

Between Europe and Tradition: Church and Society in Orthodox Eastern Europe*

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Introduction

A subject like this presents an exciting challenge. The title itself offers the author great freedom in approaching the subject, and this could provide an Orthodox Christian with another good opportunity to point to the perfection of the Eastern Church in comparison with the identity crisis of the churches in the West. This would require only a minimum of effort. However, we must ask ourselves if we are helping the Orthodox Church to find its place in society if we just conduct a monologue without making at least some attempt to cast a critical light on everything that religiosity stands for in the East today. Political boundaries between states can certainly be removed more easily than barriers between cultures and churches. A law can be changed simply by raising your hand, but people's views of their neighbours are difficult to change. A human community's consciousness of its identity is the result of centuries of political and cultural experiences and unfortunately teems with countless prejudices about those who speak differently, and especially think differently. This is why I feel that the call to dialogue has a lot of point for us. I realise that I will not be able to cover the whole range of issues which are suggested by the title. However, I will attempt to fulfil expectations at least in part with the help of the sources available to me, which mainly come from Russian, Romanian and German-speaking areas.

Viewed statistically, the Orthodox Church today forms a mosaic of several autonomous and national churches encompassing between 120 and 150 million believers.¹ Alongside the four ancient autocephalous patriarchates (Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem) other recognised national patriarchates belong to the Orthodox family – among the most notable are the Russian, Romanian, Greek, Serbian and Bulgarian Patriarchates, as well as patriarchates which are in the process of formation, as in Ukraine. In the course of this century a series of church structures in the USA, Canada, Western Europe and even the Far East have been formed by emigrants.

The immigration of a large number of Orthodox Christians to the West as a result of the political collapse in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s and the publication of numerous studies of Orthodox theology and spirituality in the latter half of this

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century have led to a better acquaintance with Orthodoxy in Catholic and Protestant areas. However, a large proportion of Orthodox literature that has appeared in the West consists of the work of emigre Russian theologians. In most cases the authors restrict themselves to a dogmatic and sometimes sanctimonious depiction of Orthodoxy without any sort of critical analysis. In order to simplify the integration of Orthodoxy into western culture they usually refer to Russian religious philosophy of the period between the two world wars.² As a result western readers tend to find the Orthodox Church a mysterious institution with political, social and cultural involvements that are difficult to fathom. This being so, any studies in which the Orthodox Church is depicted as a 'tangible' body and in which it appears as a part of a whole, with multiple access points, are extremely useful. For this reason I propose to start looking at the role the Orthodox Church is playing today in the course of the complex process of modernisation which is going on in Eastern Europe, within the context of European integration. I shall pay particular attention to the political, social and cultural aspects of this process, while also bearing in mind what people in civil society are saying – politicians, economists, journalists and those in the cultural sector.

The Orthodox World and Europe

Pierre Chaunu points out that originally 'Europe' was a concept from scholarly language which spread from West to East at the beginning of the seventeenth century, supplanting the term 'Christendom'. Those who know the religious history of Christian Europe between the Middle Ages and the modern period realise that it did not stop at the border with the West but encompassed the Orthodox parts of Europe as well.³ However, although Christian solidarity did not exclude the eastern sphere, it is clear that Orthodoxy and Catholicism have to a great extent preserved their individuality. When Enea Silvio Piccolomini (later Pope Pius II) used the term 'Europe' instead of 'Christendom' he placed the compass on Rome and entrusted the West with the duty of defending the civilised world, which with no regard for south-east Europe had moved its borders further westwards, against the Ottoman invasion.⁴

At the end of the eighteenth and the start of the nineteenth centuries the centre of European civilisation still lay in the western part of the continent. Educated people and politicians in the East saw Europe as limited to its western part,⁵ which presented a true model of an ordered and prosperous society to be caught up with as quickly as possible.⁶ The term 'Europe' also surfaced in the discourse of many Orthodox hierarchs around the same time, but in order to distinguish themselves from the Catholic and Protestant world they increasingly used the term 'Occident' (*Abendland*). This new term was not an exact synonym for 'Europe' but meant everything that was not the Turkish-Orthodox area and described the world which had fallen away from the 'true Christian faith'. For example, Naum Râmniceanu, a monk and one of the Orthodox scholars of the time, likened the West to a territory where any heresy was possible. He saw it in fact as the home of heresy, idol worship and unbelief.⁷

A reaction set in with the modernisation movement of the latter part of the nineteenth century in Eastern Europe. Byzantinism was accused of having engendered poverty and social injustice. Thus the Romanian Pompiliu Eliade, for example, calls the Orthodox Christian religion obscurantist and sees it as a barrier on the road to rapid economic and social change.⁸ In Russia the Westernisers demanded that the Orthodox Church become less involved in public life.

Those who resisted every attack on traditional state institutions – of which the

Orthodox Church was an important one – were quick to react. In 1871 the panslavist Nikolai Danilevsky accused Europe of a programme of hostility towards the Slavic world. In his view there were two sorts of civilisation which held sway between the Atlantic and the Urals – the Romano-Germanic and the Slavic. The former gave rise to anarchy; it was guilty of the fall of mankind and completely unsuited to successful activity in church and cultural spheres. The latter, by contrast, was capable of preserving ‘the most noble human qualities’ and ‘the true Orthodox faith’.⁹ Danilevsky was also convinced that even where Catholicism had been imposed in the East the Slavic spirit had brought special religious forms into being. He cited the Hussite movement: ‘the purest and most perfect of all religious reforms, without the seditious spirit of the reforms of Luther and Calvin’.¹⁰

The dispute between prowesterners and pan-Orthodox continued between the two world wars. For a proportion of the eastern elite – including the church elite – in the 1920s Europe continued to be an alien and hostile world of Catholic and Protestant states, while the Orthodox nations were ‘included in the Near East’.¹¹ The geographical boundary between the two ecclesiastical worlds was also a spiritual boundary. During his tour of Carpatho-Ukraine – then part of Czechoslovakia – the Russian metropolitan Veniamin Fedchenkov was surprised by the friendliness of the Slavs (Russians) that lived there: it was ‘as if he were not in Europe but somewhere in Volhynia or in Poltava’.¹² To him the Carpatho-Russians were ‘the best of all peoples’, although in the wake of the sixteenth-century Union ‘Catholicism has had a negative influence upon their souls’.¹³ Around the same time Nikolai Trubetsky maintained in *Yevropa i chelovechestvo* (1920) that Russia was not a European country and ‘must join the world revolution of all non-Europeans against the rule of the old continent’; and Nikolai Berdyayev commented, admittedly without reproach to the West, that ‘the Orient is very much alive in Russia’.¹⁴

In Romania, an antiwestern tendency based on the spirituality of the Eastern Church took shape in the cultural sphere in tandem with the rapid modernisation of the nation. Nichifor Crainic maintained that the distinctive nature of Romanian culture was manifested in Orthodoxy, while Nae Ionescu built an entire socio-philosophical system on this premise. In his view, philosophy is nothing other than ‘the conceptual realisation of existence’ and as such ‘always contains a characteristic tone, a kind of striving towards the absolute. Almost all philosophy is actually an act or path towards the absolute, towards something outside ourselves, something immutable, indestructible, special and ideal for our spiritual lives.’¹⁵ Elsewhere he wrote: ‘In Romania Christianity has descended into immediate daily reality and has thus contributed to the creation of a specifically Romanian universe.’¹⁶

In recent years this dispute has again flared up in Russia, and it is somewhat reminiscent of the clashes between prowesterners and panslavists. Certain circles within the Russian intelligentsia think that links between the prowestern democratic forces in Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church are harmed by the liberal attitude of the prowesterners towards western Christianity (Catholicism and Protestantism). Political movements which advocate the wholesale acceptance of the political and economic experiences of the West – commonly labelled as radical-democratic – are often accused of neglecting the ‘Russian Idea’ and the ‘special historical mission of Russia’, and of supporting principles which ‘open wide the door to western cultural intervention’. In such instances, the ‘historical services of the Russian Orthodox Church in the formation and defence of Russian statehood, nation and culture’¹⁷ are often referred to. Critics of prowestern Russian intellectuals are currently gathered around the newspaper *Zavtra*. At the head of this group is Sergei Stankevich, a

former adviser to President Boris Yel'tsin.¹⁸

The situation in Romania is somewhat different. The world of the Romanian intelligentsia has known this kind of debate, but the field is now being won by those who want to draw a clear line of demarcation between the Orthodox faith of the majority of the population and the programme of integrating the nation into a region which although culturally close to Romania is clearly dominated by non-Orthodox confessions: Catholicism and Protestantism. Confronted with a new political reality Romanian intellectuals are trying to find answers to questions which have long remained unanswered, such as: 'Are we in the centre of the Orthodox world or on the periphery of the Catholic and Protestant world?' and 'Would we rather remain with the "true faith" of the Balkans or become "integrated" in Europe, while carelessly abandoning the tradition of the East?'

Under the influence of the polemic between Orthodox and prowestern intellectuals Teodor Baconsky, the author of a number of important contributions on the relationship between church and state and on cultural dialogue with the West, recently remarked that Orthodox intellectuals 'would become more credible if they gave up their triumphalism and fortress mentality' and that prowestern intellectuals 'would become more credible if they ceased fighting the "intolerance" of the other side with exactly that same mercilessness which is characteristic of the Orthodox side, if they proved the enemy stereotypes wrong by willing engagement with Orthodoxy, and if they understood that a society at peace would actually benefit them best.'¹⁹

Orthodoxy and Nationalism

The tragic experience of the peoples of former Yugoslavia in recent years points very clearly to the negative role which the religious factor can play in the wake of the outbreak and spread of interethnic conflict. This is not the place to debate the responsibility of each confession in the war. Countless books have been written on that subject and I am sure that there are many more still to come. For our purposes it seems more useful to concentrate on the opinions of the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbian intellectuals who tried to determine Serbia's place in the European political and cultural constellations in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The theme 'Europe' has been of special interest in Serbia in recent times. The reasons for this are easy to discern. From the mid-1980s Yugoslavia faced a deep crisis in its federal system; subsequently four republics seceded,²⁰ war broke out and Serbia was isolated from the international community. In this context Europe, or the western half of the continent, has played the role of Serbia's enemy and the defender of Serbia's enemies in political and media discussion within the country. As a result it has been argued that the Balkans are no longer part of Europe and that of the Christian peoples of the Balkans the Serbs and Bulgarians are the least European in the western sense of the word.²¹ Europe, the argument goes, has lost its original identity because of the western Europeans, who have followed a 'mistaken path'. 'Luckily' the Serbs, as well as other Slavic or Orthodox peoples, have not followed this path but have remained 'true Europeans'. Take for example a recent exposition by Amfilohije Radović, a Serbian Orthodox bishop:

Europe is against us not because we do not belong to Europe and do not want to be Europeans, but because thanks to the grace of God and not our own merit we are the bearers and guardians of the Mediterranean European heritage of Jerusalem ... the West is too bound up with material

things and the deification of its own works; it is dedicated to expansionism, an extremely perfidious form of totalitarianism. Greed and earthly considerations shape its religion.²²

Through insights such as these, the argument runs, the Serbs alone have been saved from the 'mistaken path'. However, this quotation could come from any other Orthodox hierarch – Russian, Romanian or Bulgarian – who is confronted with the suffering of his people and for whom the dashing of his nation's aspirations is entirely the fault of foreign forces. In the Orthodox world the enemy has usually been sought in a political sphere where people have a different faith. This is unfortunately still the case. Catholic or Protestant nations have frequently been cast in this role.

It would be wrong, however, to believe that Orthodoxy is being used by eastern politicians as a means to influence public opinion only in the area of relations with nations of different confessions. Thus for several years political relations between Russia and Romania have been coloured by differences of opinion regarding the right of jurisdiction over the Orthodox in the Republic of Moldova. The Greek Orthodox Church has actively intervened in the dispute over the right of Macedonians to claim their state of Macedonia, which emerged from the breakup of the multiethnic state of Yugoslavia. In several states of the former Soviet Union the Orthodox Church has been accused of not supporting the national emancipation movement wholeheartedly or secretly serving the 'imperial aspirations of Russia'. This applies to Ukraine and the Republic of Moldova in particular, where the structures of the Russian Orthodox Church were involved in the denationalisation and russification policies of the Soviet period.²³

Church and Society in the Orthodox Nations

The most recent political developments in the Balkans confirm the important role still played by the Orthodox Church in the life of Greek society. Most people equate Greece with 'Hellenism, Orthodoxy and Family'. According to Dorothea Schell

The significance of Orthodoxy for the people of rural Greece is obvious. When they respond to surveys they continually stress the role of religion in their own self-perception. Even those few sceptics who criticise the church as a powerful and rich institution do not call religion into doubt, as they clearly distinguish between church representatives and their own Orthodox faith.²⁴

Theoretically the place of the Orthodox Church in contemporary society is defined by the so-called vertical and horizontal theologies. Whereas vertical theology deals exclusively with dogmatic issues, horizontal theology is concerned with the social aspect of life. The assumption is that all believers belong to the vertical structure of the Orthodox Church, from clergy down to ordinary parishioners. On to the horizontal dimension, however, the believer has 'a double citizenship: on the one hand he belongs to the religious community, but on the other he is also part of the political, economic and social community'.²⁵ In the Russian Orthodox Church the higher church dignitaries mostly belong to the group which speaks out for the preservation of the traditional role of the church in society. For them the concept of God is much more important than human personality.²⁶ In Romania those who have a high regard for the traditional role of the priest in society believe that a priest's mission is not social, but mystical: priests exist in order that the Holy Spirit can influence people

through the seven sacraments: baptism, confirmation, eucharist, confession, marriage, extreme unction, ordination.

The aspiration of the Orthodox Church to limit itself to questions of the human soul and to become involved with political concerns only if this does not encounter opposition from state institutions has its roots in Byzantine tradition. Even after the political changes in Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s the leading church institutions essentially continued to follow the line taken by the ruling political class. Thus the voice of the Russian patriarch was barely heard at the time of Russian military interventions in the Republic of Moldova and Chechnya. In Bulgaria, Romania and Serbia the leading hierarchs of the Orthodox churches have likewise failed to adopt a clear line in response to various attempts to return to communist practices in dealing with internal political crises, for example during the miners' interventions in Bucharest in summer 1990 and autumn 1991. There have recently been signs, however, that the Orthodox churches are in a position to influence political life in their part of the world, especially if requested to do so by forces which many have the (democratic) political future of that particular nation in their hands. One recent example of this is the attitude of the leadership of the Serbian Orthodox Church in the course of the political crisis in Serbia between November 1996 and February 1997. Some 230 priests led by Bishop Lavrentije of Valjevo and Sabac demanded that the synod of the Serbian Patriarchate take a clear line towards the falsification of the results of local elections in several cities and condemn the government's suppression of justified protests. Following this appeal came a declaration of the Serbian patriarch's solidarity with the demonstrators and a demand for the recognition of the will of the electorate. Some intellectuals are in agreement with greater involvement of the Orthodox Church in political life, but others think that the role of the church is more likely to have a destructive effect due to obligatory rejection of 'all reformist and modernising trends in society'. In this context H.-R. Patapievici, one of the most important liberal thinkers in the country, told Romania in an interview that he was concerned about the attitude of a section of the Orthodox Church towards intellectuals and 'the grotesque way' in which the church took part in the political life of the country.²⁷

The growing social role of the Orthodox Church is also a result of its reaction to the aid programme conducted by Catholic and neo-Protestant churches in the East, as well as of its fear of losing a portion of its believers to these churches. It has been said, for example, that the Orthodox Church agreed far too willingly to distance itself from social problems when responsibility for these was taken on by the state.²⁸ The increasingly active role of the Orthodox Church in the social field is most evident in the charitable sphere. For example, in Romania the church has organised and supported the activities of soup kitchens, orphanages, old people's homes, dispensaries and medical centres. The case has come to light of a young Orthodox priest from Buzău who single-handedly set up a whole range of charitable activities and who distributes a Christian weekly newspaper called *Pâinea Vieții* (*The Bread of Life*) free of charge. Such examples of what is sometimes described as Orthodox mission are becoming ever more common throughout the Orthodox region.

Orthodoxy and Culture

In discussing the relationship between intellectuals, or culture, and the Russian Orthodox Church one frequently finds evidence of the existence of two types of intellectual, the patriotic and the liberal. The former regard the Orthodox Church as

the basis of Russian statehood and spirituality and insist on a return to Orthodoxy. At the same time they reproach their liberal opponents for calling for the renewal of the church, which would involve the translation of the liturgy from Church Slavonic into Russian, the replacement of the old with the new calendar and the abandoning of certain fasts. The ideal of this section of the Russian intelligentsia is said to be 'Orthodoxy with no cross and Christianity with no crucifixion'.²⁹ This dispute must also be seen in the light of the Orthodox Church's attempt to find its place in cultural life as a whole, however. In this context should be mentioned the Moscow publication of *Khristianstvo i kul'tura segodnya*, a volume of studies which includes the papers of a conference held in Naples in autumn 1994.³⁰ The book is a successful attempt to throw light on one of the great controversies of this century: the antithesis between church and culture. Many Orthodox theologians are certain that as a result of this dispute intellectuals find themselves outside the church and the church outside culture. In the eyes of the clergy, while there were many instances in the first few centuries AD of individuals who 'abandoned the world in exchange for accepting Christ', 'modern civilisation accepts the world in exchange for abandoning Christ'. According to the Russian metropolitan of Volokolamsk and Yur'yev the basic idea of Orthodoxy today, however, is 'the acceptance of the world as well as the acceptance of Christ'. This is said to be the foundation on which a new Christian culture is to be created.³¹ According to the metropolitan, the church may actively influence economic and culture life because

everything in the world which is imbued with Christ's spirit is a part of Christian culture and history ... the secularised and un-Christian culture of the present should not be condemned or rejected in its entirety. On the contrary, like science, art, law, national sentiment and economics it must be newly evaluated once again in a Christian spirit and so undergo renewal.³²

The Orthodox Church has without doubt made a deep impression on the culture of the Orthodox peoples of Eastern Europe and enriched the world cultural heritage. To take just a few examples: the writings of the Holy Fathers, the icons of Andrei Rublev and the monasteries of Moldavia. Even under the communist regime the cultural activity of the church was not interrupted completely. Under conditions of virtual illegality icons were painted and church music composed. On the other hand, the church, like society as a whole, lost priceless cultural treasures at this time. Thousands of churches were destroyed, countless volumes of religious writings were burnt and many icons went abroad. Recent attempts by the church to return to public life and influence cultural life through state institutions, especially schools, have resulted in new controversies regardless of the church's former role. A conference in Moscow from 25 to 30 January 1993 organised by the Religious Education Department of the Moscow Patriarchate, the Russian Orthodox Pedagogical Society and the Ministry of Education of the Russian Federation was dedicated to the role of the Russian Orthodox Church in the educational system. Participants analysed the current state of religious education and its future prospects and discussed the role of theatre and film in Orthodox Christian upbringing. In the course of the debate two schools of thought took shape – conservative and liberal. The conservatives argued that these forms of cultural activity had no role to play in addressing the most intimate issues of Christian life, while the liberals were more tolerant in discussion of works of art such as screen adaptations of the Gospel.³³

In Romania religious education was reintroduced after the collapse of communism. A provision of the education law now requires compulsory religious education for pupils in primary school (years 1 to 4). This has provoked a range of reactions from the Romanian intelligentsia. Supporters of the new provision point out that religion is a doctrine which awakens spiritual hunger in the individual. According to them it is religion which shapes and motivates a mature conscience; the church can also serve culture as a backdrop and a goal. The most common argument against this view is that the provision infringes the freedom of conscience of the individual, not only of the child but also of the parents. Moreover, it amounts to state intervention in church affairs through the medium of the public institution of the school. The state, it is argued, must be neutral and completely separate from the churches.

Conclusions

The dispute over the place of religion in primary schools goes far beyond the issue of education. The essential question is whether the Orthodox Church can reoccupy the place in society which it had before the advent of communism. Some of the participants in the discussion point out the special role which Orthodoxy has played in the formation of the peoples of Eastern Europe, and therefore welcome the church's attempts to involve itself as fully as possible in public life. Others, however, see this as a barrier on the road to modernisation and demand that the church concern itself solely with saving the souls of believers. While traditionalists see in an attack on church institutions an attack on the Christian foundations of society, modernists fear that europeanisation and economic progress could be sacrificed on the altar of religiosity. It should be noted that, historically, these debates have not been exclusive to the Orthodox world. To a large extent they resemble differences of opinion which until recently seemed to be especially characteristic of the West.

I have mentioned the fact that the issue of relations between the Orthodox world and the West has been, and still is, a reason for the publication of large quantities of literature. In this context I believe that it must be recognised that, regardless of the way in which they organise themselves, all Christians have the right to view themselves as creators and inheritors of an ancient civilisation which is today known under the name of European civilisation. Placide Deseille, an Orthodox theologian of French origin, recently suggested that the future prospects of European civilisation would be seriously endangered

if Europe does not find its Christian roots again, if it fails to recover its spiritual unity at least in part and if all the denominations produced by past schisms continue to fight each other senselessly or else ignore each other ... Eastern and Western Europe must stop regarding one another as foreign. Not everyone can understand the dialogue between different confessions, but in the wider context links between Christians of the Catholic tradition and the Orthodox in Europe could prove fruitful to both sides in the future.³⁴

In this context we are justified in hoping and believing that those who bear the responsibility for the new architecture of the continent will find a place within it for all nations which have signed up to the principles of democracy and harbour a wish to belong to the great family of Europe regardless of what particular confession or cultural tradition they come from. The great dilemma of the Eastern European Orthodox – 'How shall we integrate ourselves into a world of stability and prosperity

without damaging our own religious and cultural principles?’ – will then find a solution in the concept of unity through diversity.

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