

Radicalism or Reconciliation in Russia?

Focusing on Religion in the North Caucasus

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Censorship, imprisonment and death

A friend of mine in Moscow, who will remain nameless, recently told me how his offices had just been raided and files taken away – his Christian ecumenical work had come under suspicion, through contacts with foreign organisations and charities. Many other important NGOs have been closed down – human rights organisations in particular have been targeted, as have any liberal media outlets. How many journalists from *Novaya gazeta* have been killed in recent years? I think it is five. People may have heard of the heroic Anna Politkovskaya and read her journals, but I saw a figure of a total of 17 journalists and cameramen who have been killed – plus hundreds of disappearances – in Russia since 2000. Last year in June, you may recall, General Aleksandr Bastrykin, head of Russia's Investigative Committee, personally threatened to kill Sergei Sokolov, the deputy editor of *Novaya gazeta*, because of his critical coverage of his agency.

Mysterious deaths and disappearances, or kidnappings, have not just been confined to writers, human rights workers and journalists. We know of the big businessman and others falling out with President Putin and with those who control the levers of power in the Kremlin – from Mikhail Khodorkovsky to Sergei Magnitsky (murdered in prison in 2009) we have seen the cost of crossing a thin 'red' line. The unsolved (or untried) murder of Alexander Litvinenko in 2006 was perhaps the most public revelation of the work of the Russian secret services (FSB) – even if he may have been a double or triple agent. Politically, it is said that one of the most dangerous jobs in Russia is that of being a mayor – *Russakaya planeta* recently reported that more than 100 mayors have been dismissed from their jobs or charged with crimes and imprisoned in the last five years – all of them had run and won against United Russia candidates. The popular mayor of Yaroslavl', Yevgeny Urlashov, a human rights activist and lawyer, was warned and then arrested just over a week ago on trumped-up charges just after he had organised a protest of several thousand people against United Russia.

Foreign policy and security

There is an icy blast as we move towards a new Chill War if not a Cold War, played out amidst the conflicts of the Middle East; or rather the Russian Eastern Question has yet to be answered. The combative Russian position on Syria and the Middle East is challenging the West and Western policy – perhaps rightly – but this is seen as a renewed assertiveness by Russia. (Remember Putin's inscrutable look when meeting the Prime Minister, David Cameron, at the G8 in Northern Ireland). The crackdown on possible terrorists and the shooting of those thought to be planning an attack in Moscow in late May 2013 – two died – seems to show that the approach is still shoot

first, ask questions later. Now with the Winter Olympics in Sochi to be held in February 2014, there is an extra reason to be tough. Last month Doku Umarov, the so-called leader of the Islamist Movement in Russia, stated in a video that

They plan to hold the Olympics on the bones of our ancestors, on the bones of many, many dead Muslims buried on our land by the Black Sea. We as mujahideen are required not to allow that, using any methods that Allah allows us.

One could have listed such issues many years ago - censorship, imprisonment without fair trial, unsolved murders, the political use and over-use of security and an aggressive foreign policy...

So has anything really changed for the better in recent times, or in some other areas could we even say that matters have got worse in the last twenty years? Well, there is no full answer to such questions, but perhaps from reflections, meetings and travels I can give a few pointers. Let me reflect on one of my fairly recent trips to Russia last November (2012).

The North Caucasus and terrorism

I stood in the bombed-out remains of the school sports hall, viewing blackened detonator holes in the floor, burn marks above the climbing bars and singed netball hoops. In the middle of the hall stood a cross, surrounded by bottles of water and flowers. I was in Beslan in North Ossetia - standing in the sports hall of School No 1 where a terrible siege took place in September 2004 when 334 people including 186 children were slaughtered. Here in the nothingness and deadness of what was once a place of life and energy the horror of fundamentalism was palpable. The Chechen rebels were fired up by radicalism, ethnic oppression and a religious fundamentalism without love or humanity.

Now there may be a peace in parts of the North Caucasus, in southern Russia, but the ethnic and religious tensions are growing with a rise in fundamentalist Wahhabi Islam. Many Russian Orthodox are moving out of the region, as the spread of Islamic fundamentalism worries both the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian government. By some estimates at least twenty per cent of the population of Russia is now Muslim and the radicals have now reached wide and far – even to St Petersburg. The iron fist of President Putin is not able to combat this extremism.

Life itself gives encouragement to work together. Christianophobia pushes us together. 'The worse the better,' as the Russians say! But we need time and patience – we should better understand each other.

These were the words of Bishop Nazari of St Alexander Nevsky Lavra, St Petersburg. Bishop Nazari is a former champion weightlifter with a PhD in biology and he was telling me strongly how the work of Blagovest' Media and the Cultural and Inter-Denominational Centre for Dialogue – both supported by Aid to the Church in Need

– was making a difference to the understanding between the Orthodox and Catholics. Bishop Nazari told me that the publication of books, guidebooks and films on the undivided Church and the relics of the early Church in Rome were important:

There are more than 120 churches with relics of the undivided Church in Rome. Relics are treated like icons here – they help us to see the saint to whom we pray.

It is in the face of mutual challenges that interdenominational cooperation builds up. In Stavropol', in the North Caucasus, the Orthodox seminary was closed down in Soviet times under Khrushchev – remaining shut from 1960 until 1989. Now there are 100 seminarians who receive small grants of £160 per student from Aid to the Church in Need and recently ACN also sponsored a minibus for pastoral work, including in the local prisons. These trainee priests also study Islam and meet with students from the local Koranic school. Metropolitan Kirill of Stavropol' emphasised to me how important the support given was:

There are no borders to charity – no boundaries or divisions – as we saw with Christ in the way he cared for people and loved them. In the same way this Catholic charity, Aid to the Church in Need, reaches out to the Orthodox as well – responding with love to our needs. Thank you!

So why do we not actually see any really public signs of positive developments in Catholic–Orthodox relations? Archbishop Zosima of Vladikavkaz referred in a public homily, which I heard, to the important meetings he had held with Pope Benedict XVI. Other Orthodox bishops and priests I spoke to commented – at the time – that there is great respect between Patriarch Kirill and Pope Benedict. Yet, the history of suspicion and mistrust between East and West does not help progress the relationship. There are reactionaries – particularly in Orthodox monasteries – who do not know Catholicism and blame the West for every perversion and disease. There are also many Catholics who do not know the history of suffering and the tenacity and faithful devotion of the Orthodox – or who are dismissive of all that President Putin says, who last Orthodox Christmas (7 January 2013) praised the social work of the Orthodox Church and other Christian denominations and spoke of interreligious dialogue.

I met Fr Grigori Miknov-Vaitenko, the son of the famous dissident Aleksandr Galich, a singer and songwriter who was eventually expelled from the Soviet Union and went to France, where he died in a mysterious explosion. He is married with four children. Fr Grigori is parish priest of Staraya Russa, the parish where Dostoyevsky lived and where he wrote *The Brothers Karamazov*. Fr Grigori has something of his father about him – and we had a fascinating far-ranging discussion going late into the night. We reflected on the church–state relationship, power, the distance between clergy and laity, the question of catechesis, Pussy Riot, religious freedom and many other issues. It was all interesting and he told me that in his parish he insists that people are known and come for catechism before baptisms. This has created protests, as people feel they are paying for a service – and cannot be refused. He quotes a friend

who put it quite simply: just as Moses led the people of Israel in the wilderness for 40 years, so the post-Soviet Orthodox will see a generation die out; but unfortunately a monster is being born at the moment, with no depth of knowledge about how to live a Christian life. Fr Grigori adds that it is no good just saying that you are good if you do not kill! We agree that in East and West there are similar problems and challenges – we should learn from each other, not just concerning facing the challenges of fundamentalist Islam but on social teaching. As well as discussing the Church we also discussed films and literature. Fr Grigori is a very engaging young priest – and he tells me that many other priests are asking similar questions to him and even some bishops, but not in public.

Reflecting on his words about time in the wilderness, I remember that the late founder of Aid to the Church in Need, Fr Werenfried van Straaten, who died just over ten years ago, said that after seventy years of state atheism it will take a long time for the scars to heal. Indeed, perhaps we still see today many manifestations of *Homo Sovieticus*. It will take a long time for a deep faith to emerge out of the years of suffering.

Yet, there is still a growth in the Christian faith. I visited an Orthodox convent, on the edge of the Caucasus Mountains, where more than 1000 baptisms take place every year in the lake in its grounds. Further north in the Russian Republic of Kabardino-Balkaria, in a beautiful Catholic parish, run by the Community of St John in Blagoveshenka (literally 'Good News'), there is good news. An eco-friendly 'green' church is being built in Blagoveshenka with the help of ACN and hundreds of children come to stay in summer camps, mountain horses are ridden by deprived children and interdenominational and interreligious gatherings take place.

And – after travelling north and eventually arriving in the middle of a snowstorm in St Petersburg - the most public manifestation of the resurrection of Christianity was to be seen in St Petersburg on Nevsky Prospekt. Having been at a well-attended Mass in the beautifully restored Catholic Church of St Catherine, run by the Dominicans, I witnessed an extraordinary sight. A replica of the icon of Our Lady of Kazan' was carried out of a packed Kazan' Cathedral in a procession of priests and deacons: bells were rung off the back of trucks and flags waved as thousands of people, including the police and military, processed through the streets. This was 4 November, the feast of Our Lady of Kazan' (and Russia's People's Unity Day); it was a remarkable sight. I stood and asked the prayers of Our Lady for the all the people of Russia and those who had suffered and died for their faith, as I recalled that when I first visited Leningrad in January 1983 Kazan' Cathedral was then the Museum of State Atheism.

The present Papal Nuncio to Great Britain, Archbishop Antonio Mennini, told me when I met him in Moscow a few years ago that we had to 'have the courage to turn the pages of history'. If we somehow think that the road to Christian unity has been lost, perhaps we can recall the prophetic vision of the late founder of Aid to the Church in Need, Fr Werenfried. He followed the call of Pope John Paul II to help the

Church proclaim the power and hope of the Gospel with both lungs – East and West – across the frozen spiritual wastelands.

I stood in the snow in Novgorod, where Fr Werenfried came twenty years ago to meet the Orthodox Archbishop Lev. Here it was that Fr Werenfried was invited to take part in the liturgy in St Sophia and here audaciously and challengingly initiated the outreach in love of Aid to the Church in Need, a Catholic charity, to our Orthodox brothers and sisters.

It is nothing new – just a journey of rediscovery. For in the very walls of Novgorod, the ancient city of Russian Christianity founded in 859, you can see the historical evidence of the early undivided Church – Norman arches and Celtic crosses adorning Orthodox Churches inside the Kremlin.

This 'dialogue of charity' in action is of huge significance, even if the work will bear public fruit only in years to come. There are no borders to Christ-centred charity. Archbishop Zosima of Valdikavkaz put it quite simply as he expressed his thanks:

The Church will always be persecuted. There is much to build on and learn. Unity is so important – we cannot think we are better as Orthodox than Catholics, or the other way round. Your help here matters – thank you, my dear friends.

Conclusion

So how do I conclude my talk on Russia? I can only emphasise how important our help is to the Orthodox – as much for our understanding as for the help itself... we need to understand and feel in a deep way what the Russians have been through and what the new challenges are. How to list the challenges? Perhaps in no order of preference:

The rise of fundamentalist Islam - especially in the North Caucasus, but even up to St Petersburg. How can we support the Orthodox Church in all that they have to face? 20% or perhaps 25% of those living in Russia are Muslim, but does Putin admit of this? Being in Beslan shows in an horrendous way what can happen if we do not understand.

Danger of a selective history of the supposed victor – for example when the wipeout of the Circassian people in 1864 is not even remembered, an ethnic cleansing or 'genocide' with the death of perhaps 500-800,000 people. How can Russians expect the North Caucasians to be subservient with what they have suffered through deportations and executions? Has the violent suppression of peoples worked? Chechnya is now a Muslim republic – the one Orthodox priest is protected by the army.

The challenges to deepen the faith. Baptisms paid for by those who come to the Orthodox Church are not good for an understanding of the richness of the Orthodox

heritage. How to live as a Christian in modern society? How to deepen trust between Orthodox and Catholics? Yes, 'the worse the better' as Bishop Naziri said – with all we face as Christians are persecuted. We have so much experience to share. Perhaps we can rediscover a Novgorod Christianity – of the undivided Church.

Russia – to adapt Churchill's phrase – is an ethnic enigma wrapped in a blanket of authoritarian rule. It faces huge challenges. The Russians have a huge experience of diversity and almost tribal religion. We in the West can learn a great deal. Is the tough approach the right one, if religious freedom is ignored? Or is this storing up trouble for the near future? Yet, we cannot and must not be patronising as the Russians have suffered so much. Yes, the reality of the German – Russian suffering and loss of millions of lives is being faced up to. However, there is still the unreconciled facing up to Soviet persecution when perhaps more than 20 million died. The Russian Orthodox Church is only beginning to work through the files of the martyrs of this period – tens of thousands of priests and monks and hundreds of thousands of the faithful. One absolute essential is clear to me – the 'dialogue of charity' of Aid to the Church in Need as a Catholic charity is of immeasurable importance; our projects and support may not seem much but are essential – and it is a learning and empathy which both Orthodox and Catholics must have. There is, as Pope John Paul II said, 'an imperative of charity' to helping the Church breathe with both lungs – to proclaim the Gospel of reconciliation and hope across the spiritual wastelands of the East where people suffered so much under Soviet atheism. With understanding, respect, admiration and prayer our work for the undivided Church in faith must continue.

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