

Social Doctrine: Will the Russian Orthodox Church Take a Daring Step?¹

VENIAMIN NOVIK

The essence of social doctrine lies in the theological and moral basis of the various attitudes believers have towards socio-political and economic issues. There are two points of view in this respect.

According to the first, which is strictly dualistic and by far the more popular, the whole world is clearly divided into two spheres: ecclesiastical and secular, spiritual and worldly. All social, political, economic and even cultural problems are generally held to lie outside the sphere of spirituality. These are the prerogatives of specialists, whereas a priest must be a priest in keeping with his calling, he must possess a certain quality of otherness and be the embodiment of holiness. He must concern himself with the deep essence of humanity and not get mixed up in political squabbles or intrigues.

According to the second point of view, which is unfortunately extremely unpopular among the Orthodox, Orthodoxy exists not only for individual salvation, basically in the form of church devotion, but is capable of creatively transforming life in all its fullness (albeit only partially, given earthly conditions).

We recall the resolution of the Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox Church from 31 March to 4 April 1992 in Moscow:

The church is not linked to any social or state system, nor to any political force. It is above 'right-wing' and 'left-wing', and is thus able to conduct dialogue with any movements within society, other than overtly criminal ones, seeking to reconcile and unify them in the service of the good of the people.

The Council stressed that 'the church does not have a preference for any particular state system, political doctrine or social movement',² and confirmed the resolution of the Holy Synod of 8 October 1993 that 'priests should refrain from participating in elections in the capacity of candidate for Duma deputy', extending it to cover 'membership of political parties, movements, unions, blocks and other similar organisations, especially those waging a political campaign'. Priests are permitted to participate 'in particular activities undertaken by political organisations' and also in 'church cooperation with such organisations in activities which are beneficial to church and society, so long as such participation and cooperation does not involve support for political organisations, but promotes peace and concord among the people and within the church'. The Bishops' Council of the Russian Orthodox

Church held at the Danilov Monastery from 18 to 23 February 1997 confirmed these earlier resolutions.

It is well known that in certain countries with a Christian tradition priests, both on principle and by law, play no part in government or political parties, but this has not prevented the Catholic Church, for example, from working out a detailed social doctrine which is on offer to Christian society and to all people of good will.

At this point two questions arise in the consciousness of the Orthodox believer.

The first is the question of what kind of socio-political and economic structures there are to be, and the fact that this is not a purely technical question for experts. Just as people can be sinful, 'structures' can also be bad (or, figuratively speaking, sinful) if they create favourable conditions for individual human sinfulness and corresponding collective, or social, sin. The only reason why social sin is not perceived as sin is because it is impersonal in character. However, it is well known that a Christian can be a Christian in any conditions. There is always an opportunity for personal charity, to say nothing of confessing one's faith. Of course, people who have fallen victim to unjust structures often do not survive. Such people are deprived of the possibility of choice; other people (specialists) make that choice for them. Reference to the will of God and to the fact that 'all power comes from God' (Rom. 13: 1–2) in such situations is simply a convenient hypocrisy which is not without false piety. Socio-political structures reflect not only the historical and cultural traditions of a people, but as they constantly change, develop or regress, reflect also the 'here and now' state of moral responsibility of their creators and of the people, who are obliged to participate in such structures rather than remain simply observers or even ignorant of what is happening. Wherever there is a moral aspect to what is happening there is also an opportunity for taking a religious attitude.

I can already hear a stern voice saying: 'What are you calling for? Revolution?' Not at all. However, it is not hard to imagine a kind of 'revolt' among, for example, the bosses of collective farms (or whatever they are called nowadays) if any opinion even remotely critical of their administrative or landowning prerogatives were to be expressed by the church in the Duma. They would cry out louder than anyone else about how the church should not be allowed to interfere in politics, the economy and so on.

The second question occurring to the Orthodox believer is the question of the participation of lay people in politics. The Orthodox Church does not forbid this at all, at any level. But here again the same problem arises, for it seems to many people that not only priests but lay people as well would be better not to participate in politics, a 'dirty business'. But nobody calls surgery, for example, a 'bloody business'. Not everyone can be a good surgeon, and in the same way not everyone can be a good politician. But the possibility that something can be abused does not mean that it should not be used at all.

Archpriest Mikhail Chel'tsov, who was shot by the Bolsheviks in 1930, wrote that

The involvement of Christianity in politics seems strange because we have become unaccustomed to living a truly Christian life. For us Christianity is one thing and life is another; Christianity is sometimes even thought of as a kind of comfort, necessary only for priests and monks but superfluous for everyone else, except for the chosen few among the laity, and then only while they are in church.

He goes on to give a complete model for the relationship between Christianity and life:

Christianity stands above everything earthly but not outside it; it does not interfere in anything, but does not concede that there is anything 'non-Christian'. It does not engage in politics, but demands Christian policies; it does not carry out its own policies, but applies direction, enlightenment and judgment to the policies of all who do. It does not divide up into parties, but tries to unite all parties in the task of serving the general benefit of the people and the state; it thus does not become secular itself but penetrates the secular, or earthly, with the Divine, assisting and guiding both individual human beings and the whole people. ... Only if it relates to the earthly, to earthly human relationships, and consequently to the policies they carry out, will Christianity be able to further the work of God's Kingdom in the souls of men and on Earth in general.³

It is easy to see that these words are a direct application of the Holy Fathers' principle of openness to contemporary problems; they seem to echo the famous passage from the *Epistle to Diognetus* (second to third centuries) which speaks of the fact that Christians are – to use the Christological formula – 'united indivisibly yet unconfusedly' with the world and its problems:

Christians live in their native land, but as strangers; they take part in everything as citizens but endure everything as foreigners. Every foreign country is their homeland and every homeland is a foreign country ... They live in the flesh but not by the flesh. They pass their lives on earth but are citizens of Heaven [see Phil. 3: 18–20]. They obey the law but in living their lives they transcend all laws. They love everyone and are persecuted by everyone. They are poor, but make many rich [Gal. 5–6].

However, this kind of participation in social and political life requires the aforementioned theological and ethical concepts which are approved by the church. How can these concepts be realised?

The state of Russian agriculture today, for example, is well known. The sluggish, decaying collective farm administrative system continues. The main stumbling-block is the question of private property, which reflects the whole spectrum of Russia's socio-cultural problems like a droplet of water. This question is not a technical one, then, but has a significant spiritual dimension. It is easy to say 'we don't need capitalism in the countryside, it's a new form of serfdom'. Well-formulated Bolshevik phraseology on this issue is readily to hand: although rather hackneyed it has apparently not yet lost its power to convince. This collectivist ideology is not entirely without roots: the configuration of a collectivist consciousness lies behind it. From a religious point of view this is a sign that impersonal pagan folk consciousness, with its concepts of one people and one Earth which cannot belong to anyone as an individual, has not yet been overcome. If the land is described as God's, holy (Holy Rus') or, for the communists, 'the one, indivisible homeland' (it is no accident that what attracts the communists in Orthodoxy most of all is *sobornost'*) the issue of private ownership naturally does not arise. The fact that this holy homeland is still very much of a socialist rubbish dump does not worry anyone, for some reason. The main thing is that 'capitalism' should not exist (although this word is not used). No arguments about high taxes on property can convince people otherwise ('They don't pay it anyway', thinks every pensioner, 'and even if they do the money will never reach us.') The collective farm bosses in the Duma, they say, are not simply going to give in and abolish their own positions. The fact that 'some people here and there'

are farming quite well in Russia and in practice even have their own land does not come into it. Firstly, there are very few of them, and secondly, the real issue is the conceptual understanding of property as such, and this is what is absent. Meanwhile there are still 'red roosters'⁴ in the villages.

The example of the well-organised monastic agriculture of the past has moral, but not economic, significance. It cannot be treated as a model for the whole country. It would not be at all desirable to devise artificial schemes for which there is no basis in historical and cultural tradition, but even if there were some precedents for private ownership, all psychological connection with them has been lost after 70 years of collectivist communism, and so it is essential to develop new concepts. However, we do not have to start from scratch: there are many passages in Russian religious and philosophical writing where this subject is discussed in depth.

Despite the fact that 'a noble disregard for objective reality for the sake of impersonal Truth is in the blood of Russian thinkers', most of them, entirely accepting the Gospel teaching on renouncing personal possessions, understand it as a call to the conscience of each individual, and have reasoned that the principle of private property must not be renounced in the social sphere: it is possible to share out one's own property, but not someone else's! They have even tried to give religious and philosophical foundation to the necessity of private property (within limitations, of course), viewing it as an extension of the soul and body, and even of the personality, of an individual into the external sphere: objects, such as a house, necessarily belong to a person for the same reason that his body belongs to him and indeed as his own identity belongs to him. Moreover, private property blocks state infringement of the individual, and prevents the transformation of a state into a totalitarian one.⁵

A second issue, possibly more important, but which is also hardly ever discussed, is the question of Orthodox attitudes towards the social structure. Orthodoxy in the Russian Empire had a social doctrine, albeit not officially proclaimed: 'Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality'. All aspects of political, socio-economic and cultural life were to be considered in the light of this triad. There are obvious similarities with the famous Sixth Novella of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian (565), in which he talks about the symphony of church and state. It was never worked out in detail how Uvarov's formula was to be applied, just as there was no social doctrine as such in any systematic form. What it was was primarily a spiritual and psychological configuration; but it has turned out to be extraordinarily tenacious in Orthodox consciousness, although Autocracy is long gone and Nationality is much in question today. In my view this can be explained by two factors.

Firstly, there is always a tendency for a perfect concept to take precedence over imperfect reality: 'Reality does not correspond to the ideal? So much the worse for reality!' The contemplative type of spirituality is generally little concerned with the discrepancy between the ideal and reality, and the different degrees in this discrepancy. 'There is never going to be complete harmony between the two in earthly conditions, so there is no point in worrying; instead of creating alternative "conditions" of some kind, is it not better to reflect on one's own soul?' This kind of aim makes social doctrine, which is by definition concerned with the horizontal links in society, a psychological impossibility, but it nevertheless creates in the consciousness of believers a certain complete, all-encompassing model which matches most closely to a centralised socio-political system: and even more so if this centralised system is a monarchy, which wins handsomely from an aesthetic point of view in comparison with other heteronomous systems, which always seem more eclectic.

Sergei Bulgakov offers an explanation:

The religious fascination of autocracy lies in the idea of the Christian tsar: an 'Orthodox tsar' is a concept which makes many a simple heart beat faster. Imperial autocracy is considered to be a direct theocracy, a genuinely Christian government, God ruling on Earth. Hence the widespread conviction that whoever is against autocracy or 'against the tsar' is against God and Christ.⁶

The second factor is that the Russian monarchy was administrative, as Georgi Fedotov so acutely observed; that is, the mechanisms whereby society was governed and organised were bureaucratic and not social in character. There was no civil society in Russia and provincial self-government was either non-existent or very inadequate; communism later created general social paralysis. The lack of these horizontal social links and of any opportunity to influence the vertical ones also helped to consolidate the fully-centralised model of Uvarov's model in public consciousness – or rather, subconsciousness, since many believers had never even heard of it. The necessity for social initiatives and social links was never perceived psychologically, and is still perceived insufficiently today. These circumstances explain why it is possible to carry out reform in Russia only 'from above', on the initiative of the leadership. The revolution of 1917, which was social in character (not political, as the majority of the population did not belong to any party and had no understanding of politics) was an exception, but it is well known of what kind.

The imperial factor is still alive, especially in the context of the territorial vastness of the country, despite all shocks (such as the break-up of the USSR), and is an important factor in promoting the corresponding type of consciousness. The idea of monarchy as the political model most appropriate to Orthodoxy has penetrated deeply into the consciousness of believers. Historically this is understandable. However, the Constantinian era of imperial state Orthodoxy ended long ago; for Russia it ended decisively in February 1917. Nevertheless, for many Orthodox this era is still psychologically alive.

All this makes the task of considering new political realities in Russia difficult from an Orthodox point of view. Orthodox teaching on the monarchy does not come into the category of dogma, but many Holy Fathers shared it and interpreted 'the one who is restraining lawlessness' (2 Thess. 2:7) as this Orthodox monarchy. From an abstract theological point of view it can be demonstrated that a democratic structure in no way contradicts a Christian understanding of the world, with its primacy of inner truth over any external forces (as Georgi Fedotov, Boris Vysheslavtsev and Nikolai Lossky show in their writings⁷); and that the monarchy, with at its head a sacralised figure who is believed to have a special connection with God, has an ancient pagan origin: this is pointed out in the Holy Scriptures (1 Kings). The monarchy was a consequence of the fact that the Israelites had fallen away from the theocracy set up by God. The anointing of the king was a sign of God's mercy bestowed on the new form of state system rather than of divine institution. However, from the Holy Fathers to writers of the recent past (Filaret (Drozdov), Feofan (Govorov), Ignati (Bryanchaninov) and Archpriest Ioann (of Kronshtadt)), nobody has found anything to say in favour of democracy; on the contrary, they have often been very critical of it.

In my opinion, however, the eleventh anathema issued by the Russian Order of the Triumph of Orthodoxy against those who did not accept God's providence in the appointment of the tsars was valid only so long as there was still a tsar. The church itself has abolished this anathema along with others and discontinued it.

It is easy to criticise democracy, especially as it does not instil fear like totalitarian regimes. It is interesting to note that this criticism is in fact frequently levelled from the position of the implicit ideal of democracy itself. Even such severe critics of democracy as Konstantin Pobedonostsev, for example, do not so much speak about the philosophical foundations (or lack of them) of democracy and parliamentarianism as give a graphic description of every possible abuse which might arise in attempts to create democracy, while accepting that there are peoples (primarily of Anglo-Saxon origin) for whom democracy is totally suited – and, moreover, not by virtue of their worst characteristics. The reasoning of Il'ya Il'in takes roughly the same line.⁸ It is also interesting that even overtly totalitarian regimes do not give up using democratic phraseology.

'Our new Orthodox', primarily those who 'sat quietly' under the communists, sometimes working in the Party or the Komsomol, continue to maintain stubbornly that democracy is 'from the devil'; and they cite the opinions of various saints as if they had the status of dogma, although it is a well-known fact that canonisation is a consequence of the holiness of one's life, and not of the infallibility of one's personal theological opinions.

Most critics of democracy make their task very much easier by not proposing anything positive at all, cunningly maintaining that this issue is not a 'spiritual' one. When it becomes necessary to make a political choice (during election campaigns, for example), such 'neutrals' nearly always end up on the side of the totalitarian forces, even of the communists, as was the case in the last presidential elections. The absence of opinions from the Holy Fathers regarding communism or 'choosing the lesser of two evils' in this case does not trouble 'our new zealots' for some reason. On these occasions they also forget the 'devil', otherwise such a popular word in their vocabulary.

The results of a sociological survey carried out by the All-Russian Centre for the Study of Public Opinion in July 1996 are interesting. Research was conducted into the question of how far the socio-political views of people who defined themselves as Orthodox depended on their degree of involvement in the church. It turned out that church involvement is conducive to conservative (nondemocratic) political preferences (and today that means the patriots and communists). Russia still stands at a crossroads; it has not made a firm choice in favour of democracy. It also emerged that two-thirds of those calling themselves Orthodox do not take communion, and that only four to five per cent take communion more than once a month, that is, approximately two to three per cent of the whole population of the Russian Federation.⁹

The same situation arises with the concept of 'human rights'. Some people even see it as a manifestation of the egotistical nature of man, either not knowing or not wishing to know that this social and ethical concept has its origin in respect for the individual as created in the image and likeness of God. The legal aspect generally has a regulatory social purpose, and operates on the horizontal plane inasmuch as it is concerned with human interrelations, and on a truncated vertical plane (if we take this to include state structures) inasmuch as it places limits on state infringements of individual freedom. It is clear that the individual does not have rights before God (the real vertical), although this is not a simple matter: remember Jacob wrestling with the angel.

The situation is rather complex, then. We need to interpret new socio-political and economic realities, but there are no significant conceptual precedents for this in the Holy Tradition. This being the case, social doctrine might remain on the level of

noncommittal phrases of a general nature about the necessity for reconciliation, peace and other similarly good things about which there was a great deal of talk in the pre-*perestroika* period. It will be even worse if ordinary believers fail to see any positive sense in the new social realities, refuse to accept them from an Orthodox point of view and enter a social ghetto (this time voluntarily). There is another possibility: that Orthodox Christians themselves will learn to live in the new conditions without going against their consciences but without developing any particular theoretical understanding. However, surely the challenge is more than just that of keeping up with the times: it is the challenge of taking the lead prophetically, of showing the way.

Our church is thus challenged to take a daring step.

Notes and References

- ¹ This article does not necessarily reflect the official position of the church on the issue in question.
- ² I nevertheless assume that we can take it that the church would not simply say that it 'does not have a preference' as far as known criminal organisations are concerned.
- ³ Prot. M. Chel'tsov, 'Khristianstvo i politika', *Zhurnal Moskovskoi Patriarkhii*, no. 3, 1994, pp. 62–64.
- ⁴ The old Russian term for arson attacks by peasants on landowners' houses.
- ⁵ See K. Isupov (ed.), *Russkaya filosofiya sobstvennosti* (St Petersburg, 1993).
- ⁶ S. M. Bulgakov, 'Tserkov' i gosudarstvo', *Voprosy religii* (Moscow), no. 1, 1906, p. 56.
- ⁷ G. P. Fedotov, 'Osnovy khristianskoi demokratii', *Imperiya i svoboda* (New York, 1989); B. P. Vysheslavtsev, 'Krisis industrial'noi kul'tury', *Smysl i tsennost' demokratii* (New York, 1953), ch. 15; N. O. Lossky, 'Organicheskoye stroyeniye obshchestva i demokratiya', *Sovremennyye zapiski* (Paris), no. 25, 1925; N. N. Alekseyev, 'Khristianstvo i ideya monarkhii', *Put'* (Paris), no. 6, 1927. See also: Veniamin Novik, 'Demokratiya kak problema mery', *Voprosy filosofii* (Moscow), no. 7, 1996, published in English as 'Democracy: a question of self-limitation', *Religion, State and Society*, vol. 25, no. 2, 1997, pp. 189–98.
- ⁸ K. P. Pobedonostsev, 'Velikaya lozh' nashogo vremeni' and 'Novaya demokratiya' in the book *Tserkov' i demokratiya*; I. A. Il'in, 'Predposylki tvorcheskoi demokratii', *Nashi zadachi* (a collection of his articles) (Moscow, 1992), vol. 2.
- ⁹ See B. V. Dubin, 'Pravoslaviye v sotsial'nom kontekste', *Informationny byulleten' monitoringovogo oprosa*, no. 6, 1996.

(Translated from the Russian by Geraldine Fagan)