

Some Observations on Orthodoxy and Christian Democracy*

ALEKSANDR SHCHIPKOV

Christian Democracy in Russia is a new, surprising and interesting phenomenon. Carried on western winds, seeds of Christian Democracy fell on our soil and did not die. It thus warrants attentive study. Over the past few years I have devoted much time to Christian Democracy, associating with its leaders, observing its movements, parties and groups in both the capitals and the provinces, where it differs greatly.

With its unformed ideology and its social, national, confessional and intellectual elements, Christian Democracy in Russia is a multiform phenomenon. All young political parties subdivide, but no other party has done so with such speed or into such clear divisions. There are now a minimum of seven or eight Christian Democrat groups, each distinguishable from the others. Two basic questions need to be answered. Firstly, is Russian Christian Democracy viable? Secondly, does Russia need Christian Democracy? In order to answer these questions, one needs to compare the various ways in which the structure and statutes of the groups have developed, as well as the evolution of radical and conservative tendencies. It is probably still too early to answer them fully. Nevertheless, one useful exercise is to trace the relationship between the Christian Democrats and the Russian Orthodox Church, with particular reference to the St Petersburg Christian Democratic Union, headed by Vitali Savitsky.

What is the Membership of the Christian Democratic Union?

It would seem that Christian Democrats would be wise to take Orthodoxy as the basis for their ideology, since from time immemorial Orthodoxy has saturated Russian history and the vast majority of the population still consider themselves Orthodox believers who with a little effort on the part of the Christian Democrats could become Christian Democrat voters. However, just the opposite is happening. The Christian Democratic Union unites or attempts to unite Christians of all denominations and even to attract atheists who share its values. It is in fact the case that among the activists in the Christian Democratic Union there are almost no firmly established Orthodox believers, that is, believers who attend church and accept and fulfil the obligations of the Orthodox canon. Generally speaking the activists are Orthodox neophytes, Protestants and sceptics who do not in principle deny a supernatural construction to the universe.

Realising the interests of one particular church or another is not a task which the Christian Democrats have set themselves. It can indeed be said that Orthodoxy, with

*This article first appeared in Russian in *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 1 July 1993.

its monastic and statist aura, alienates Christian Democrats, and they have proved to be outside the sphere of its influence.

The Absence of Social Doctrines

Let us not forget that nothing grows in a desert. European Christian Democracy, despite its present conflicts with the Vatican, took its first steps under the influence of the Catholic Church, following its teachings (*Rerum novarum*) and making use of its practical help. Moreover, one of the fathers of Christian Democracy, Fr Luigi Sturzo, who founded the Italian People's Party after the First World War, began his active political life only after receiving a blessing from the church hierarchy, thereby obtaining the church's spiritual support. The Orthodox Church, by contrast, has worked out no social doctrines, and our Christian Democrats therefore have nothing to build on. Nobody in Russia has made any real attempt to provide a theological justification for Christian politics. The tireless repetition of the idea that Christian politics is founded on the truths of the Gospel cannot be taken seriously as theology. Nevertheless, the religious convictions of several Christian Democrat leaders have led them to the view that if they regard Christian politics as a Christian activity they need the support of the church.

Attempt at Dialogue

Vitali Savitsky, one of the most able Christian Democrats, consciously or intuitively tried to bridge this gap. In 1991 he took a gamble on the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad, a church untainted by collaboration with the KGB and which preserved Orthodox tradition and glorified the new Russian martyrs and confessors. The St Petersburg Christian Democratic Union stepped forward in defence of foreign parishes of the 'Free Orthodox Church' on Russian soil which were coming under pressure.

On 13 March 1991, at a regular session of the executive committee of the St Petersburg Christian Democratic Union, Savitsky suggested to members that they go ahead with initiatives to create a second parish of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad in St Petersburg (the first was opened in 1990). This did not mean that the St Petersburg Christian Democratic Union as a whole came under the leadership of Bishop Vitali, but the interest of rank and file members in that church was obvious. Three members of the St Petersburg Christian Democratic Union made up the leadership of the second community and on 21 May 1991, on a visit to New York, Vyacheslav Ivanov received a blessing from Bishop Vitali for the founding of the parish. Savitsky himself became a leader of this group. It is possible that he saw in this dissident church a potential spiritual centre for a liberal opposition.

Despite some disagreements over this question within the St Petersburg Christian Democratic Union, the relationship with the foreign church turned out favourably. Its representatives were regularly invited to the sessions of the executive committee and to conferences, and even said prayers (Fr Innokenti). As there were no positive objections on the part of the CDU members, who included Protestants, the leaders' actions were accepted as the party line.

Nothing came of the venture, however. The *karlovchane* (members of the Church Abroad) accepted defence and protection but were unable to show gratitude to the Christian Democrats. Christian Democracy was as essentially alien to them as it was to the Moscow Patriarchate. The parish behaved with great suspicion towards the

Christian Democrats, including Savitsky, as if sensing danger to itself from an inter-denominational organisation which also included non-believers. The Union's attempt to reach political agreement with Orthodoxy was not crowned with success, then, perhaps because Savitsky was looking not so much for mystical patronage as for a union with the church as a political partner.

The Russian Orthodox Church Hinders the Christian Democrats

The Christian Democrats now began to discuss other possible moves. As there is no social teaching in Orthodoxy and as Orthodox spirituality does not operate logically, it is difficult to combine it with the concept of a law-based democracy, which, in turn, has trouble with Orthodox ethics and the writings of the holy fathers. Some theoreticians of Russian Christian Democracy suggest a solution on another level: a descent from the religious to the cultural – that is, to Orthodoxy as it is reflected and interpreted in Russian national and cultural tradition. In an interview, one Russian Christian Democrat told me:

We have in fact no ideological foundation and we have to invent one. The answer is ecumenism, but not as it is traditionally understood. We have to place Christian ecumenism on a Russian national and cultural basis and develop the work of western Christian Democracy. The Russian Orthodox Church is paralysed. It is not transforming itself and it is hindering general development. Our task, if not to search for a new religion, is to create a new religious ecumenical ideology, introducing ideological diversity into the Russian Orthodox Church.

Is an independent Christian Democrat doctrine going to constitute a new religion, then? It is unlikely. But the above quotation shows that we cannot expect mutual understanding between Christian Democrats and the Orthodox Church. Attempts to accommodate, if not Orthodoxy itself, then at least its national cultural elements with the requirements of Christian politics bear witness to the fact that if some Orthodox writers announce openly that democracy is in opposition to Orthodoxy, then Russian Christian Democrats have not enough courage to state the opposite, namely that Orthodoxy is contradictory to democracy.

The Confusing of Spiritual and Political Problems

The absence of visible links between Orthodoxy and Christian Democracy leads some of its supporters to a mystical understanding of Christian Democracy itself. As V. Budkov writes in the Christian Democrat newspaper *Vestnik khristianskoi demokratii*,

To atone for its mistakes is the sacred duty of the Russian intelligentsia. Reconciliation and spiritual union amongst the nations of Russia on the basis of Christian commandments is one of the *political* [italics added] tasks of the Christian Democratic Union. ... The path to rebirth lies through repentance and exorcising evil spirits from the soul of the nation. ... The duty of Russian Christian Democrats is to do their utmost to strengthen the force of Good in the fight against Evil.

The well-known Christian Democrat and Orthodox priest Vyacheslav Polosin spoke in the same spirit in a lecture at the first constituent conference of the Russian

Christian Democratic Movement on 9 April 1990, saying ‘Christian politics is a spiritual sword against sin.’

This confusion of concepts and the conviction that spiritual problems can be solved by political methods witnesses to the weak development of Russian Christian Democratic thought. Artificially created and induced ideologies have always needed to be treated as religions.

(Translated from the Russian by Emma Watkins)