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An Orthodox Priest Responds to the ‘Appeal’*

FR ALEKSANDR BORISOV

Fr Aleksandr, what is your opinion of the ‘Appeal to the Jewish Nation’?

I can only welcome the desire of politically active Christians to oppose militant anti-semitism. I have to say that the slogan ‘fascism will not take hold’, with its desire to predict an optimistic scenario for the future, seems to me rather unconvincing. One would have to be a prophet with a revelation from on high to make such claims. As I have been given no such revelation, I will not make any predictions. I cannot be sure that victory for extreme nationalistic forces is impossible.

You cannot be called an optimist, then. But I regard the slogan ‘fascism will not take hold’ not so much as a statement of fact as a political and spiritual task, a call to action.

I agree with you completely.

To what extent are the views expressed by the writers of the ‘Appeal’ representative of Orthodox Christians?

It is hard to say how many feel this way. As you are aware, there has been no sociological survey on this matter.

But qualitatively?

It seems that the overwhelming majority of Orthodox Christians do not have any views on the matter, but among those who do have an opinion, I fear that those who are consciously opposed to antisemitism are in the minority.

Members of Pamyat’ use Christian symbolism and appeal to Christian values. Members of the clergy participate in their activities.

This is understandable. People always find things easier when they have some kind of explanation and many find the explanation put forward by *Pamyat’* acceptable and attractive because it moves the focus from the very difficult question of the national repentance of the Russian people and emphasises collective self-assertion, as though simply belonging to the Russian nation were a justification in itself. This is a sign of

*This interview was first published in *Shalom*, no. 6, 1990, pp. 64–7.

spiritual immaturity. I agree fully with the writers of the 'Appeal': the Jewish nation is being turned into a scapegoat.

It is incorrect to say that the Orthodox hierarchy has been silent. I have myself read interviews with Metropolitan Aleksii of Leningrad and Metropolitan Vladimir of Rostov in which both leaders condemned *Pamyat'* and other extremists and emphasised that the Russian Orthodox Church opposes any strife between nationalities. This spring the Holy Synod decided to include several new prayers in the liturgy for an end to national enmity in our country and for peace and love between the nations.

How could the simple Soviet Jew know about this?

These interviews were published in *Moskovskiye novosti* last summer. Fr Boris Stark, who is not himself Jewish, appeared on television and called the *Pamyat'* attitude towards the Jews antichristian. And prayers for an end to enmity between the nations in our country can always be heard in church.

The authors of the 'Appeal' call Jews brothers, but Christians of different denominations cannot agree yet, so how can they have a positive attitude towards Jews?

The Church Fathers talked about people as points on the various radii of one circle. The nearer they are to the centre – that is, to God – the nearer they are to each other. The division of the nations at Babel was in consequence of their struggle against God. The division of Christian nations is proof that their sinful human striving for national self-affirmation and supremacy has been a stronger force than 'love' or 'unity'. All people are children of Adam and therefore brothers and sisters. The image of God is in everyone. Christ died for all people, whatever their nationality. The Jewish nation is unique: it gave the Bible to the world, and the spirit of the Bible penetrates the whole of European civilisation.

What prospects do you think Jews in the USSR have?

This is a difficult question and it is closely tied up with the prospects of the Russian nation. There is a danger that the revival of Christianity could be exploited as symbolic of nationality and ethnicity. In this case, Jews could be a target, as they already are for *Pamyat'*. But if there is a return to genuine Christian values, to Christ as the Way, the Truth and the Life, then every aspect of society will be renewed.

The mass emigration of Jews is a huge loss for our country. It is especially sad to be losing such an intellectual force at this time of crisis for Russia. But this is not the only reason. The involvement of people of different nationalities in Russian culture makes it brighter, richer and more diverse, and opens up new paths and opportunities.

One of the points in your pre-election programme was 'opposition to all forms of enmity amongst the nations. All people are children of one God.' How are you going to realise this in your work for the Moscow City Soviet?

We want to cooperate with all denominations, religions and cultural and national movements so that no one feels like an alien in our city. Look at the names of the streets in Moscow: 'German Quarter', 'Armenia Lane', 'Georgia Street'. They all reveal the solid international traditions of our city. Muscovites have always been

broadminded enough to allow all kinds of national groups to live in the Russian capital and make their contribution to our common culture while preserving their own national identity.

(Translated from the Russian by Emma Watkins.)