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The Problems Facing Theological Education in Russian Society Today: the Experience of the Moscow School for the Advanced Study of Orthodox Christianity

FR GEORGI KOCHETKOV

In Russian society today there are many new tendencies and processes at work which will have long-term consequences. The majority of these are at root connected with equally longstanding problems. At the core of cultural and historical problems lie spiritual ones. The fate of the world depends upon the spiritual orientation of the population of Russia. Will Christianity come to the fore in Russia or not, will the people focus seriously on Christian and especially Orthodox church values, or will these values be reduced to the level of cheap Intourist brochure culture and semi-pagan national nostalgia? Whether this happens or not depends mainly on this very moment, on us and on our actions.

The people of Russia are today still mostly non-Christian, if not semi-pagan. In the past they were not the most enlightened of people, although this did not prevent them from producing geniuses of international repute. They created a culture which was important for the whole of humanity and this made them a great nation. Now, however, their situation is without precedent. They are humiliated both externally and internally although they are by no means chiefly responsible for what has happened to their country in the twentieth century. Whatever one's view, one cannot deny that they have had their share of suffering. Furthermore, it was their traditional values – political, national, spiritual, intellectual, cultural, material and financial – which above all were destroyed, plundered, mocked, placed under suspicion, even banned completely.

Such destruction continued without respite for three generations, lasting longer than the Babylonian exile. Therefore it is no accident that our country – its people and society – is now in a state of collapse which inevitably affects all aspects of life, especially the sensitive areas of spiritual and church life. Traditional Russian spirituality is now lying in ruins like Rome after the barbarian invasions. No one can say in advance whether the last flickers of life will be rekindled, whether past disasters are redeemable, whether centres of spiritual life will reappear in new places.

The answer to these questions concerns the whole world, but most important of all for us is what our own people are going to take upon themselves. Our people must find the inward strength to achieve self-determination and become victorious. Such goals are only indirectly linked with international politics and economics, with economic aid and external help.

Much depends upon the Russian Orthodox Church. Whether she is praised or criticised, and whatever latest spiritual fashion is engaging people's interests, intuitively everyone relates to our church as the chief gauge for the spiritual life of the

country and people. Despite humiliation, persecution, immense losses, restrictions, mockery and betrayal, this church continues to fulfil her age-old historical role. She is the only Russian institution which has survived from our traditional past, and she is the only guarantor and arbiter of this past, a fact with which all must come to terms.

She has suffered great losses, both internal and external. The Russian Church is sick, paralysed by the disintegration of important internal links and traditions. Nevertheless she has been enriched and continues to be enriched with new strength from God, first through the blood of millions of martyrs and confessors, and through their new liturgical, spiritual, historical, human and communal experience which needs only to be brought together and revealed to all those who have eyes to see and ears to hear. Second, the church is preparing to uncover new strength in herself by assembling her vast spiritual, ecclesiastical, theological, philosophical, cultural and intellectual heritage, which until now has been scattered across the globe, becoming in the process partly the possession of the whole world.

One aspect of contemporary church life which is directly inherited from the period of open persecution and restrictions is the appearance of new, non-traditional theological institutions. The Moscow School for the Advanced Study of Orthodox Christianity (hereafter MSASOC or simply School) is an example. The author of this article, Fr Georgi Kochetkov, is the School's Rector. In actual fact this is not just one Russian Orthodox theological school, but three united under one name and one governing body (*rukovodstvo*).

First, there is the Catechetical Centre, which offers a one-year course and which has been in continuous existence for 15 years, since the end of the 1970s. Second, there is the Theological College, offering a three-year course, which began to take in students in 1988 (when the church was still persecuted) but for which plans had been drawn up much earlier. Third, there is the School for the Advanced Study of Orthodox Christianity itself, which has existed for six years, functioning initially in secret and beginning to take in students unofficially in 1989.

Right from the beginning everything in the schools was adapted for study at home: there was no official support, there were no classrooms, no lecture halls, there was no advertising of its courses, and there was no official blessing from the church. The advantages and disadvantages of this situation must be obvious. The relatively small number of catechumens (*oglashayemyye*) and students, the geographical limitations placed on its work, which was possible only in large cities, and the near-impossibility of exchanging experience not only with colleagues abroad, but with others within Russia and within the church, were clear disadvantages. Only a serious inner commitment to the life of the church (*tserkovnost'*) and a sense of responsibility enabled staff and students not to go to extremes or to fall into heresy and sectarianism, not to become dogmatic or, on the other hand, to rush to surrender on every controversial question. They aimed to acquire and pass on intact the church's spiritual experience, avoiding all particularism, xenophobia, nationalism and obscurantism.

From the very beginning, all teaching and study in the schools aimed consciously at 'the sanctification (*votserkovleniye*) of all life', a doctrine preached in Russia during the first years of the twentieth century which involved overcoming all the divisions and discontinuities between, for example, liturgical and non-liturgical life, between the inner and the outer, between the sacred and secular. It was considered important to take care to avoid any split between word and deed, between theory and practice in the church, which gives rise to nominalism and formalism in theology and worship, and to avoid the split between spiritual and intellectual understanding ('spirit' and

‘sense’) which paralyses the individual.

On the other hand, the School also aimed to introduce its students and especially its new converts to the two-thousand-year-old body of church tradition and writing, to the fullness of the church’s experience – both the experience which was visible and that which was preserved only in the church’s historical memory; both to that which was spoken about officially and to that which by force of circumstances was not mentioned or was consciously suppressed. A way had to be found to link up the life of each Orthodox Christian student in the School with the inheritance of Russia’s new martyrs.

Following the principle of complementarity (*dopolnitel’nost’*) and without being judgmental, it was necessary to learn and to teach people to include in their lives all that had in practice been excluded from church life although, on a theoretical level, it had been recognised as essential. This meant emphasising first and foremost all types of service: missionary work, teaching, worship, all forms of the diaconate, and also the exchange of experience, gifts and resources within the Orthodox Church and between churches belonging to different jurisdictions and confessions. Of course, the schools themselves had to collect, study, evaluate, select, preserve and make their own the valuable aspects of Russian theology, philosophy and church learning (*tserkovnaya nauka*), such as church archaeology, history, liturgics, law and so on, which had developed abroad in the twentieth century. Thus we proposed to create a system of authentic teaching to act as a guide to the Christian way of life and provide a way of studying which would help all Orthodox Christians – irrespective of their sex, age, nationality, culture, abilities, state of health and church standing – to observe the commandments of God and His faithful disciples without detaching such Christians from contemporary life. To do this we had to create totally new programmes and forms of long-term and integrated study and teaching, such as had not so far been applied in principle to any church or secular system of education in the country.

Thus a theological school made its appearance, both in the Russian Orthodox Church and in Russian society, which tried to be faithful to the spirit of the church but also administratively free from both state and official church structures.

The School existed in this form until September 1990, when it became possible for it to join the then newly organised non-governmental and non-confessional Russian Open University without sacrificing its inner freedom and external autonomy. This meant that most of the School’s staff were able to leave or reduce their secular work, and the School was able to acquire official status. At this point the School received its present title (previously it was called simply the Christian School), and set up an organisational structure while expanding in size.

The financial and organisational crises which struck the Russian Open University in 1992 meant that from December 1992 our School became entirely self-supporting. This was in all respects an advantage if one discounts the resulting poverty which is the usual cost of such freedom. However, we asked for help and gradually began to receive it from various quarters. All the staff were convinced that the School would survive this period of poverty although in the short term it could not risk expanding its work.

At the beginning of 1993 the School had 30 permanent members of staff, including five clergy (priests and deacons). Over a thousand students were accepted at the Catechetical Centre, including some disabled students and some prisoners. Some 400 of these students did not live near Moscow but in other parts of Russia and the countries of the ‘Near Abroad’. A hundred students enrolled in the Theological

College, including some clergy and those doing a correspondence course. Twelve students were accepted for four courses out of six at MSASOC. From July 1992 the School was registered at the Ministry of Justice, which officially recognised MSASOC as a religious institution of higher education within the Russian Orthodox Church, thus enabling us to open a bank account and become the owners of our own printing press. On 27 August that year His Holiness Patriarch Aleksii II of All Russia gave his blessing to the work of the School. He also allowed the Rector to defend his master's degree at the St Serge Orthodox Theological Institute in Paris – an event which had never before happened in the history of the St Serge Institute and which was of great significance for the School in terms of its own goals. The defence of this thesis in May 1993 revealed the deep spiritual unity which exists between Christians from many different countries who are prepared to pose and resolve in a new way questions concerning faith and practice.

Nevertheless this School could not fulfil all its potential if it remained in splendid isolation, trying to achieve its own goals without reference to other church organisations and movements: to parishes, brotherhoods, institutions and movements for children and young people, to publications, libraries, Synod departments, and foreign international Christian charitable and educational organisations. Such cooperation is particularly important in the present conditions for theological education in Russia. MSASOC does not yet have its own premises, but the parish and parishioners of the Cathedral of the Vladimir Mother of God within the Sretensky Monastery (Monastery of the Meeting)¹ in Moscow, whose priest-in-charge is the School's Rector, have provided space for an office, for meetings and study groups, for a library and for full-time and part-time students. In this parish, some already existing institutions are now closely linked with the School: an Orthodox kindergarten (20–30 children), a Sunday school (170 children from 6 to 15 years old), a youth group (about 60 aged between 15 and 20) and a scout group. An Orthodox secondary school has just been founded and is about to open. The cathedral is also the centre for the 'Sreteniye' Brotherhood, an interparish Orthodox charitable and educational organisation consisting in the main of graduates from the School. It does much to support the School as well as helping to witness to a genuine form of church life based on the School's principles and on the spirit formed within it.

The cathedral's congregation was the first in our country openly to declare itself a missionary parish – an important if not the most important extension to the work of the School. The cathedral's attitude to mission has had a fundamental effect on all aspects of its life. First, it has affected its liturgical life: we discovered the need to read Holy Scripture in Russian with an explanation of the text given in the sermon; prayers, words and expressions, which were little understood by modern Russians, especially when only conveyed orally, needed to be put into Russian; the School's catechumens had to leave the church when this was called for in the liturgy; it was felt that the sanctuary should no longer be cut off and distanced from the main body of the church, from the choir and the people, that the clergy should no longer be distanced from the laity and those who run the administrative, financial and organisational side of the parish, and in general that it should no longer be the case that some of God's children are separated from others, and in particular from the people who are not parish members and frequently just 'drop in' off the street.

Personal membership of the parish has been reestablished at the cathedral. Members have to realise that they must participate fully in the liturgy and play a part in the lives of all their fellow-parishioners. The reality of life in the community, as distinct from parish life, has also been established. This has overcome the split

between a person's worshipping and secular life, and much that once was identified solely with the church and the church's hierarchy (communal prayer, reading of the Word of God, preaching, mutual help and support and maintenance of church buildings, schools and the church as a whole) has begun to be practised by small religious groups and communities which live according to the principles of a spiritual family.

The School, the cathedral and the Brotherhood have been among the first to found a missionary society, the aim of which is to reestablish and develop another remarkable tradition of the Russian Orthodox Church, namely the wish to fulfil Christ's command to preach the Gospel to all people, to teach and baptise all believers (Matthew 28: 19–20) and to act in love and peace with all Christians who are full members of the church.

The School wants to strengthen and expand its cooperation with all theological institutions and other movements akin to it in spirit. It has already formed a link, through mutual prayer and work, with the best representatives of Orthodox institutions of higher education in Paris and New York, and with the international brotherhood of Orthodox youth 'Syndesmos', after cooperating with the Polish Orthodox Church over the regular publication of the journal *Pravoslavnaya obshchina* and working with the professors and teachers of other Christian educational institutions.

Furthermore, mutual understanding between theological institutions and movements within our own church has deepened steadily. It is true of course that whereas with some, relations develop quickly and positively, with others this has not yet happened. The 'Sreteniye' Brotherhood even had to leave the Union of Orthodox Brotherhoods because the latter promoted attitudes which were unchristian and contrary to church teaching, tending to support xenophobia, nationalism, threats and violence. The School particularly values the good relations which have been established with the St Tikhon Institute, the Fr Aleksandr Men' University and other spiritual schools in Moscow, St Petersburg, Kiev, Kostroma and Smolensk.

The experience gained from the School's correspondence courses is also worth noting. Moscow may be in a state of spiritual collapse, but in other towns, with the partial exception of St Petersburg, we have discovered what can only be called a spiritual desert. In such places we have to start from scratch. What is more, we cannot even count on basic help or even ordinary understanding from local churches and members of the hierarchy as they frequently need help and support themselves. Yet we find it difficult to meet these needs when we are faced with their suspicion and distrust. Therefore in country areas the slightest positive sign shown by the churches, by the local people and society and by existing educational and cultural institutions is a cause for rejoicing.

Of course you meet living people even in the desert, but you never know where, or who they are, or how you will find them. In some towns we immediately find a common language with the local bishop, who understands the importance for the future of his church of fully imparting and teaching the faith (*oglasheniye i prosveshcheniye*); in other towns we discover warm, faithful hearts in priests and other servants of the church who agree *a priori* with everything as long as we help them fight against the influx of non-Orthodox missionaries who are taking away the few remaining reasonably healthy and reliable members of their flock; in some towns, catechumens themselves or students – some from the intelligentsia – get access to the auditoria of universities, institutes and schools, to local radio and television. You learn so much that is interesting and instructive at such venues: you come across such

a wide variety of people who are in the thick of life, with their experiences, prejudices and questions, with their pain and joy in sharing, discovering and learning about spiritual truths.

Generally speaking, correspondence course groups all lead to interesting results. The desert is indeed grateful for every drop of living water. A group of no more than five to ten people has only to start meeting and to embark seriously on the catechumen course for a chain reaction to follow. Before even finishing the course, the group's members find they are having to deal with more and more new people who want to be considered for membership in the next group. In such cases we have to hold back, even in Moscow, because we do not have enough qualified catechists. In Yekaterinburg, for example, hardly a year after the first group of 20 people had finished their course for catechumens four new groups for adults and a number of groups for children came into being. But clearly, in order to be a good teacher in the catechuminate for adults, an individual should have completed at least a course at the Theological College, or even better have qualified at an institution of advanced theological education like our catechetical system which, unlike many other systems, is directed entirely at adults (from the age of 21) and not at children, and thus avoids a primitive and simplified approach (the 'liquidation of illiteracy'). So far only a few people from Yekaterinburg have been able to join the college. Two tasks have faced us in that large and distant city: strengthening links with the local hierarchy and with local clergy, and this, thank God, has happened; and opening a branch of MSASOC there, even if initially it can be no more than a catechetical institution.

The external and internal difficulties of theological teaching on a correspondence course are so great that even if the teaching of the catechumens follows the same lines and the same programme, with the same teachers (catechists) coming regularly to the group, the course takes one-and-a-half times longer to finish, especially if this is the first group of catechumens to have been formed in a particular place. One has to consider not only the basic situation of people forming a group but also their church environment, which has no such thing as a traditional Orthodox catechuminate; one must consider the lack of local catechists and churches which nurture community and mission, the lack of satisfactory teaching materials, the lack of libraries and space for meetings. Often the negative effect and direct opposition of unbelieving relatives and close friends are greater than in Moscow, although in Moscow the situation in this respect is certainly not ideal.

It is particularly difficult to give instruction to the disabled and to prisoners because of the limitation on movement and their inability to pay. Although you can study free of charge in all the schools of MSASOC, unlike Muscovites those doing a correspondence course must pay for tape-recordings of lectures, meetings and discussions arranged in Moscow. They sometimes have to pay the travelling expenses of a catechist who visits them, or the travelling expenses of a group going to Moscow for a discussion and to receive baptism, followed immediately by an introduction to the sacraments in the Cathedral of the Vladimir Mother of God during the following seven days.

It is interesting to note that with surprising consistency, both in Moscow and in the provinces, groups of catechumens consist of 25–30 per cent non-baptised and 15–20 per cent baptised and regularly communicating but who have not previously received instruction in the catechuminate, while the rest are baptised but non-communicating and most frequently people who have previously been non-believers.

The system of teaching for catechumens is usually the same for everyone, although all personal external and internal factors are taken into consideration. The system is

made up of three stages, as was the ancient system of the Orthodox catechuminate.

The first stage is an introductory stage which usually requires nine months of intense study in groups and individually, with meetings arranged for each group at least once every two weeks, sometimes during the day and in the evening, and attendance at the rector's specialist lectures given monthly, which focus on contemporary ethical – including Biblical – problems.

The second stage is catechism for those considered mature enough by the church and catechists to start preparing, usually over a ten-week period, for baptism or some other form of church membership. This course involves twice as many meetings at which candidates are expected to think in conceptual terms, as well as increased attendance at those church services which are open to personal participation by catechumens.

The third stage is an introduction to the sacraments over a period of one week when, after making one's confession, or if necessary after baptism and/or anointing, the newly initiated 'babe in Christ' participates daily in the mysteries of Thanksgiving and Communion with the Body and Blood of Christ. Each day the candidate is expected to attend an introduction to sacramental life when the liturgical mysteries, the church's universal (catholic) dogmas, Christian anthropology and the principles of the Christian ascetic and mystical life are explained.

This system of instructing catechumens is based on the great and ancient tradition of the church but also takes account of the conditions which face people in our contemporary world, from which they should not be disconnected. Of course the Theological College and School for Advanced Study have their own specific ways of working and their own particular problems. Let us look at some which we have not considered so far.

The creation of such schools has so far been possible only in Moscow, where there is an appropriate cultural and relatively educated church milieu, relevant public and private collections of books, and qualified teachers (although their workload is too heavy owing to their small number) who are able to acquire and maintain personal links with foreign specialists, church workers and church organisations.

Among the spiritual ruins of this same Moscow there is much to be nurtured, gathered and organised in a new way. Life requires us to overcome our fear of the new and our inclination to look backwards and cling to traditional ways. Furthermore, we are required to overcome the separation of the church's rule of prayer from its rule of faith and life. We have to struggle to help church people to respect theological study in general, to respect our schools, their teachers and students, just as we still have to struggle against the hidebound mentality of many church people who often reject the need for full catechisation for every Christian, for every living and healthy member of the church and society.

We have to continue to expand and strengthen cooperation and mutual exchange with all appropriate church and secular educational establishments, both foreign and local. For this to be possible it is essential for us to convince the authorities to take more seriously what the church may be able to contribute to our people's lives, both present and future. To this end they should be bolder in restoring premises and books and giving any additional support required to all viable and promising church institutions, in particular to parishes and schools, even if this means in the short term reducing the amount of space and range of activities available to other institutions and enterprises.

We must learn to choose what is more important in the lives of people: first come spiritual values, then intellectual and cultural, and then material, physical and

financial interests. Nothing in society should be promoted at the expense of something else, but this does not abolish the above hierarchy of values, while reminding us that in the meantime an awful lot in our society and nation has been built at the expense of the spiritual.

In our schools, and first of all in our college, what we have to try to provide above all is basic and complete knowledge based on sources, so that such knowledge can become the foundation for long-term service in church and society, including missionary and catechetical work. While it is important to give due attention to standards in specialist training, this long-term service does not always have to become a profession or lead to ordination or full-time 'work' in the church, which inevitably means a break with one's other work.

It goes without saying that in our schools, as indeed in the church and society as a whole, good open and warm personal relations with everyone must be strengthened. In many cases this requires far-reaching changes in people's fixed ideas about Christian spiritual teaching, and about life and practice as it relates to this teaching, which demands from every religious school, including MSASOC, that they search for a new approach, for new spiritual creativity, new study programmes, new people, new courage before God and a new spirit of contrition and humility before Him.

Note

- ¹ The word 'sreteniye' refers to the 'meeting' between the ikon of the Vladimir Mother of God and the citizens of Moscow which took place in 1395 when this ikon was brought to Moscow. After prayers had been said before the ikon, an invading Tatar horde was found to have withdrawn inexplicably – an event seen as miraculous at the time. On the site of this 'meeting' the Cathedral of the Vladimir Mother of God and the Monastery of the Meeting were built in 1396. (Translator's note.)

(Translated from the Russian by Xenia Dennen)

Update

This article was written for *RSS* in the summer of 1993. On 31 January 1994 Fr Georgi Kochetkov was summoned to a diocesan council (*sovet*) where he was handed an edict (*ukaz*), signed by the patriarch, removing him from the parish of the Vladimir Mother of God. He was also given a number of verbal instructions forbidding him to leave Moscow, to give any interviews or to celebrate the liturgy in any language other than Church Slavonic. This move came as a surprise to Fr Georgi: at the beginning of January he had had a fruitful 90-minute interview with the patriarch, who is said to have heard for the first time what Fr Georgi was trying to do and to have responded positively. Nevertheless, the *ukaz* handed to Fr Georgi on 31 January had been signed by the patriarch on 27 October 1993.

Fr Georgi was transferred to another Moscow church, that of the Dormition in Pechatniki. The new priest-in-charge of the church of the Vladimir Mother of God, *igumen* Tikhon Shevkunov, was asked to establish a *podvor'ye* (representative presence) in Moscow of the Pskov Monastery of the Caves.