

Faith and Lack of Faith in Russia

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The Russian Orthodox Church at present finds itself in a new, unusual situation, to which it is unaccustomed. Its formal deliverance from the strict control of the state, its return to public life and the appearance of clergymen in the press and on television have aroused extraordinary hopes (and not only among Christians) that the future renewal of our unhappy society will come from the church. Never has so much been expected from it by so many people. Both clergymen and laymen have made statements expressing not just hope, but firm confidence in a renewal coming from the church.

Thousands of people are being baptised every day — not only infants but young people, teenagers and adults, who have asked for baptism themselves. Gradually but ever more widely catechism classes are being started, as well as elementary religious instruction courses, seminaries and parish schools. The number of unofficial Christian societies is growing; Christian parties and unions — both right- and left-wing — are being founded (though they are still very few). Religious activity has recently increased, while atheist propaganda is becoming practically inaudible. The very word ‘atheism’ often arouses open revulsion or disrespect, at the very least. Among intellectuals, you need to be somewhat resolute to declare yourself an atheist.

It should be noted, from the start, that all these developments primarily affect the intelligentsia — though in the broadest sense of the word. New believers are recruited basically from its ranks and it is the intelligentsia that will probably decide the future of Christianity in Russia, for it is most strongly attracted to religion and seeks it out.

It was in the 1970s that there was an outbreak of such seeking. The sermons of Fr Dmitri Dudko, the activities of Fr Gleb Yakunin’s group and a variety of religious seminars and circles demonstrated this quite plainly. The activities of these people were influenced by reading pre-revolutionary and emigre editions of Russian religious philosophy and church literature and, in part, by living links with church tradition, going back to Patriarch Tikhon. Respect for church

tradition, as well as free and creative interpretation of it, a high regard for the individual and a love of culture were their basic values. Their newly-acquired faith opened up new horizons and brought unexpected, undreamed-of liberation. Atheism seemed to have been finally overcome and so was no longer theoretically of interest. This upsurge of faith was called a 'religious revival' — a definition with which some disagreed. It was however justified — though rather because of its religious impetus than because of its influence in society, as the movement had too few participants. And as time has shown, its results did not fully justify the hopes it aroused.

The ideological press and the persecutions at the beginning of the 1980s cooled down religious activity at its height and diverted its course. In the second half of the 1980s, the same milieu already presented quite a different picture. The creative attitude to tradition took second place. The decisive tendency now was conservative, conservationist and distinctly politicised. The religious and cultural spheres were more sharply differentiated than before. In the 1970s, the link between religion and national culture was an acute and painful problem to many new believers. Now this problem has simply been removed, set aside, not because it has been resolved but because it is regarded as non-existent.

By the beginning of *perestroika*, the 'religious revival' appeared to be largely frozen and had lost its vital impetus. So when an opportunity arose for the religious to speak before millions, it turned out that there was nothing particular to say: few speakers went beyond demanding rights or colourlessly appealing for morality. Dull sermons by clergymen on television and elsewhere, which basically consist of such appeals, are admittedly useful but do not inspire anyone. The huge number of baptisms does not result in a greater number of people attending church. There is yet another significant phenomenon: in the whole of the last 20 years, no literary works have appeared dealing with the search for religious truth in which religion is presented as the central problem or question, rather than merely a decorative element typical of the recent 'early *perestroika*' period. The thirst for truth, the yearning for the absolute, for religion as a faith in the living God and in the Resurrection of Christ, are often obstructed by decorative elements such as appeals to moral duty, the latest fashion or opposition to an official ideology that has lost all credibility.

Now we must ask the most important question: how far have hopes been fulfilled of the church becoming a source of renewal in society? After all, these hopes are so important, even when they are the hopes of unbelievers, for they convince us anew that Russia's fate is indissolubly linked with the fate of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Even the appalling persecutions which the church endured under Soviet rule indicate that the regime saw it as the main danger to totalitarianism, which in the 1930s began to assume the characteristics of a 'sacred cult'. Nevertheless, the years of totalitarian terror did their job, leaving their mark on many aspects of the church. The ties between some of the hierarchy and the organs of the party-cum-government, as a result of the latter's 'selection' of bishops over many years, have clearly discredited the church more and more and threaten it with spiritual paralysis and loss of the trust of society at large.

Today, despite the opportunities it now has for going out into the world, the church finds itself in a situation where it is quite incapable of fulfilling its appointed mission of determining the fate of our society. Moreover, attempts to strengthen the church's public role artificially incur the danger of achieving the opposite and could lead to spiritual consequences absolutely contrary to those desired. The reasons for the church's weakness and the distortion of its influence on the life of our society do not lie merely in the problems and sins of the church itself — whether these are 'purely human' or part of its structure as a public institution — but also in the thorough inadequacy of the church's Word, as addressed to the world, and in the undeveloped nature of Orthodox dogma, when it is required to reach out beyond the inner, sacramental borders of the church and address itself to people who live a secular life, giving unbelievers a contemporary explanation of its teaching on the faith and the world. Church sermons are not merely being permitted more and more freely, but are also being actively transmitted to the public. In this process it is becoming more and more noticeable that the church's authority is being discredited. This is the result of the church's failure to explain — of its unwillingness even to admit — that it has not internally resolved its most difficult and important problem — that of the Orthodox Church's place and purpose in the modern world and in our nation, which has endured and survived the experience of a decisive break with the Christian faith and has been educated in the ideas of unimpeded atheism. The church today has not found an authentic, appropriate form of existence outside the church building; hiding its confusion in the face of the modern world and its trends, it reveals itself as an archaic, moralising educator-enlightener. We have already heard bitterly ironic words from those who have looked to the church with interest and respect, who would like to understand church dogma and come closer to the church: they feel that the sermons

and speeches of church representatives might succeed in doing what atheist propaganda failed to do.¹

Here one aspect of the spiritual situation in Russia today must be mentioned: the position of the human being. This is now being much discussed and the discussion can be summed up thus: we have been both witnesses and objects of an unprecedented degradation of humanity, unprecedented in its cruelty and profundity (cruel in the Stalinist era and profound in the post-Stalin period). This degradation was so profound that we hardly recognised it ourselves at the time and have not fully realised the extent of it even today. At the same time, when we realised the serious nature of our illness, this was a sign that we were already beginning to recover, and it signified the inner liberation of the human being. This inner liberation preceded political and legal liberation, as it was their source and objective cause. The liberation of man from the totalitarian state and its institutions, for the sake of man himself, is not just the main problem now facing our peoples, but the only one.

What does our Orthodox Church have to say about this? Here again we must state that so far it has not said anything very important. Judging by the statements of our bishops, this question does not form part of their thinking. Lack of respect for human beings within the church, as shown by bishops towards priests and by priests towards parishioners, sometimes assumes shocking dimensions. When a priest tells his parishioners in a sermon 'Remember that you are nothing before God', he has forgotten whom he is addressing. He is talking to people who have always known that they are nothing before any minor official of the local soviet, and almost nothing before any militiaman on the street. I am not saying that this kind of thing always happens; but it does happen, and not simply by chance. My task is not really to criticise. Whatever can now be said about the church, it has always defended what we regard as sacred. My only aim is to show how serious our spiritual crisis is. But this crisis could be very useful to us: it is in such crises that we discover very important things about ourselves — things which show us how to escape from the situation.

I said that this kind of attitude towards human beings did not arise simply by chance, and I shall try to explain what I mean. The point is that the concept of man which is dominant in the Russian Orthodox Church has been inherited from past ages. During the last few decades, Orthodox life in Russia (I am not speaking about the Russian emigration) practically ceased developing and thus we did not notice — we let ourselves miss the fact — that people had changed. They had

¹Statement by the 'Open Christianity' Society at an international conference on 'Christianity and Society' Leningrad, 18-20 May 1990.

lived through the horrors of totalitarianism and of ravaging, aggressive atheism: that is, through the most extreme form of secularisation, experiencing a complete break with the faith and with all their former traditions. They are ignorant of the faith, they do not read the Gospel, they do not know that the New Testament is part of the Bible and they do not understand the Old Slavonic language of church services. So you cannot talk to them as you would to elderly people in church; it is pointless and useless to do so. However helpless people may feel without roots, however weak this spiritual breach with the past makes them, they will not give up a particle of their free will to a priest in a church who tells them that they are nothing before God, no matter how that priest explains the theological meaning of the words.

There is another important aspect to this. That atheism of theirs, so often cursed by some believers, has turned out not to be so stupid or simple or even strange. The coarse and mediocre atheist propaganda which was beaten into us from childhood has now practically disappeared — it is hardly to be found anywhere — but the surprising fact is that atheism and lack of faith have not disappeared at the same time. Atheism itself, as it turns out, has taken a stronger hold on human beings than the doctrines it formulated about itself. The doctrines have passed away but people have not become believers. Perhaps they would even like to be believers — they themselves often say so — but nonetheless they cannot change anything in themselves, and they remain atheists.

All the same there is a change in the atmosphere, in relations between believers and unbelievers. A mutual respect has evolved, though it is more obvious on the atheist side. We have come to the end of the period of 'denunciatory criticism', as we call it, when Christians insisted that atheism was a delusion, a sin or a form of satanism (conscious or unconscious), and atheists said of Christians that their faith was an illusion or deception. In other words, both sides declared that the others' convictions and beliefs had nothing real behind them. Nowadays the respectful relationship between believers and unbelievers means that each side has to admit that the other has something substantial to say. It now turns out that the world of faith and that of atheism are confronting each other as two complete and fully-formed world-views. Each of them has its own value; each has something in its nature which the other does not have. The atheist does not know God but would like to understand what a believer means when he speaks about Him. The believer does not know the meaning of the phrase 'there is no God'. A dialogue between them, however difficult it may be, has now become possible and is urgently needed by both sides, especially by anyone who considers it important

to view his own inner world intelligently. This dialogue may end by answering the question asked long ago by Dostoyevsky: 'How can someone with a European education believe in God?'

We might ask, why should a believer learn the meaning of 'there is no God'? However, we simply cannot avoid this issue and cannot refuse to reply when asked what 'there is no God' means *to a Christian*, or what the Christian concept of atheism is and why Christianity has given rise to a world which rejects it. At the same time, this world that rejects Christianity, the world in which we all live, in the West as well as in the East, is not something we can refuse to accept — it is part of us, even if we reject it. Democratic values, human rights, modern culture, science and philosophy were all set up, founded and established, now and in the past, by this world — not in opposition to God, but at any rate without God. Human rights in the 18th century were formulated in opposition to the church and were condemned by the Vatican as godless, but now we have accepted them as our own. How was such a change of viewpoint possible? In their own way, the 'traditionalists', who want to return to past forms of religious worship, are right. But that kind of traditionalism risks becoming modernist rather than traditional — by becoming a 'retrograde' style of religion, presenting an image of religion which atheists would welcome: beautiful, sometimes helpful, but inactive. The most powerful modern trends, our whole historical fate and the catastrophe we have endured all present us with the same problem: the enigma of atheism, lack of faith and modern secular consciousness face to face with faith.

Trying to resolve the problem of the church's relations with the modern world is in fact the main task of our society 'Open Christianity', which was founded in December 1988 in Leningrad. I have been describing the aim of our society, to have meaningful dialogue with atheists, and how we see that dialogue.

The society has its own pre-history. In the 1970s there was a small active circle of friends in Leningrad, centred on A. A. Vaneyev, as yet little known as a philosopher and theologian. He had spent ten years in Stalin's camps in Komi, where he became acquainted with the famous Russian philosopher Lev P. Karsavin. The latter's ideas and especially his mode of thinking were later developed further by Vaneyev. Other members of the circle were Fr Sergi Zheludkov and his many friends, as well as Konstantin Ivanov, the present chairman of our society and its chief inspiration. It was Ivanov who put forward a new view of atheism, which he had developed and elaborated over many years through personal contacts. One of the ways in which he built up such contacts was a fairly wide correspondence, which has now been partly published. Later Vaneyev was to formulate the main

aim of these reflections of his as follows: 'to gain a clear view of the summit of atheism, so as to conquer it; otherwise atheism will conquer.'

We began by issuing a hand-produced journal, *Amin*' (there were five numbers); it preserved a genre once suggested by Fr Sergi Zheludkov — personal correspondence on a chosen theme. These letters expressed differing viewpoints on the main theme, including some that conflicted sharply. In general, many Orthodox believers reacted suspiciously and indignantly to our assessment of atheism. On the other hand, we had unexpected success among atheists — those who had doubts and were thinking things over. Our chairman K. Ivanov gave a talk on Leningrad television, on one of the most popular programmes, 'Pyatoye koleso'. His subject was 'the spectre of atheism'. After the programme we received over 200 letters from viewers in Moscow and Leningrad. These were basically from people who had been thinking about God and the faith, wavering, doubting and wanting to resolve their doubts. They were very interesting letters, expressing a real longing for truth. Often they told some dramatic personal story. People offered us help and cooperation and we began to arrange meetings with them. These people did not call themselves atheists and did not want to be described as such, but neither did they consider themselves believers. They varied greatly in age, ranging from schoolboys to the very elderly. They included quite a lot of mothers who had conflicts with their teenage children and were seeking a way out. Gradually we built up a youth group of 15- to 16-year-old boys and girls, with whom we held meetings and discussions on spiritual themes (not just about religion). Then, quite unexpectedly, we received an offer from the headmaster of a Leningrad school, an offer later backed up by the authorities, to take a class of older pupils — 30 16-year-olds — and organise a complete plan of instruction for them. That is what we are doing at the moment; and we have also added a class of 7-year-olds and another of 9-year-olds. Our task is to establish free and friendly relations between pupils and teachers, so that after the barrack-like conditions in official schools, children will be able at last to straighten out their thoughts and perhaps even become free individuals, as God created us and as our human dignity requires.