

“The World as Sacrament” in Alexander Schmemmann’s Vision¹

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Christ never spoke of the natural and supernatural. He spoke rather of the old and the new, and especially of the renovation of the old. Sacrament is movement, transition, passage, Pascha: Christ knows the way and guides us, going before. The world, condemned in its old nature, revealed as life eternal in its new nature, is still the same world, God’s good work. Christ came to save it, not to allow us means of thankful escape before it was discarded as rubbish. Thoughts of the “life to come” can be misleading. In a sense, we have no other world to live in but this, although the mode of our occupying it, our whole relationship to space and time (*tota ac simul possessio*) will be very different when we are risen again in Christ.

If then our attention is to be given more seriously – and even, in a carefully defined sense, wholly – to this world, that does not mean we are committed to “worldliness”.... We have a simple task, and a happy one. Some say that we should concentrate upon this world as though God did not exist. We say rather that we should concentrate upon this world lovingly because it is full of God, because by way of the Eucharist we find Him everywhere – in hideous disasters as well as in little flowers ... it is not supernatural at all; we return to our original nature, to the garden where Adam met God in the cool of the evening. No, we do not meet Him wholly and unconsciously: we are still fallen, still estranged, and our fallen nature could

¹ This paper was given at an international conference, “The Legacy of Father Alexander Schmemmann 1921–1983,” held in Paris, December 11–14, 2008, St. Sergius Orthodox Theological Institute.

not at present survive that. A sacramental correspondence ... always points beyond. But it creates also a present unity, making us contemporary witnesses of Christ's death but also of His coming again, and of the fulfillment of all things in Him. Thankfully we accept from God's hands His lovely garden, the world. We eat its fruits, transform its substance into life, offer that life to God on Christ's cross and our daily altars, and look forward to the possession of it, as a risen body, in the Kingdom. But it will be the *same* world, the *same* life. "Behold, I make all things new." These were God's last words to us, and they only say at the end, and eternally, what was in his mind at the very beginning, when he looked on the sacramental world of his creation and saw that it was good.²

Alexander Schmemmann and his Vision

Fr. Alexander Schmemmann wrote those words almost forty-five years ago, in a paper delivered in June, 1964 and published a year later. Of course, the "world" is to be found throughout his writings, not to mention his Radio Liberty talks, his lectures and the journals kept during the last decade of his life. The "world" figures importantly in the title of two of his best known books: *For the Life of the World* and *Church, World, Mission*. While he modified his perspectives on a number of issues over the years, it is also the case that on the question of the relationship of Christian faith, the liturgy, and the church to the world, there was a remarkable consistency in his vision.³ The very title of this 1964 paper, "The World as Sacrament," is a particularly apt statement of his thinking, and despite other views which would seem to contradict it – Schmemmann's critical perspectives on politics, poverty, and

² "The World as Sacrament," in Alexander Schmemmann, *Church, World, Mission* (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1979), 226–227.

³ *The Journals of Father Alexander Schmemmann 1973–1983*, trans. Juliana Schmemmann (Crestwood NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2002), 310. In an entry from February 1, 1982, Schmemmann notes his dismissal as theological advisor to the OCA synod and his mixed feelings about this event. Even in so partial a selection as the English version of the journals, the instances of his noting change in his thinking are remarkably numerous.

feminism among other issues – this was his essential point of view, even with some qualifications.

On many dimensions, Schmemmann remains hard to describe with precision. He was neither a progressive nor a reactionary. Sometimes he was ruthless in his criticism of traditionalist resistance to change, of the “reduction” of liturgical rites or piety to mystical symbolism and custom. Yet he would then stop short of changes one might expect from his vision. He also liberally dismissed other efforts to reform or change – social policy, cultural patterns, liturgical forms.

While he may have not always cited them and surely disagreed with some, he was the student of the “Paris School” of St. Sergius Institute, of such figures as Bulgakov, Afanasiev, Kern, Zenkovsky and Bishop Cassian (Bezobrazov), as well as Kartashev, Sové, and Zander, among others.⁴ Given his most complex history, Schmemmann’s usually very positive evaluations of George Florovsky have always been puzzling to me. We have John Meyendorff’s witness to the influence of these St. Sergius faculty members, not to mention Schmemmann’s own.⁵ For all the harsh criticisms of Bulgakov in his journals, there is Schmemmann’s reverential essay about him on the latter’s centenary.⁶ There are the notes in *The Eucharist* as well as his obituary devoted to Afanasiev. There are other items such as the replication at St. Vladimir’s Seminary of *les semaines liturgiques* begun in 1952 at St. Serge by his mentors Kern and Afanasiev; and Schmemmann’s own books and essays in which he sought to describe the *theologia prima* or “litur-

⁴ All of these were contributors to *Zhivoe predanie/Living Tradition*, the anthology published in 1937 by YMCA Press in Paris as a statement of a more progressive theological perspective that joined these thinkers, despite their differences. Many though not all of the essays in this anthology have been translated and gathered in *Tradition Alive: On the Church and the Christian Life in Our Time*, ed. Michael Plekon (New York: Sheed & Ward/Rowman & Littlefield, 2003). For a presentation of the “Paris” or “Russian” School, see Paul Valliere, *Modern Russian Theology: Bukharev, Soloviev, Bulgakov* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001).

⁵ “A Life Worth Living,” *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly* 28 (1984): 3–10.

⁶ “Trois images,” *Le Messenger Orthodoxe* I (1972): 2–20.