

The Dramatic Blindness of Western Orthodox Theologians Towards Russia

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The open letter published by three American Orthodox Christians on September 3, 2015,² reproaching the very respected American Catholic writer George Weigel for “having insulted the Russian Church,” is symptomatic of the increasing malaise within the Orthodox Church both in Russia and among some of its representatives in the Western world. George Weigel did nothing more than denounce Russian aggression in Crimea, following the lead of almost all the countries belonging to the United Nations with the exception of ten countries, and defend the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church against the systematic and unfounded accusations of the Patriarchate of Moscow.³ Two Orthodox priests and a lay person who felt wounded by the truthful words of the Catholic theologian chose to publish an argumentative letter stating the reasons why they continue to support Patriarch Kirill of Moscow.

¹ *Editor's note:* We asked the author for permission to reprint his important text, which we do here in a lightly edited version.

² <http://www.aoiusa.org/patriarch-krill-and-russian-orthodoxy-deserve-respect-not-insults-an-open-letter-to-george-weigel>.

³ In particular, there was the stupor of the Catholic bishops united in a synod on the family in October of last year who had the kindness to invite the Orthodox Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, in a gesture designed to promote ecumenical relations, when the metropolitan responded with mendacious accusations directed at the Ukrainian Greco-Catholic Church. This attitude was at the origin of the response from George Weigel.

But they wrote this letter knowing that, above and beyond the brilliant analyses of Weigel,⁴ the whole world is now witnessing the astonishing moral collapse of the Patriarchate of Moscow and the end of the myth of the new Russian Church in which so many sincere people wanted to believe after 1991.⁵

Anyone today, Christian or not, understands that a Christian Church which blesses an offensive war and promotes the annexation of a neighboring state is in profound contradiction with its Founder's message of peace.⁶ The famous photos of Patriarch Kirill blessing a military arms factory in Siberia or the bishop of Volgodonsk blessing the Russian bombers on the Ukrainian border were certainly known by the authors of this letter.⁷ This is why I do not think that the publication of the open letter to Weigel should be considered as an act of propaganda.

I would rather interpret this letter as a call for help.⁸ Their underlying, non-formulated, painful (and hence polemical) questions are the following: how is it that the Russian Orthodox Church, the Church of St. Vladimir, of St. Seraphim of Sarov, is so sick? Can the Holy Orthodox Church be deceiving itself? Would it be rather the Western world which is upside-down? But why are all these reports in the Western media about the Crusade ideology of the "Russian world" of Patriarch Kirill so painful to hear? And what to make of the declarations of the Russian government accusing the American administration of being responsible for the change of government in Kiev when everyone knows, at least in the United States, that Ukraine is far from being a geo-strategic priority of the

⁴ <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/415027/lenin-meets-corleone-george-weigel>.

⁵ A. Arjakovsky, "Le règne controversé de l'orthodoxie russe," *Le livre noir de la condition des chrétiens dans le monde* (Paris, XO Editions, 2014), pp. 696–703.

⁶ The discussions on the internet comparing the modesty of the lifestyle of Pope Francis and the personal fortune of Patriarch Kirill are equally well-known.

⁷ http://www.ng.ru/ng_religii/2015-08-19/2_rpc.html.

⁸ Without pretending to give lessons to anyone, it happens that I lived many years in Russia, Ukraine, and in the West. I simply want to share the fruit of the experience I acquired through my studies and practical field work.

White House and that the European Union also has no commercial interest in privileging Ukraine over Russia?

The letter thus poses three profound questions which should be taken seriously; one is theological-political, the second is historical; and the last concerns the media.

1) The Theological-Political Question

How is it, our three authors ask, that our church, which since the fourth century has based its political theology on a symphonic relationship between the state and the Church, now finds itself in such a dramatic situation? There is no lack of information concerning the state of dereliction of the Orthodox Church in Russia. One need only watch the film *Leviathan*, directed by Zvyagintsev, to be convinced of this. In the film, the director shows that the sharing of power between the governor of a region and the local bishop, based on the so-called “separation” between the Kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar, is balanced in an “orthodox” manner through the “symphony” between the temporal and spiritual powers. This symphony leads, in reality, to giving the governor a free hand to administer the affairs of his regions in the most dishonorable way imaginable while the bishop receives all sorts of privileges and material advantages in exchange for his silence.⁹

Our authors indirectly raise the following question: Is it possible that the Eastern Fathers were mistaken when they used symphony to describe the ideal model of Church-state relations? They add another question just as fundamental as this first one: Is it possible that Western Christians feel at ease with the model of secularization which has predominated in the United States for the last two centuries? These two simple questions unfortunately cannot be answered in a few lines. We will limit ourselves to recommend to our authors that they read Orthodox writers such as George Fedotov or Father Alexander

⁹ Among the various crises of the Patriarchate of Moscow, there are the chronicles of Deacon Kurayev on the lobbying power of homosexual bishops and the repeated scandals of pedophilia.

Schmemmann.¹⁰ These authors have taken note of the fact that caesaro-papism fell apart in 1917. They were able to come to this awareness because, for them, the Church is a divine-human Body, composed of history and eternity and is thus dynamic.

According to Alexander Schmemmann, if the symphonic model of Theodosius and then Justinian represented progress when compared to the period of persecutions, it cannot be eternally baptized as Christian. In fact, the Church was manipulated by the emperors very soon. The Church tends toward the Kingdom of God upon earth. It cannot limit itself to strict separation between the temporal and the spiritual, but it also cannot accept to transform what constitutes the corporality of Christ on earth into an instrument of propaganda for a state which subjugates its fellow citizens – be this a tsarist state or a Bolshevist one.

Though Western democracies formerly separated the *saeculum* from the divine power in such a radical way that they are now losing their spiritual energies,¹¹ it is not necessary for some Orthodox in reaction to the Western malaise to relapse into the monophysite heresy which consists in seeing a single divine nature in Christ. What must be done is to delve deeper into the social doctrine of the Orthodox Church (which, in the year 2000, recognized, for the first time, the primacy of conscience over the laws of the state), reflecting in an antinomic and eschatological perspective on a model of relationship between Church and state which is no longer symphonic (because this symphony never really worked and, moreover, led to the subjection of the Church) but “analogical.” The Church is, in fact, according to the Orthodox liturgical tradition, the burning bush, the spouse of the lamb.

In the primitive Christian tradition, the model of the nuptial relationship between Christ and the Church should be the basis for social life on all levels from the family even up to

¹⁰ G. Fedotov, *Svyatye drevniei Rusi* (1931); A Schmemmann, *The Historical Road of Eastern Orthodoxy* (New York, 1965).

¹¹ This is a point which would have to be discussed and at least nuanced and put into perspective for the degree of social violence in France is infinitely less than it is in Russia.

the level of international law, passing through the nation-state. The Church should give priority to its liberty to love and to hasten the Kingdom. But that kingdom of God on earth will only be able to be realized with a reconciled Christianity capable of demonstrating the possible syntheses among the regulative charism of Peter, the liberty of James, and the mystical vision of John. This has been vigorously affirmed by the greatest Russian Orthodox minds, from Vladimir Solovyov to Sergius Bulgakov.

2) *The Historical Question*

The second question posed by our authors is historical. To sum up their position we could say that they defend the mythological narrative of the “Russian world” which has been propagated for many years by Patriarch Kirill due to the sole fact that the contemporary Russian state received its Orthodox faith – and hence its moral foundation – through a chain of personalities which go back to the baptism of Vladimir at Chersonesus in Crimea. Using this narrative, they cannot qualify Russian aggression in Crimea as a real war since, in their mind, Crimea is “Rus” soil, and hence Russian, while Ukraine is only a “border country” which really doesn’t have any identity. Moreover, they support the project of the Russian Church of a “new evangelization of the historic lands of the Rus’ of Kiev.”

In a recent book, I demonstrated that this approach was mythical in the sense that it based the continuous identity of the nation on a collective myth – the baptism of Vladimir. This myth was the foundation for the consciousness of a nation but it did not take the evolution of memories into account and hence, after a certain time, the possible ruptures within the history of nations. We must, therefore, separate the true from the false in collective memories in order to arrive at an authentic mytho-logical narrative, which does not deny the power of transcendence in a nation’s identity but which also does not deny the workings of the Spirit in the transformation of a people into several nations. France, Italy, and Germany, for example, are all heirs of the same Carolingian Empire and their history is founded on this heritage. But, indisputably, and

without their being able to account for it easily, three distinct nations were progressively formed between the fourteenth and twentieth centuries on the basis of three distinct interpretations of this imperial heritage.

To sum up my thesis in a few lines, the Russian, Ukrainian, and Belarusian nations were formed during modern times (fourteenth to eighteenth centuries) after the Tatar-Mongol and Lithuanian-Polish invasions of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries had cut their territories into three. Each one of these nations kept the memory of their relationship with the Rus' of Kiev and hence of their belonging to the great European family of Christianized peoples; but the collective memories of the three peoples interpreted the nature of their origins and respective missions in a different way.

Everyone knows that the very notion of a "Russian State" only appears in the seventeenth century under Peter the Great as an attempt to revive a Muscovite identity which had become tyrannical and corrupt. Prior to that there was only Muscovy. Similarly, Ukraine does not emerge as a real nation until the seventeenth century with the arrival of the Cossack chivalry in the south of Rus' which was hostile to the Polish conquest.

The clearest example of this divergent interpretation of the same baptismal foundation of the two nations can be found in the contradictory receptions of the Council of Florence at Moscow and Kiev in the 1440s. As the Russian historian Basil Lourie has shown, during the years 1439–1448, Vassili II, the Grand Prince of Moscow, thought that the priority of the Church of Moscow, if it were to remain faithful to its baptism, was to become autocephalous, independent of Byzantium.¹² In March 1441, the Great Prince stripped Isidore, his delegate to the Council of Florence, of his title of metropolitan after the latter signed the treaty of union with the Church of Rome along with almost all the Orthodox bishops of the era. In 1511, the monk Philotheus of Pskov, deducing the consequences of the fall of Constantinople in 1453, intensified the isolation of the Muscovite Church by proposing to Prince Vassili III the project of "Moscow, the Third Rome."

¹² B. Lourie, *Russkoye pravoslaviye mezhdv Kievom i Mockvoi* (Moscow: Trikvadrata, 2010).

Conversely, as the Ukrainian historian Mykola Chubaty points out, the Orthodox Churches of Kiev and Smolensk reacted differently. In December 1440–February 1441, these churches gave a triumphal reception to Metropolitan Isidore upon his return from Florence.¹³ For them, fidelity to the baptism of Vladimir signified, above all, belonging to the Church of Saints Cyril and Methodius; unity to the Church in the creed of Nicea-Constantinople was more fundamental than the certainly important question of ecclesial autocephaly.

Later on, (and even to this day – with a few exceptions such as Sergius Bulgakov and Olivier Clement) the Russian Orthodox Church has sought to devalue the Council of Florence by claiming that it was not an authentic ecumenical council. After Joseph Gill’s work on the Council of Florence, such an evaluation can no longer be accepted by any serious historian.¹⁴ All the historical accounts show that, in fact, there was a profound and serious consensus of nearly all the theologians of the East and of the West at Florence and this would predominate in the lands of the Rus’ of Kiev until at least 1596. The result of this blindness of Russia was that the Greco-Catholic Churches in Slavic lands, which are the heirs of the Orthodox Churches reconciled with Rome, were brutally dissolved by Tsar Nicolas I in Belarus in 1839, and in Ukraine by Stalin in 1946.

But the stunning rebirth of these Churches since the collapse of Communism in 1991 testifies to the profound and persistent truth of a contrary model to the project of “Moscow Third Rome,” viz., the sapiential model of a church called to reflect not only the personal unity of God but also the conciliarity of the intra-Trinitarian life. In such a model, which I would define as “catholic-orthodox” (following the lead of Metropolitan Petro Mohyla of Kiev and Metropolitan Philaret Drozdov of Moscow), the local church cannot be based on the proud project of a “Holy Russia.” The local church can only flourish according to a dynamic and anthropic process of love and recognition among local churches.

¹³ M. Chubaty, *Istoria Khrystianstva na Rusi-Ukraini*, vol.II, pars I (Rome, Neo Eboraci, 1976).

¹⁴ Joseph Gill, *The Council of Florence* (Cambridge, 1959).

Ukraine has its own proper identity and it is urgent that the Russian Orthodox theologians become aware of this as did the late professor Georges Fedotov.¹⁵ At the risk of proposing a contra-testimony to the truth of ecclesial orthodoxy: the pan-Orthodox Council scheduled for June 2016 will not be able to ignore the reality of the local Church and, hence, of the autocephaly of the Orthodox Church of Ukraine. This is being discussed more and more clearly today since the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew insists on the ecumenical priority of the Church of Christ. Moreover, the Church of Constantinople is the mother church of Orthodoxy in Ukraine and has never recognized the historical usurpation of the See of Kiev by Moscow.

3) *The Question of the Media*

The third theme which our authors treat in a polemical way – which only manifests their confusion in the face of a highly contradictory reality – is that which I will summarily call “the media.” It is a question of finding the correct interpretation of the events in Ukraine since 1991 and, especially, since November 2013, amidst the nebulous media coverage. Our authors evoke a number of “facts” which they think reveal that the medias throughout the world (with the obvious exception of the Russian media) are wrong in presenting the Ukrainian revolution of February 2014 as a “revolution of dignity” and the Russia-Ukraine War as the consequence of the annexation of Crimea by Russia on March 18, 2014.

The authors embrace the clichés of Russian propaganda which depict the Ukrainian people as fascists who collaborated with Hitler during the Second World War and claim, without proofs, that the May 2, 2014 massacre in Odesa was carried out by the Ukrainian authorities who took over after the revolution of the Maidan; they treat Russian aggression in Ukraine as “mythical,” etc. The enumeration of such “facts” should still be taken very seriously here for it manifests a desire – noble in

¹⁵ G. Fedotov, “Sud’ba imperii,” *Novyi Zhurnal* (New York, 1947).

itself but irrational – of a mythical truth and, consequently of a transcendent and eternal truth.

Other “facts,” these real and well documented, are not lacking concerning the Russian forces in Crimea on the occasion of the pseudo-referendum on the peninsula in March 2014 or concerning the participation of the Russian Church in Russia’s invasion of Crimea and the Donbas. Vladimir Putin, moreover, has admitted himself in 2015 that he had been personally planning the invasion of Crimea since February 20, 2014. There is also the video showing Colonel Igor Girkin accompanying Patriarch Kirill in Crimea in January of 2014. And there are numerous witnesses to the support given by the bishops of the patriarchate of Moscow to the Orthodox Army of Donbas – to the point that Patriarch Kirill and Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev are now forbidden residency in Ukraine. In May 2014, I dedicated a whole book to this theme denouncing the lies of Kremlin propaganda.¹⁶ I invite our authors to read my book which has been translated into English and is accessible on the internet.¹⁷

It is true that in certain cases it is not always easy to find the truth among so much propaganda. Each year, the Kremlin spends more than \$300 million on a single disinformation channel, Russia Today. This is why I understand the troubles of sincere friends of Russia and the Orthodox Church. The media are full of half-truths which are very difficult to contradict. But, just consider the example of the massacre of Odesa on May 2, 2014: an attentive study of the report of the United Nations, of the European Council and of the Open Dialogue Foundation¹⁸ or even the detailed account of the encyclopedia Wikipedia all show that the massacre of Odesa could not have been planned by the new Ukrainian authorities who came into power in February 2014.¹⁹ The police of Odesa, who were

¹⁶ <http://arjakovsky.uatoday.tv>.

¹⁷ http://data.tsn.ua/files/Livre_en_anglais-libre.pdf.

¹⁸ <http://en.odfoundation.eu/a/3632,report-destabilization-of-the-situation-in-the-south-of-ukraine-who-masterminded-the-sanguinary-events-in-odesa>.

¹⁹ <http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/UA/HRMMUreport15June2014.pdf>.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2014_Odesa_clashes.

guilty of not intervening to separate the protagonists, had been put into place by the preceding pro-Russian government of Yanukovich. On the other hand, it is very probable, as shown on a report filmed by Ukraine Today,²⁰ that the 200 seriously wounded and 48 persons who perished following the arson of the Trade Union House were victims of a terrorist act planned by pro-Russian mercenaries and by Russian citizens. These Russians were subsequently arrested and quickly released by the local police with the complicity of the chief of the pro-Russian militia of Odesa who is currently a fugitive.

We must not fall into relativism, skepticism, or Manicheism in the face of the complexity of truth. Truth is one. Even though it might not be convincing, even though it demands the effort of adhesion on the part of each person, it is all-powerful. But it is necessary that the *logos* – the historical truth, the critical approach – balance the *muthos*, the moral truth, the memorial approach. Thus, for example, it is very true that the Western Ukrainians massively sided with the armies of Hitler in 1941–42. But this was because the Soviet occupation was extremely violent against them in 1939–1941. As Timothy Snyder has shown in a detailed study, it was these same Ukrainians who fought the most in Europe against two totalitarianisms between 1942 and 1945 and who had the largest number of victims from the Nazi and Communist regimes. It is often forgotten that the Ukrainians were the first to liberate the prisoners from the extermination camps of Auschwitz Birkenau.

This is the reason why I am glad that the Ukrainian Parliament, following the lead of other Central European countries, voted to condemn the totalitarian regimes of Communism and Nazism in May, 2015.²¹ It is by laying down moral foundations that a nation can come together, heal the wounds of the past, construct a lawful state and project itself into the future. This is what West Germany did after 1945 by a very clear-cut criticism of Nazi ideology, by a sincere repentance and by a

²⁰ <http://uatoday.tv/society/odessa-may-2-watch-on-ukraine-today-424573.html>.

²¹ <http://www.lesechos.fr/idees-debats/cercle/cercle-137838-faire-renaitre-l-europe-en-redecouvrant-les-fondements-de-letat-de-droit-1149260.php>.

subsequent purge of all traces of Nazism in its state, economic, moral and intellectual structures.

In this respect, it is a shame that the Russian State, far from condemning its Communist past, now only thinks of rehabilitating it, as can be seen by the new history textbooks being used in Russian schools. The same could be said of the Russian Church which has not drawn on the consequences of its condemnation, at the beginning of the 1990s, of the regime of collaboration with the Soviet authorities since 1927.

On the contrary, while Russia was invading Ukraine, Patriarch Kirill was passing out honorific awards to the principal propagandists of the neo-Soviet regime of President Putin (Gennady Zyuganov and Dmitry Kiselev). His right-hand man, Father Vsevolod Chaplin, who is in charge of relations between Church and society in Russia, keeps mouthing nostalgic declarations about the Soviet past as if V. Chalamov, M. Heller, E. Ginzbourg, S. Alexievich, and A. Solzhenitsyn had never written anything on the mechanisms of Soviet totalitarianism. In spite of the overwhelming testimonies concerning the pressure Stalin exercised on Patriarch Alexis in 1945 to eliminate the Greco-Catholic Church,²² the Russian Church, including its most gifted representatives such as Metropolitan Hilarion Alfeyev, still continues to deny its involvement in the forced incorporation of this Church at the pseudo-synod of Lviv in March 1946. The irresponsibility of this attitude is measured by the wave of anti-clericalism which is now surging in Russia. Less than 1% of the population of Moscow assists at the great feasts of the Church.

This capacity for lying by throwing oneself into the arms of Russian propaganda would be impossible if the “heart-intellect” of these defenders of Russian Orthodoxy were to undergo an in-depth purification. This is the reason why those who are really responsible for the success of Russian propaganda are not found in those who work in the trolling factories which, from Russia, fill the world with counter-truths, but in the vision of the world which lurks deep down within us. It is very clear for me that the secularized philosophy which runs

²² Antoine Arjakovsky, “The Memoirs of the Pseudo-Synod of Lvov/Lviv,” *Awaiting the Council of the Orthodox Church*, (Paris: Cerf, 2013), 489–500.

throughout most of the Western media is not the cure-all. But it has its merits when compared to the philosophy of the neo-Soviet media in that it defends the liberty of opinion of each one – be it pro-Russian, pro-Ukrainian, homosexual or heterosexual. The media lynching of Russian citizens hostile to the war in Ukraine, who are systematically treated as members of a fifth column or foreign agents, who are constantly threatened physically or in courts which are under the heel of the state, is extremely serious. It led to the assassination of Boris Nemtsov on February 28, 2015.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like recommend, with infinite respect and humility, that the friends of the Russian Orthodox Church begin by recognizing the evidence: the Russian Church is going through a profound crisis. It is useless to seek out scape-goats and still less among the sincere friends of Orthodoxy such as George Weigel. It would be more constructive to listen to the Russian Orthodox professor Andrei Zubov who was dismissed from his teaching post at MGIMO, the famous Institute of Political Studies in Moscow, because of his public denunciation of the annexation of Crimea. Zubov considers that the Russian Church shoulders a great part of the responsibility for the profound crisis which the Russian nation is undergoing at present.

This crisis, as I have explained elsewhere,²³ now also affects, on a larger scale, the whole Orthodox Church after centuries of an anti-modern crisis. But the good news is that this crisis is not hopeless. As Father Alexander Men once said “Christianity is only beginning.” It would be enough if some representatives of the Orthodox Church, worthy of this name, were to begin to recognize past faults, sincerely repent of them, and rediscover the semantic polyphony of the very concept of orthodoxy for the horizon of reciprocal esteem among Christians to open again. All would then be able to work in depth at the renewal traced out by the emigrant Orthodox

²³ A. Arjakovsky, *What is Orthodoxy?* (Paris, Gallimard, 2013).

Church (and especially by the great figures of the Orthodox schools of Paris and St. Vladimir's in the USA) – a renewal which includes inter-Orthodox and ecumenical reconciliation. Rising above all the sterile polemics, all would then be able to consecrate themselves, Russians and non-Russians, to the unique and worthy goal: the construction on earth of a just, peaceful, fraternal and hospitable society.