakest faith acknowledges the truth of these words. But they were pronounced by the *risen* Jesus, the Jesus who had experienced the pain of the Crucifixion; and it is *only* through the Crucifixion that they can be truly understood. It is *only* through the Crucifixion that the secret of His

authority in heaven and on earth is revealed in its fulfilment.

However, many Christians found the Crucifixion of God too difficult to accept, emotionally and intellectually, and 'Christian' antisemitism came into being. Christians saw in the cross not a revelation of the incredible and immense love of God, but quite simply his murder, a capital crime like any other, only much more serious and requiring that a great many people be punished for it. They ignored the fact that it was human sin, including their own, which was responsible for the Crucifixion, and concerned themselves instead with the sins of others. They accused the Jews of murdering God and put them on trial. It is true that they did not always and everywhere judge them equally harshly, but the curse of the Christian has always lain on the Jew and has arguably been the main factor, tacitly accepted and hence indisputable, which has alienated the Jews from Christ. It was only relatively recently, at the Second Vatican Council, that the Roman Catholic Church broke silence and absolved the Jewish nation from the collective guilt of murdering God. Instead, the guilt was laid on those who actually participated in the Crucifixion. All Christians, whatever their denomination, should be thankful for this, even though the Catholic Church acquitted the Jews with a juridical and diplomatic professionalism which satisfies the requirements of formal justice rather than springing from Christian faith itself. The arguments brought before the Council and those advanced by a number of writers mainly reveal a desire to reassert simple common sense. For example, it was pointed out that the Jews, who were brought up to believe in an invisible and all-powerful God, could not without inspiration from a higher source have acknowledged anyone, even a prophet or a miracle worker, to be the Son of God.

It was also noted that when the Jewish nation was scattered to the four corners of the earth its persistence in not recognising Christ as the Son of God helped it to survive as a nation and to preserve itself from merging into and assimilating with other cultures. It was pointed out that it was a small group of high priests and Pharisees who pressed for crucifixion and that the cries which resounded round the court and have served as the basis for 'Christian' antisemitism ('His blood will be on us and on our children', Matthew 27:25) came, it would seem, from a very small number of people primed by those same high priests. It was calculated that the square onto which Jesus was led could hold a maximum of two to three thousand people and that the number of Jews who believed in Jesus was already much greater than that. And of course it was clearly stated that the Mother of God was Jewish (which in itself is enough to give a sacred significance to the existence of the Jews), as were the apostles, the first saints and the first martyrs.

It would seem that the Council had a quite separate aim in view as well: to return to the clear and indisputable message of the Scriptures; simply to remove the scales of centuries from the eyes of Christians, inviting them to see and to hear the witness of the Old Testament, of Jesus and of the apostles, in particular of the apostle Paul, reminding them that the problem of 'Christian' antisemitism is repeatedly and unambiguously resolved by the Scriptures. Chapter 11 of St Paul's Epistle to the Romans (interpreted by Fr Sergi Bulgakov in his paper *Goneniya na Izrail (Persecution of Israel)*) demolishes all the possible claims of 'Christian' antisemitism. Antisemitism itself has never been a theological riddle. The riddle is how Christians who had read and studied the Scriptures and who were possessed of that common sense that the Vatican Council appealed to could ever have been party to the judgment passed on the Jews, a judgment which either secretly or openly they believed to be the judgment of God.

That the whole history of the Jewish nation, in particular from the fall of Jerusalem until recent times, has gone according to God's plan is not, it would seem, doubted by either the Christian or the Jewish faith, but if this plan hides a secret for the Jews, and if by a heroic feat of faith they are able to recognise its holy and merciful nature but not discover its ultimate meaning, then to no less an extent it remains a secret for Christians too. In the midst of its tribulations Israel believed in the immutability of God's promises and in the remarkable fact that it had been chosen, but Christians saw the matter quite differently. 'Do not be proud, but be afraid', says the apostle Paul (Romans 11:20). But what was 'Christian' antisemitism if not monstrous pride? It took upon itself the prerogative of divine judgment and omniscience in dealing with a Divine mystery. It set about judging the children of God according to its own reason and desires. It chose to turn God's truth into a human lie, making the world a nightmare for Jews. And that is why if Jewish-Christian dialogue is to happen today Christians must first of all renounce this right to Divine judgment. Under no circumstances or conditions can they judge anyone in God's name. The Church can and must pardon and forgive, remit sins and accept prodigal sons. In this role she is holy and 'the gates of hell shall not prevail against her'. But she must not compete with any kind of earthly court, for all judgment belongs to God.

If someone hears my words and believes in me, I will not judge him; for I did not come to judge the world but to save it. He who rejects me and does not receive my words will be judged: the word I have spoken will judge him on the last day. For I have not spoken of myself but of the Father who sent me. He told me what I should say and what I should speak. I know that his commandment is life everlasting. (John 12:47-50)

If the only judge is the 'word of eternal life', then Christians must not only renounce any temporary, earthly judgment, but also repent of the judgment they have already passed. They must repent of the fact that they chose to measure the depths of the love of God with their inadequate instruments. They must repent of the fact that their judgment of the chosen people was loathsome to the Lord. They must repent of the fact that they violated the commandment of 'eternal life' and stopped up their ears to the testimony of the Scriptures. They must repent that they have not listened to the prayers of the crucified Christ. They must repent of the invention of the Antichrist by 'Christian' antisemitism. Finally, they must repent of the fact that they passed this invention on to non-Christians among whom it bore fruit, for if this repentance is to be the genuine Christian repentance which the Church has recognised as one of its mysteries, removing it from the sphere of subjective moods and experiences, confirming its inexhaustible and unfathomable authority to exercise mercy and forgiveness and revealing its divine-human nature, then this repentance must include the sins of both Christians and non-Christians. Non-Christians do not have the concept of personal sin as Christianity experiences and understands it, and so genuine repentance is not possible for non-Christians. The repentance of a Christian, however, purifies and sanctifies the whole world; while on the other hand, the sins of Christians are revealed in the fallen condition of the unbelieving world. Those Christians who today feel any kind of spiritual antipathy towards Jews must taken upon themselves responsibility for the pogroms and gas chambers of the past.

But what about Russia? Antisemitism in Russia at one time had such a markedly 'Christian' character that it used to be a tradition on Easter Day for a drunken horde to go to some Jewish quarter and call the sins of Judas to account with the help of icons, knives, crowbars and knuckledusters. In more peaceful times people would

complain that ‘the Yids had everything’ or study the Jewish attitude to blood. Much has changed in Russia since then. Christians are having to pay a high price for their faith once again. There has been martyrdom on a scale never seen before in the history of Christianity. Antisemitism had been on the wane, but has now flared up again, this time without the help of Christians. It has now taken on more respectable forms; it is the task of those very officials who once made sure that the Jews kept to their pale of settlement and protected Orthodoxy, persecuting the Old Believers and sectarians. Today, these people are professional atheists, but everything else remains uncannily unchanged: the same psychology, the same attitude towards other faiths, the same imperturbability and thick skins, the same certainty that everything is as it is, was and always shall be; the same historical naiveté. The old antisemitism lives on as both a social and a state-sponsored phenomenon. Calm or violent, it is based on the same flabby ideology and is in harmony with hearts and minds and political wisdom.

Can we seriously maintain that this is modern antisemitism, however? It is an antisemitism carefully thought out and calculated by the state, one of the curious results of a planned economy. It is an antisemitism of percentage norms and office targets, an antisemitism of anonymous circulars and special instructions delivered in a particular tone behind closed doors. Or else it is a national emotional antisemitism, an antisemitism of jokes, of knowing smiles, of ‘wink, wink, nod, nod’, the often quite unmalicious antisemitism of marketplace squabbles and crowded buses. It is hard to regard any of this as real antisemitism. It is rather a poisonous residue of ‘Christian’ antisemitism, and the stench of atheism and godlessness. In the face of this godless antisemitism, humbly and conscious of their responsibility, Christians must now enter into dialogue with Jews.

Christians are in need of this dialogue more than anyone, for it could lead to a more intelligent and deeper understanding of their faith and thus to renewal. Russian Christians especially need this renewal as they live in the midst of atheism, isolated from the processes and metamorphoses taking place in world Christianity. A full reckoning with ‘Christian’ antisemitism, past and future, social and theological, will be one condition for dialogue. This reckoning *must* happen, for nowadays Christians may even come up against Jewish fascism and fall victims to it – which does not in any way give them a licence for ‘Christian’ antisemitism. ‘Christian’ antisemitism must be eradicated, as must the ‘delusion of the Antichrist’. Only when this has happened will Christians be able to become true Christians. Only when this has happened will they be able to talk with Jews about Christian humanism, Christian ethics and Christian eschatology. Only when this has happened will it be possible to discuss the mystery of the Incarnation, the Cross, the Resurrection, the Church and the Eucharist. Only when this has happened will we be able to talk about the blessings of our faith, about our joy and about the way we pray; and it is only through faith, joy and prayer that Jewish–Christian dialogue can begin.

(Translated from the Russian by Emma Watkins.)