

The Servant Church: Nicholas Zernov’s Rethinking of Christian Unity¹

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Abstract

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Nicholas Zernov’s thinking on Orthodoxy and ecumenism is re-examined thirty years after his death. Zernov, along with Sergius Bulgakov, Nicholas Afanasiev, Lev Zander, Anton Kartashev, and Paul Evdokimov, advocated an approach to ecumenism somewhat at odds with the Orthodox “mainstream” as represented by Georges Florovsky. Critics such as Alexander Schmemmann, John Meyendorff, and Paul Schneirla dismissed Zernov’s ideas as unworkably romanticized and doctrinally suspect, but others, including Kallistos Ware, offer a more positive assessment of Zernov’s proposal for limited intercommunion between Catholics and Orthodox. The author, citing Maria Skobtsova, concludes by arguing that Zernov’s proposal for intercommunion will only work if Orthodox Christians take the lead in living out a radical *kenosis* and seeking to be the first servants of unity.



¹ This is revised version of a paper given at the 2010 conference of the Orthodox Theological Society of America on the theme “Exploring the Icon of the Servant Church,” held at Saint Vladimir’s Seminary, Crestwood, NY June 3–5, 2010. I am grateful to conference participants for their comments. For a brief general introduction to Orthodoxy and ecumenism see my “Orthodox Christianity in the West: the Ecumenical Challenge” in Mary Cunningham and Elizabeth Theokritoff, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Orthodox Theology* (Cambridge, 2008), 276–291.

In the days of my youth, when I first found the church,
I was impatient in my zeal for the truth. I was convinced that only
we, the Orthodox, and the Russians in particular, had preserved
the authentic apostolic tradition and had the fullness of the
sacraments. I wanted to save everyone else by bringing them
into Orthodoxy. But gradually I became convinced that
we don't have a monopoly on truth.

Nicholas Zernov (1898–1980)²

Introduction

Much of Nicholas Zernov's life-work was connected with thinking about Christian unity and the ecumenical movement. His Oxford DPhil dissertation was on "The Unity of the Church and the Re-union of the Churches," and, in addition to many articles on the subject, he wrote two major books on Christian unity: *The Reintegration of the Church: A Study in Intercommunion* (1952) and *Orthodox Encounter: The Christian East and the Ecumenical Movement* (1961). But Zernov was not always an ecumenist. Early in his theological education he was skeptical of ecumenism and, as Kallistos Ware reports, "doubted whether it was permissible even to say the Lord's Prayer in common with other Christians."³ This view

² Nicolas and Militsa Zernov, eds., *Za Rubezhom: Belgrad, Parizh, Oksford:; Chronika sem'i Zernovykh* [Beyond the Border: Belgrade-Paris-Oxford: a Chronicle of the Zernov Family] (Paris: YMCA Press, 1973), 556.

³ Kallistos Ware, "Nicolas Zernov (1898–1980)," *Sobornost* 3 (1981): 16. There are still serious doubts in the Orthodox world as to whether prayer is possible with the non-Orthodox. In a 2007 interview about ecumenism for the official ROCOR website, in which he defended Orthodox participation in the face of calls to reject all forms of ecumenical activity, Metropolitan Hilarion (Alfeyev), Ware's doctoral student at Oxford and now head of the Moscow Patriarchate's Department for External Church Relations, was asked specifically about joint prayer at the WCC General Assembly in Porto Alegre (2006). While maintaining conservative practice in this regard, he nonetheless argued that ancient canonical sanctions against "prayer with heretics" do not apply to most other Christians and that therefore "common prayer" with them (though not joint liturgical prayer) should be possible.

began to change when he visited England in 1923 to participate in a conference of the Student Christian Movement (SCM). For the first time, this brought him "face to face with

"As far as 'prayer with heretics' is concerned, there are ancient canons which no one ever repealed. But in interpreting these laws, I feel we should attentively study the context in which they appeared. Who were these 'heretics' referred to in these rules? Arians who rejected the Divinity of Jesus Christ, the 'Pneumatomachs' who rejected the Divinity of the Holy Spirit, the 'Eutichians,' who rejected the human nature of Christ, etc. Neither the Catholics nor the Protestants reject the Holy Trinity ... [or] the Divinity of Christ or His human nature. That is why we cannot equate them with the heretics referred to in the canons of the Ancient Church."

"Even in that era, when the canons were written, they were not observed with rigor. It is known, for example, that Basil the Great, as archbishop of Caesaria in Cappodocia, had under him fifty chorepiscopi, most of whom were Arians. Almost none of the clergymen under him confessed the Divinity of the Holy Spirit (and he himself, in order not to disturb his flock, avoided openly speaking of the Divinity of the Holy Spirit). Basil knew the opinions of his clergymen, but continued to serve with them. And he did not demand of the former Arians who rejoined the Church that they confess the Divinity of the Holy Spirit: 'It is enough for them to confess the Nicene faith, and the rest they will come to understand through a long period of communion with us.' So today, following the Nicene (more specifically, the Nicene-Constantinopolitan) Creed can be accepted as the criterion for joint prayer with representatives of one Christian community or another."

"Also, when canon law speaks of the inadmissibility of prayer with heretics, it refers, in my opinion, to prayer of a liturgical character, not to 'common' prayer. When you invite a non-orthodox Christian to your home, could you not together with him, read the Lord's Prayer before the meal? Or at inter-Christian conferences – could we not, before a meeting begins, read 'O Heavenly King?' Or, as an Orthodox Christian, when entering a non-Orthodox temple, even during a service, could you not raise a prayer to God? One can pray in the forest, one can pray in a bus (filled, maybe, with atheists or those of other religions), but one cannot pray in a Christian church, even if it is not Orthodox? Honestly, I do not see the logic in that."

(http://www.russianorthodoxchurch.ws/synod/engdocuments/enart_interviewrocor.html.)