

The Open Orthodox University

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I

The situation in Russia today can be judged in various ways. Many think that society and state are seriously ill, requiring urgent surgery. Others, whose point of view is closer to mine, assume that the country is going through the pains of childbirth (differing in their views as to what is to be born) and that it is necessary to suffer patiently. All agree that the situation is quite unstable, controversial and fraught with the possibility of dangerous consequences, not only for Russia and its neighbours.

If Russian society is sick, so is the church which consists of the members of that society. At present, the church is strongly politicised and divided, as is all society. You often hear political sermons being preached. In 'Orthodox circles' people frequently talk of parishes being either 'ours' or 'theirs', right or left. It no longer matters whether a person goes to church, what matters is *which church*. One is reminded of the words of St Paul: 'Is Christ divided?' (I Corinthians 1:13). Often the differences between Orthodox groups tend to be more profound than those between Orthodox and either Catholics or Protestants.

All this weighs heavily on the fragile souls of newly converted Christians, exhausted by their efforts to reconcile the secular and the spiritual. It appears that we are witnessing a rapid religious revival in Russia. Hundreds of thousands have been baptised in the last few years, hundreds of monasteries have been opened and thousands of churches. But the majority of the newly baptised, having initially followed the fashion, now no longer go to church. Many who have tried to hold on to the church eventually leave it, unable to understand what is going on and how the church can help them with their personal or social problems.

Most frequently, the cause is plain ignorance, lack of elementary knowledge. But where is this knowledge to come from? The hundreds of new monasteries, with a very few exceptions, have not become centres of spiritual enlightenment. The clergy does not excel in erudition. Preoccupied with their business in and around the church, the clergy simply have no time left for anything else. Good books are still very scarce and can be bought only in Moscow, St Petersburg and a few other big cities. In many churches, evangelisation and catechisation are conducted on the sheer enthusiasm of inadequately trained staff.

Church services themselves are incomprehensible to the majority of people. They can be conducted in Church Slavonic, Greek, Chuvash, English and other languages but *never in Russian*. This is forbidden. The liturgical practice of the Russian Orthodox Church largely follows ancient monastic rules. The long services extending over several hours can induce a spiritual uplift in believers, who have deep roots in the

Orthodox tradition, but for others it represents at best a beautiful but incomprehensible spectacle. The deep essence of the service remains closed to the uninitiated.

At the same time many – I would say most – church members, both lay people and priests, do not wish any changes in the ritual and social life of the church, although the need for change would appear to be obvious. The main reason for such an attitude is fairly clear. Having lost well-defined bearings in social life after the collapse of the communist system, people are frantically afraid of uncertainties (or what may seem to them as uncertainties) in spiritual matters. Constantly speaking of social freedom, people are actually *afraid of spiritual freedom*.

Strangely, recent converts are usually the most aggressive. Their stance often resembles religious fanaticism. The causes are the same: politicisation of church life, ignorance, fear of change. Being members of one church and one society, we cannot stand apart from these people and accuse them of lack of faith and spiritual experience. We must build church life and social life together.

We cannot separate spiritual and church problems from political and social ones. There is an obvious need for a broad dialogue between the church and the various sections of society, especially with young people and intellectuals. But what language should this dialogue be conducted in? This language has yet to be created, just as the culture and tradition of close cooperation between church and society has yet to be formed. Otherwise we may again witness a deep split between church and secular life, as happened in Russia in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Again and again, we come up against the problem of Christian education: an education that is open and accessible to wide sections of the population, an education that is rooted in the Orthodox tradition and which also takes into account the development of modern society and science.

II

The Soviet regime completely destroyed theological education in Russia. After 1917, all 59 Orthodox seminaries and four academies were closed. Some of them were reopened after the Second World War but by the beginning of *perestroika* only three seminaries and two academies had survived.

During the 'period of stagnation' legends abounded about an extremely high level of education in ecclesiastical seminaries and academies. Unfortunately this was far from the truth. The tradition had been interrupted. Special KGB agents prevented gifted students and qualified teachers from entering ecclesiastical colleges. The rare exception proved the rule. The lack of text books and other literature, isolation from the life of society, absence of contacts with western theology and Biblical scholarship more or less completely put an end to the training of theological scholars. Evangelisation and catechisation were criminal offences. The task of ecclesiastical colleges which survived the persecution was limited to maintaining a minimum supply of professional clergy.

Perestroika opened the way for a revival of religious education in Russia. Religious educational establishments of varying calibre came into existence everywhere, from Sunday schools to theological institutions and universities. Many did not last long owing to lack of funds, rooms for classes, books and teachers. On the whole, the level of education was low, and still is. What else could one expect? In most cases, such schools existed solely on the enthusiasm of the teachers and students involved. Alas, enthusiasm alone does not provide a lasting base.

Among the new Moscow theological colleges the following are worth mentioning:

the Orthodox St Tikhon Theological Institute; the Moscow Higher Orthodox-Christian School; the Russian Orthodox University of the Apostle St John the Theologian; and the Open Orthodox University, founded by Fr Aleksandr Men'. Regrettably, the Moscow Theological Seminary and Academy did not become fully integrated with the revival of religious education. Many qualified teachers were dismissed. In the Seminary, for example, the course on philosophy was deemed unnecessary for students and shortened.

The St Tikhon Theological Institute has become an alternative to the traditional ecclesiastical schools in Moscow. Founded in 1992 with the support of the Moscow Patriarchate, the Institute aims to prepare priests, professional catechisers, choir masters and icon painters. Some of the staff sacked by the Theological Academy went over to this Institute. The Institute requires an entrance examination, a written blessing by a priest and a certificate of Orthodox baptism.

The Moscow Higher Orthodox-Christian School, established in 1990 by the priest Georgi Kochetkov, and based on one of Moscow's central parishes, is characterised by greater openness. It is assumed, however, that a student will actively participate in parish life, and such a requirement may prove unacceptable for a person who has not yet decided about his or her relation to the church.

The Russian Orthodox University of the Apostle St John the Theologian came into existence in December 1992 on the initiative of Igumen Ioann (Ekonomtsev), head of the Catechism Department of the Moscow Patriarchate and a historian renowned for his work in Byzantine studies. This was an attempt to create a secular Orthodox interdisciplinary university. Only time will tell whether it proves successful. At present, this elite institution has a few dozen students. Presumably they will become qualified theologians, economists and professionals in other scientific disciplines. Apparently this University does not aim at more general public evangelisation or catechisation.

III

The Open Orthodox University (*Obshchedostupny pravoslavny universitet*) founded by Fr Aleksandr Men' is a blend of a confessional and a secular teaching institution. The need to create an open Orthodox theological school for educational work among various sections of the population became particularly acute at the onset of *perestroika* when the basic change in society brought many new people into the church. An appeal to the laity and an openness to interconfessional dialogue became the hallmarks of the Open Orthodox University – one of the first of a new type of Orthodox educational institution. A non-commercial public organisation, it was established in 1990. In 1993, the work of the University was blessed by Patriarch Aleksii.

Father Aleksandr Men', a remarkable pastor and preacher, was actively engaged in Christian enlightenment and catechisation of the newly converted. He was also a theologian and gifted writer, and his books, first published abroad and then in Russia, were always extremely popular. As soon as it became possible, Fr Aleksandr began to give public lectures on the Bible, on the history of humanity's religious search and of the church, on religious philosophy and theology. His lecture theatres were always overcrowded. On the basis of the existing lecture courses, it was proposed in the autumn of 1990 to form an Open Orthodox University under the leadership of Fr Aleksandr. The first academic year started on Saturday 8 September 1990 with a lecture 'Christianity' by Fr Aleksandr. Next day, Sunday, he was killed on his way to his church. The task of continuing his work and of fulfilling his plans fell to his

disciples. The University carried on. In addition to popular lectures, special courses were organised for beginners in catechism. Graduates from these courses obtained certificates and are now teaching in secondary schools, technical colleges and institutes and are working as catechists in churches.

The University has witnessed steady growth despite the inevitable difficulties with administrative and financial problems. It now runs a five-year course with approximately 300 students and 20 highly qualified specialists. Final year students will obtain a diploma in higher special education.

The history of the University's development is reflected in its structure. The first level of education (preparatory and first-year courses) consists of general lectures open to people of all kinds regardless of age, education or denomination. This series of lectures serves as an introduction to Bible study, liturgy, church history and art and other subjects. There are no entrance examinations. Students wishing to systematise their knowledge and to continue their education on advanced courses must pass examinations.

An acute shortage of teachers in Christian disciplines for catechisation in churches, Sunday schools, secondary schools and institutes necessitated the creation of special educational programmes. In addition to general educational subjects, the second-year course offers lectures on Christian pedagogics and other disciplines indispensable to future catechisers.

The third level of education (third to fifth years) constitutes a theological college. Enrolment is based on the results of entrance examinations (or examinations taken at the first two levels) and interview. Candidates must have higher education and qualifications in one modern language (English, German or French), Church Slavonic, the Bible, Christian theology, philosophy, church history and liturgy (within the syllabus of the first two levels). In some cases, entrance requirements may be relaxed if the student is capable of catching up within a short period of time.

Studies at senior class level take place mainly on workday evenings. Shortage of teaching time means that students have to put in a great deal of extra time, teachers acting more as consultants and instructors. Most attention is devoted to Biblical studies including the Biblical languages, theology, philosophy and church history. In many subjects, good textbooks in Russian are either not available or out of date. Students must therefore use foreign literature. Some lecture series are given by invited foreign lecturers, and others by staff from the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate with whom the University has established friendly links.

Within Russian Orthodoxy there is unfortunately a traditional suspicion of or even open hostility towards, in-depth study of the Bible and the achievements of modern (mostly western) Biblical scholarship. Naturally, this is true mainly of poorly educated priests and lay people; these, however, have always been a majority and, alas, an active one, exercising great influence. The same was true in the nineteenth century when the first Russian translation of the Bible was achieved against enormous opposition. The very reading of the Bible in Russian seemed blasphemous. Those interested were advised to learn the dead Church Slavonic language. Towards the end of the twentieth century the situation has hardly improved: witness the contemporary ban on translating the church service into a language comprehensive to believers. For more than a century there has not been a single new translation of the entire Bible into Russian. The achievements of modern Biblical scholarship remain practically unknown to Russian believers. Even today many priests, especially those in remote parts of the country, base their sermons on the writings of little known 'elders' whose

authority is placed above that of the Bible and of the Fathers of the Church. A suspicious attitude towards the Old Testament is strongly fostered by antisemitism which is quite powerful in Russia. Teachers at the University are trying to promote the revival of the ancient Orthodox traditions of Bible study. Working in close cooperation with the Bible Society in Russia, whose revival had been actively supported by Fr Aleksandr, the University faculty members have access to modern literature on Biblical studies. Staff from the Bible Society give lectures at the University. This special attention to Biblical studies distinguishes the University from other Orthodox teaching institutions.

The University considers the preparation and publication of modern textbooks and other necessary literature as one of its most important tasks. In 1993, the University published a collection of teaching programmes, a new translation of St Paul's Epistle to the Romans (with commentaries) and J. Powell's *Fully Human, Fully Alive* (*Polnota chelovecheskoi zhizni*). Original courses by University lecturers, new translations into Russian of various books of the Bible and the works of Fr Aleksandr are among those publications in course of preparation.

These books are not intended for internal use only. Without close cooperation and contacts of various kinds with other Christian teaching institutions in the countries of the former Soviet Union it is impossible to speak of a revival of religious education in Russia. Sending them our publications is the first step in this direction. We hope in future to arrange exchanges of teachers and students. This is particularly important for new theological schools in remote parts of the country, suffering more acutely from a shortage of books and teachers.

The University's library holds over 3,000 books and journals, many of which are rare and valuable. Priority is being given to the acquisition of publications on Biblical studies, church history, theology and philosophy. Work is in progress on compiling a modern bibliography for these disciplines. The library contains the personal collection of the renowned Russian theologian Boris Savvich Bakulin and other private collections, including those of members of the University faculty. The library owes a great debt to some western Christian organisations, including the publishers Eerdmans and Zondervan (USA). Nevertheless, there is a chronic shortage of books, especially textbooks for teaching. The University would greatly appreciate any help in the acquisition of sorely needed literature.

The main obstacle to the further development of the University is the absence of a building of its own with lecture theatres, seminar rooms, rooms for conferences and meetings, space for an office, a library and publishing facilities. Teaching at the University is carried out by highly qualified specialists who work for a pittance. Many educational and publishing programmes are under threat of collapse due to shortage of funds. The difficult economic situation in Russia makes support from home sponsors highly unlikely. The University is appealing for aid to foreign Christian organisations, charities and all who are following developments in Russia closely and with sympathy. Tomorrow we could be paying a high price for lack of mutual understanding today.

The Open Orthodox University is inseparable from the life of the church. It is oriented towards a wide range of Christians and others concerned with the problems of existence, and devotes a significant part of its programmes to educating the younger generation. In the near future we intend to open an Orthodox grammar school, based on one of the central schools in Moscow, in which graduates of the University will work as teachers.

Organising academic conferences, seminars and meetings is one of the functions of

the University in the life of the Ecumenical Church. As it makes use of its links with Russian and foreign Christian and secular organisations, the University is able to pursue its educational and scientific plans ever more effectively. These links will undoubtedly grow and cooperation will become yet more fruitful.

We hope that even a partial realisation of the above-mentioned programmes and projects will furnish a good base for the development of intra-Orthodox and interconfessional dialogue and will help to bridge the gulf between church and society.