

Church, Society, Politics: Perspectives from the “Paris School”

Michael Plekon

Abstract

(Українське резюме на ст. 219)

Concentrating on three thinkers in particular often considered part of the Paris School of contemporary Orthodox theology – Sergius Bulgakov, Maria Skobtsova, and Paul Evdokimov – the author reviews their understanding and especially their concrete practices of the “liturgy after the liturgy,” that is, their application of the social implications of the gospel for the poor, dispossessed, and the suffering, especially in Europe during the Holocaust and after World War II. With reference to numerous others, including Alexander Schmemmann, John Meyendorff, Antoine Arjakovsky, Alexander Men, Nicholas Afanasiev, Anton Kartashev, Andriy Sheptytsky, Anthony Bloom, Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, Rowan Williams, and certain patristic writers, especially Basil the Great and John Chrysostom, the author shows that Bulgakov, Skobtsova, and Evdokimov were well grounded in a “radical” social program with venerable roots in Eastern Christian life, even if that life, especially in its recent Russian context, has often given the impression of being “quietistic” and concerned only with rule-bound ritualistic celebrations that leave unchallenged unjust social orders.



Orthodox countries have belonged to the backward and stagnant parts of the world ... with feebly developed industrial life. Natural and domestic economy prevailed. The slavery of the first centuries of our era gradually disappeared, partly through the influence of Christianity, but it was followed by serfdom which was severe enough even though mitigated by personal relations and customs.... Yet even in this torpid existence doubts arose about the justice and value of such a tenor of life which seemed to be unchangeable. The attitude of the [Orthodox] Church was ascetical and conservative following St. Paul's command: "Let every man abide in the same calling wherein he was called" (I Cor. 7:20) so that he might be a good slave for the sake of God or a good lord for the sake of God. Peace and tranquility of soul were esteemed more highly than any economic striving.... Poor people have to endure their destinies for the sake of God and the rich have a responsibility to use their wealth according to the teaching in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Reconciliation with the existing social order, sometimes even of a worse kind was the natural consequence of such a worldview. The Communist hatred of religion – "religion is the opiate of the people" – is a practical sequel to this quietism, this social nihilism.¹

When one reads such a severe assessment of the social perspectives of Eastern Orthodoxy from so creative and radical a thinker as Sergius Bulgakov (1871–1944), it is difficult to imagine what this church tradition could possibly offer by way of constructive social thinking.² The close association of Orthodox churches with rulers and political structures, as well as the dominance of eschatology and monastic asceticism also

¹ Sergius Bulgakov, "Social Teaching in Modern Orthodox Theology," in Rowan Williams, ed., *Sergii Bulgakov: Towards a Russian Political Theology*, (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1999), 273.

² For a further look at Bulgakov's social and political perspectives see my "Social Theory working with Theology: the Case of Sergius Bulgakov as an Example of Living Tradition," *Logos* 47 (2006): 89–102.

would seem to militate against either social-political criticism or radical stances toward social justice. With the liturgy's transcendent orientation, the icons depicting with their color and gold the heavenly kingdom, with an often symbiotic relationship with the state, with primarily agricultural economies and a starkly delineated class stratification (including serfs well into the nineteenth century in Russia), Orthodox thought would appear to be firmly set with regard to stability and order. With such regard for the "tradition" of the Church's teaching, it would be hard to imagine any stance other than traditionalism, both in conservative political as well as theological matters.

In the US we have seen for some decades now, alliances of the "religious right" with conservative politics. Twenty years ago James Davison Hunter characterized this as the "culture wars."³ In recent primaries and in the 2012 elections in the US, religion has played and will continue to play a role despite the separation of church and state. Those on the right equate their positions, whether on the size of government and its role, on public healthcare, on issues such as contraception, abortion, same-sex marriage and rights, among others, as biblically founded and mandated. There is no room for discussion or debate, dissent or alternative positions, for "Thus spoke the Lord." Admittedly, more liberal citizens and believers identify the church with the poor and suffering, the gospel with respect for all and care for those in need. The alignment of religious points of view with political parties and platforms is nothing new and Putnam and Campbell have assessed the consequences in their recent study.⁴

The Russian Church's very traditional and conservative relationship to society and culture was shattered by the revolution. (Increasingly, it appears that this traditional relationship has resumed now under the guise of the vision of *Russkiy mir*, the "Russian world.") Actually, movement for reform of both church and state had begun in the nineteenth century and cul-

³ James Davison Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Control the Family, Art, Education, Law and Politics in America* (NY: Basic Books, 1992).

⁴ Robert D. Putnam and David. E. Campbell, *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us* (NY: Simon & Schuster, 2010).