

Fundamentalist Christian Anti-antisemitism in Modern Russia

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There is a type of phenomenon that seems at first sight to be simple and non-controversial, but that on closer inspection turns out to be just the opposite. Anti-antisemitism belongs to this type. Indeed, anti-antisemitism may originate in a range of different standpoints, many of which are irreconcilable with each other. Two such standpoints are the fight for the right of a Jew to be a Jew, and the fight for the right of a Jew *not to be a Jew*. While both fights are legitimate, their objectives are very different, and they can sometimes come into conflict with each other. This is in fact what is happening in Russia today.

The Right to Be a Jew

Traditional Jewish anti-antisemitism was a response by those who felt it necessary to defend the right of a Jew to remain a Jew, or to defend Jewry as a whole as a distinct religious or national entity. Antisemitism was regarded as dangerous if it posed a threat in either of these areas. It was also regarded as dangerous if it involved the threat of physical violence. Thus an antisemitic state or society might, for example, place restrictions on religious or secular Jewish institutions, or even close them down, as under Stalin. An antisemitic state could also impose intolerable economic burdens on Jews, and limit their movement and their right to settle in areas of their choice, as was the situation in pre-revolutionary Russia.

A more dangerous escalation of antisemitism involves blood-libel or allegations of conspiracy, and in this context calls for sanctions against Jews might include the threat of physical violence. Opposition to violence of this kind was one of the most important aspects of anti-antisemitism and it was not by chance that the Jewish world set up special bodies, such as the Anti-Defamation League.

The Right Not to Be a Jew

When one looks more closely at the history of anti-antisemitism it is clear that since the nineteenth century there has been a second motive in the fight against antisemitism, a motive of a radically different kind.

The massive assimilation of European Jewry is a phenomenon that had its origin in the nineteenth century, and it took several forms. One form involved acculturation without conversion, and another assimilation with conversion. The accelerating pace of Jewish conversion in Germany, Austria-Hungary, Russia, France and other countries meant that quite a large number of Jews became Christians, and some of

these (especially women) were very successfully integrated, even into the upper strata of Christian society.¹ In reaction to this phenomenon a new, purely racist brand of antisemitism emerged, which claimed that the conversion of the Jews could have no effect on their harmful biological nature, and that converted Jews should therefore not enjoy the same civil rights as Christians. In Russia, racist antisemitism developed especially when young converted Jews began to circumvent the numerous restrictions on Jewish entry into higher education. This new brand of antisemitism was most evident in nineteenth-century Russia among the educated classes, although it had in fact existed at the popular level for a long time: witness the Russian proverb: 'A baptised Jew is like a cured horse – both should be thrown into the water with a stone round their necks'.

Racist antisemites in all countries claimed that conversion does not change Jews and that sooner or later the Jewish problem would reemerge, this time within Christian society. Naturally enough anti-antisemitic polemics of a new kind were already discernible in Russia in the 1880s, delivered by converted Jews defending their new civil rights as fully fledged citizens of the Russian empire. Relying on Christian fundamentalism, they flatly rejected racist antisemitism in principle. For them, the only negative aspects of being Jewish were Judaism and Jewish isolation, both of which should now be overcome.

At the same time, a Christian anti-antisemitism was emerging, and this had at least two faces. Its proponents argued that Jews must be regarded first and foremost as future Christians or, failing that, at least as the people who produced the Mother of God. A very tiny minority, however, defended not only individual Jews, but also Judaism, as a form of eschatological salvation. According to this minority the Jewish problem could be solved only eschatologically, in the spirit of the Epistle to the Romans. The first Russian Orthodox theologian to voice this view was Archbishop Nikanor (Brovkovich) in 1884;² but a thoroughgoing theological approach to the problem of anti-antisemitism was made only much later, by the Orthodox priest Archimandrite Lev (Gillet) in his *Communion in the Messiah*, published during the Second World War.³ Fr Lev, who never contested the principle of nationality, saw Judaism as a partner in a dialogue rather than as a missionary target.

The Search For Universalism

From the beginning of the Soviet period, as a result of the integration of the multinational empire, a supranational and constantly growing stratum appeared, which extensively practised mixed marriages that placed no conversion obligation on the non-Christian spouse. The percentage of Jews involved in mixed marriages was extraordinarily high in such centres as Moscow and Leningrad. Mixed families, in turn, created a kind of open supranational pool. Their supranational identity was internationalism. Later, during Stalin's time, a strong racist undercurrent became apparent. Anyone of Jewish ancestry (at least as defined by the Nuremberg Laws) was considered not only a Jew, but a Jew who was even more dangerous than an 'open' Jew, since he could insinuate himself into official positions. This prejudice was widespread, although unspoken, throughout the Soviet system in official recruitment and promotion policies, but has been manifested openly only since the 1970s, in fiction, beginning with the works of Shevtsov.⁴

The supranational Soviet identity based on official ideology was rather shaky, however, and did not survive the overall collapse of the ideology. A new universalism was sought when communist universalism collapsed during the period of *perestroika*.

It is amazing how quickly one was found. A mass movement towards Christian universalism began among those supranationalists who lacked a national identity, and especially among strongly Russified Jews. More specifically, it was a liberal Christian universalism, owing much to names such as Vladimir Solov'ev, Berdyayev, Frank and others. These philosophers became new spiritual authorities. The speed with which the 'new universalism' was discovered was in large part due to the vigorous movement towards Christianity among urban (mostly Moscow and Leningrad) Russian Jews that had started in the 1960s. Various well-known figures were involved: the late Fr Aleksandr Men', for example.

From the very beginning it was clear that the Russian Orthodox Church was incapable of integrating large numbers of Jewish Christians, either individually or as a distinct entity. There were various reasons for this, the most important of which was the fact that the Church was a deeply nationalistic body and had a long tradition of hostility towards Jews. Anyone who might not wish to identify himself with the Church as a national body risked remaining a marginal outsider, and an object of suspicion, especially if he were a Jew. However, the Jewish-Christian mainstream did not wish to take upon themselves a national identity. They could not regard themselves as Russians, and did not wish to. The conflict had to come to a head sooner or later.

The Clash between Fundamentalists and Conservatives

On the one hand, the new universalists wished to remain within the framework of the Russian Orthodox Church with its churches, parishes and priesthood. On the other, they tried to change the Church from within. They saw the national element of Russian Orthodoxy as a burden, and fought it as best they could. They were deeply traumatised by the national legacy of the Orthodox Church, especially by its historical attitude towards Jews. They fought this attitude; but not in a traditional Jewish way. Since the majority of laymen and priests continued to regard them as Jews, what they therefore defended was their right not to be Jews. They argued that Christianity is supranational in that it does not classify a given individual as Hellene or Jew. The did not fight antisemitism in order to assert their Jewishness; on the contrary, they rejected nationality in principle. From a purely fundamentalist point of view, they were right since fundamentalist Christianity does not, in fact, recognise nationality. Their views have, however, been attacked by conservative Christians.

One of the earliest to do so was the religious genius Vasili Rozanov, who stressed the basic difference between fundamentalist Christianity and the historical Church.⁵ Rozanov levelled harsh criticism against fundamentalist Christianity, which, according to him, was essentially nihilist, anti-social and destructive, and therefore incapable of being implemented in any social system. The 'national nihilism' of original Christianity could not survive because it was lifeless, it remained on an abstract theological level. Any attempt to achieve Christian fundamentalist values in society would lead to social instability because of the total incompatibility of these values with real life and its laws. In other words, anyone who took fundamentalist Christianity seriously would have to break totally with family, society and nation, and retire from the world to become an ascetic. To remain in the world means accepting its frameworks. According to the conservative Rozanov, then, the historical Church is to be preferred to any experiment with Christian fundamentalism, which is no less dangerous from this point of view than Muslim or Jewish fundamentalism, and may even be more dangerous.

Other Russian conservative Christians went further. They did not limit themselves to a defence of nationality as opposed to supranationality. They tried to interpret the massive Jewish influx into the Church in terms of a sinister Jewish conspiracy.

The new fundamentalist Christian anti-antisemitism started to fight antisemitism. However, it did so in such a way as to issue, albeit unwittingly, a death warrant to Jewry as a whole. Sergei Lezov's article 'The National Idea and Christianity' demonstrates the internal contradictions in contemporary Christian fundamentalist thought.

Lezov mounts a devastating critique of Christian attitudes to the Holocaust, believing that thus he takes an uncompromising stand against antisemitism. He regards Christian theology as the main spiritual source of the Holocaust. Lezov is unfortunately not acquainted with Russian Orthodox theology. It cannot be said that Russian Orthodox theology was especially friendly to Judaism, but those who are not familiar with the work of theologians such as Nikanor Brovkovich, Ivan Troitsky, Aleksandr Glagolev, Kh. Retivtsev or Lev Gillet, are unqualified to discuss Orthodox theology. What Lezov does is to attack contemporary conservative nationalists, ascribing their views to Russian Orthodox theology in general.

Lezov may or may not be justified in attacking or approving this or that theologian, whether German or Russian. Throughout, however, he regards the nationality principle as the source of all evil. He seems not to realise that rejection of nationality as a matter of religious principle is simultaneously the rejection of the right of the Jewish people to exist as a nationality, since in no other nation are religion and nationality so strongly interwoven. Lezov's verdict against nationality is a death warrant for the Jews as a nation (although not of course as individuals!). Here we can see another nihilistic aspect of Christian fundamentalism. To be consistent, Lezov should fight Judaism and Jewish nationalism as well, but this he does not do. Lezov should be aware that in attacking the nationality principle only as it manifests itself in the ideas of Christians, and not Jews, he will lead Russian conservatives to construe his article as a diversive conspiracy against all nationalities – with the exception of the Jews.

Lezov's theology seems, in the end, to be both anti-social and destructive, in that it ignores the basic features of human life. Here I take my stand with Rozanov, not with Lezov. If Lezov thinks he has found a solution, he is mistaken. No practical solution can be found by relying on spiritual principles that are incompatible with biological and social reality.

Meanwhile, the various anti-antisemitic apologetics which attempt to claim that the Russian Orthodox Church was never involved in antisemitism are well-meant but naive. One such work is the article by Zoya Krakhmal'nikova, 'Russophobia, anti-semitism and Christianity'. The article is noble but at the same time misleading: noble because it attacks contemporary Russian conservative antisemitism; and misleading since it tries to claim, against all evidence, that Russian theologians and clergy can be presented as united in the fight against antisemitism.

In support of her anti-antisemitic universalist point of view, Krakhmal'nikova quotes selectively from Russian ecclesiastical essayists and theologians of various persuasions. A controversial conservative Russian nationalist like Lev Tikhomirov, for example, is quoted in support of Christian universalism, although those familiar with his writings are well aware that he could just as easily – and more legitimately – be quoted in support of a totally opposite view.⁶ In the same way, Krakhmal'nikova quotes remarks made in 1903 by the Metropolitan Antoni (Khrapovitsky), ignoring what he said and did later.⁷ She also seems to think that the

example of Gurovich cited in the book by Pol'sky somehow neutralises other statements by Pol'sky in the same book.⁸ The quotations from Metropolitan Antoni are, moreover, not particularly persuasive. He opposed the Kishinev pogrom in 1903. But he speaks of the Jews as a 'rejected tribe'. I am sure that even Shafarevich, had he been asked if he supported pogroms, would have decisively condemned them.

Krakhmal'nikova is less nihilistic than Lezov in his total rejection of the nationality principle. What she claims is that nationality acquires a new meaning in Christianity.

The modern Christian fight against antisemitism is legitimate, but it should be stressed that it is a fight waged by marginal fundamentalist groups against marginal nationalist groups, and vice versa. Neither the first nor the second represent the mainstream of the Russian Orthodox Church and its theology. In fact, what we can see in the articles by Lezov and Krakhmal'nikova is the struggle of fundamentalist supranationalist Christians against conservative Russian nationalists. It is not a struggle within the Russian Orthodox Church as such. Nor is it by any means the struggle for the right of a Jew to be a Jew. *It is the struggle for the right of a Jew not to be a Jew.*

Notes and References

- ¹ Mikhail Agursky, 'Conversions of Jews to Christianity in Russia', *Soviet Jewish Affairs*, vol. 20, nos 2–3 (1980).
- ² Mikhail Agursky and Dmitry Segal, 'Jews and the Russian Orthodox Church', *St Vladimir's Theological Quarterly*, vol. 35, no. 1 (1991), p. 24.
- ³ Lev Gillet, *Communion in the Messiah* (Lutterworth Press, London, 1942).
- ⁴ See Ivan Shevtsov, *Lyubov' i nenavist'* (Voyennoye izdatel'stvo, Moscow, 1970) and *Vo imya ottsa i syna* (Moskovsky rabochi, Moscow, 1970).
- ⁵ Vasili Rozanov, *Apokalipsis nashego vremeni*.
- ⁶ See this issue of *RSS*, pp. 21–22. Compare, for example, the article by Lev Tikhomirov in *Moskovskiye vedomosti*, no. 144 (1911), with its violent antisemitism.
- ⁷ Mikhail Agursky, 'The Jewish problem in the Russian radical right', *Ostkirchliche Studien*, vol. 36, no. 1 (1987).
- ⁸ See this issue of *RSS*, p. 27. In fact, Pol'sky unreservedly glorifies members of the Black Hundreds, such as Fr Ioann Vostorgov, who later suffered at the hands of the Bolsheviks.