

The Development of Authority within the Russian Orthodox Church

A THEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL INQUIRY

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Introduction

A general note on Russian Orthodoxy: the 20th C

Anyone attempting to study and to understand the history of the Russian state, of the Church and the society at large, would be overwhelmed by the sheer size of this task. The country and the nation which overthrew the seemingly unstoppable hoards of Mongolian Medieval tribes; that largely on its own account was able to defeat the victorious march of the Third Reich across Europe and yet was largely responsible for the 'export' of a Communist 'plague' across the globe has provoked both fascination and resentment on the part of many researchers. The twentieth century brought about some monumental changes in the course of history of this country. It produced a major ideological shift and a change of political system on an unprecedented level: from an Empire ruled by God's anointed, to the Soviet Union led by an all-wise 'Father of the nations' and his communist successors, to the subsequent collapse of the Soviet empire and a move towards greater freedom and democracy; from a society which was supposedly characterised by its adherence to a Christian worldview expressed through the system of beliefs of Eastern Christianity, to a utopian vision of *homo sovieticus* at its core, the latter being based upon scientifico-materialistic values designed to replace and to eliminate all religious features within the consciousness of its citizens.

This century witnessed both the unchecked despotism and authoritarianism of Stalin and the chaotic, neo-democratic freedom of Yel'tsyn's years, reverting yet again to the neo-democratic, but authoritarian-like leadership of V. Putin at the end of the century. It also produced an unstoppable quest for power and suppression, and a thirst for freedom, and the apocalyptic reality of wars and the imagined bright future of tomorrow. The pendulum of history swung back and forth affecting the lives of the

succeeding generations. Thus the state of affairs can be summarised as that of Russia's journey with all of its apparent contradictions and complications. It is again in search of its own self-identity, as has happened on several occasions throughout its history.

Russia still continues to provoke different, indeed, contradictory reactions at the point of one's encounter with its history within the early period of the 21st C. One is confronted by the complexity of Russian history in which the Russian Orthodox Church played a major part. That brings inevitably 'face to face' with Russian Orthodoxy, its beliefs and set of values which sustained Russian society in its turbulent history and moulded in many ways its worldview.

In a similar way to the rest of the Russian society the Russian Orthodox Church as a 'corporate' entity went through a turbulent and violent history throughout the 20th C. Like the rest of the Russian society it went through an 'identity' crisis and was subject to terrors and challenges from a godless regime throughout this eventful era. Its actual existence was under threat owing to the brutal pressure and supervision of the State and the pastoral negligence on the part of its compromised hierarchy. Yet it survived and has risen 'from the ashes' by the end of the 20th C and is increasingly starting to play an ever more dominant role in the life of the nation.

However, it must be admitted that the issue of the self-identity of the Russian Church goes beyond that of the communist era. As we shall see from our study the Russian Church hardly enjoyed any period of freedom throughout its existence when it was essentially free from the 'shackles' of the State and would have been free to develop on its own accord. Thus, there is an essential historical parallel running between the beginning and the end of the twentieth century. It presents us with the picture of the Russian Church emerging from the period of State domination, either that of the Synodal or the Soviet period attempting to find its place, to reform itself and to express its opinion within the socio-political setting of Russian or post-Soviet society. In the case of the latter scenario, it is the unlimited freedom of the post-Soviet political system which presents the Church with apparent blessings and unprecedented challenges.

During the last decade of the twentieth century Russian Orthodoxy has been propelled to the forefront of social and political life. Being always

identified and portrayed as the Church of the Russian nation, it took a defensive stance in face of the rapid changes and challenges which were coming into Russia from different directions and on different levels. On a socio-political level, the country was facing a transition from a society of the perceived 'equality' of all of its citizens and a controlled economy, to the pro-western reforms which led to the acquisition of western values in the economical sphere and resulted in the creation of a class society. The socio-political 'experiment', however, ran out of steam by late the 90s and resulted in widespread disillusionment, the rise of rampant nationalism and widespread poverty. On a socio-religious level, in the aftermath of Gorbachev's *perestroika* and *glasnost*, Russian Orthodoxy came to face the increasing missionary activity of either indigenous or foreign Protestant and Catholic churches as well as that of different religions and sects. The combined missionary or proselytising activity was perceived to be a tangible threat to the Russian way of life, culture and faith, which was claimed to be shaped entirely by Russian Orthodoxy. These combined threats brought about a particular reaction from Russian Orthodoxy and warranted some extraordinary theological and literary speculations. Support for its policies sometimes came from unexpected factions within Russian society such as the Communist party, resulting in a combined effort between some representatives of Russian Orthodoxy and the communist party through the virtue of Russian nationalism.

On the part of a certain faction within the Russian Church and society some authors perceived the unfolding day to day post-Soviet reality and identity crisis through the 'high' perception of apocalypticism. In this vision post-Soviet Russia came to be seen as existing within an end of the world scenario, being involved in a cosmic struggle between the forces of good and evil; Christ and antichrist. The apocalyptic themes of the Third Rome were invoked in order to present Russia as a 'neo-messianic' kingdom fulfilling its role at the end of the world. The literary evidence of Slavophiles and a neo-Slavophile, like F.M. Dostoevskii, was brought to bear in order to give a warrant for and to re-enforce the overall vision of this 'neo-messianic' role for Russia. The nineties witnessed publication of a two-volume *Rossia pered vtorym prishestviem* (Russia before the Second Coming) – collection of different prophecies, *startsy's* predictions and

legends in which the apocalyptic motifs were mixed up with clearly monarchist aspirations and ideals.¹ In some cases these publications revealed an inherent anti-Semitism; in others it brought the Russian Church and the Patriarchate of Moscow, in particular, to the 'helm' of world Orthodoxy. On occasions, this resulted in a direct confrontation with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople to a lesser or greater degree throughout the twentieth century.

On a 'lower' level of perception, the Russian Church and Orthodoxy as a whole were perceived to be an organic and essential element of Russian identity and therefore the only legitimate and desirable set of beliefs for the Russian nation. The Church was re-enforced as the national Church of the Russian nation which *alone* had pastoral and spiritual authority over the Russian nation. In relation to other Christian confessions and Churches either indigenous or Western, the Russian Church and Orthodoxy as a whole were firmly re-affirmed as the *true* Church and the only *true* belief which was perceived to be essential to Russian national identity. On the other 'front', in relation to other Orthodox churches or groups such as the Old Believers and the *Katakombnaia tserkov'* ('The Catacombs' Church) this essentially underlined the projected perceived authority of the Russian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate).

From the standpoint of the early 21st C one theme tends to recur again and again in different and sometimes contradictory reactions in the life of Russian Orthodoxy in relation to the outside world – that of the perceived authority of Russian Orthodoxy and the Church. In the face of different ideological, sociological, religious and political challenges Russian Orthodoxy is attempting to re-assert its authority not only over the soul or *psyche* of the nation but also beyond its boundaries – on the international stage. In view of these considerations the question arises as to what constitutes the perceived authority of Russian Orthodoxy? Where does this perceived authority derive from? What are the essential 'ingredients' of

1 Sergey and Tamara Fominy (sost.), *Rossiia pered Vtorym Prishestviem: materialy k ocherku Russkoi eskhatologii*. 2 vols., 3rd ed. (Sankt-Peterburg: Obschestvo Sviatitelia Vasilii Velikogo), 1998.

the perceived authority in its external and internal elements? What could unite the proponent of the Communist ideology and a representative of the high-ranking hierarchy of Russian Orthodox Church and what could be the common denominator for their views? What is the central thread of their aspirations and beliefs?

Structure and Themes

As we investigate these issues our thesis falls broadly within four major areas of discussion: Spiritual/mystical authority, hierarchical authority, the principle of *sobornost'* and the charismatic authority of the *starets'*. The first two chapters constitute an essential, foundational background for all subsequent chapters which will discuss developments and perceptions within Russian Christianity. Our thesis will revolve around two major questions: *how* and *what*? Whilst the first question seeks to investigate the way the concept of the authority developed within Russian Orthodoxy, the second will be pre-occupied with discussion as to what type or mode of the authority developed within Russian Orthodoxy within a period of time.

Chapter I is intended to 'set the scene' by discussing the wider issues of pre-Constantinian Christianity which will be relevant to our discussion of Russian Orthodoxy in chapters III, IV and V. Themes such as *Pax Romana*, eternal Rome, Jesus and *Pax Romana*, the attitude of the NT writers towards the State and its authority, the Church Fathers' perception of the State, the concept of *translatio imperii* and the Messianic kingdom, the Church as the New Israel are presented as the essential 'ingredients' which contributed to the creation of a spiritual/mystical concept of authority. This initial discussion takes place in order to identify and to reveal the understanding of the nature of the relationship between State and Church as it emerged through the writings of the evangelists, other NT authors and the Church Fathers. We will attempt to answer the question as to what was their understanding or attitude towards the State and its subsequent

implication for the authority of the newly emerging Church. This discussion, in itself, will be placed within a wider context of *Pax Romana* which contained relevant ideas like eternal Rome and lead to a subsequent discussion of the spiritual/mystical authority of Moscow the Third Rome.

The first chapter will look into the background of the ideas mentioned above through a historico-theological investigation. We will be primarily concerned with the early period of Christianity within the *Ante-Nicene* period. Our investigation will bring us into considerations of issues such as *pax Romana*, the concepts and ideas which went into formation of this notion, its origin and development. Alongside *pax Romana* attention will be drawn to the notions of the eternity of the empire and its nature and of Rome in particular. The assessment of these issues will be brought together in order to present the make-up of the Roman Empire as it was understood in its pre-Constantine outlook. Further, we will discuss the understanding of the relationship between the Church and the State within the wider framework of *pax Romana*. We will investigate the way Jesus, the apostles and the Church Fathers dealt with the issue within the designated period.

Finally, in our last section within this chapter we will investigate the notion of the *translatio imperii*: its origin and evolution. We will look into the ways in which the concept of the moving empire was perceived by the book of Daniel and transmitted into Christian understanding of history and theology. Additionally, the concepts of the Messiah and the Messianic kingdom will be discussed in relation to the issue of *translatio imperii*. This will be done in order to determine the significance and the meaning of these concepts in a Jewish context. We will also consider its implications or influence upon Christian understanding of God's kingdom and the Messiah. This will enable us to understand the way in which Christian interpretation of Danielic four-fold schema of history was intertwined with Roman and Jewish understanding. The chapter will end with an assessment of the changes within early Christianity in its theological and sociological aspects in order to present the evidence showing in what way the changes within the theological and sociological realms could have had an impact upon the self-perception of the Byzantine Empire.