

# faith in Europe

## The Power Struggle in Orthodoxy

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There are two large issues in the current crisis affecting the Russian Orthodox diocese in Britain. One is the special character the British diocese of Sourozh has developed, which is now at variance with the prevailing mood in the Moscow Patriarchate, under whose jurisdiction the diocese falls. The second issue arises from the first: should the diocese of Sourozh now change its jurisdiction?

While the Moscow Patriarchate spent seven decades preserving its identity against assault in the hostile atheist environment of the Soviet Union, Russian Orthodox jurisdictions of various allegiances developed in Western Europe and the United States. Some, like the British diocese, remained under the jurisdiction of Moscow, but sought to respond creatively to the challenges of being a minority in a pluralist religious environment.

In the words of Metropolitan Anthony Bloom, the head of the diocese until his death in 2003:

From the very outset ... we Russians have considered that we have been sent to this country to bring Orthodoxy here, that is, to share the most valuable thing we ourselves possess, to give it to anyone at all who feels a need for it. This we have done not violently, nor by proselytism, but by proclaiming it for anyone to hear and by sharing it.

His vision of the Orthodox calling is thus out-going and inclusivist.

Meanwhile, since the fall of Communism, the prevailing mood in the Orthodox Church in Russia has been increasinalv

inward-looking and exclusivist. It has attracted large numbers of new zealots, who often have no background in Orthodoxy, but are motivated by patriotism, a hankering after order and ritual, and conservative social and political values.

The Russian Church has been traumatised by the influx of what it sees as aggressive secular Western values propagated by 'proselytisers' of harmful sects who are bent on poaching the Orthodox flock. A milestone on the road to retrenchment was the law on religion passed in 1997, which gave privileges to 'traditional' religions in Russia, and opened the way to the penalisation of interlopers.

In Britain, tension between Moscow and the local diocese has been growing for years, as Russian citizens arrive here in increasing numbers, expecting to find an Orthodox environment of the kind they are used to at home. Now Bishop Basil of Sergievo, acting head of the diocese in Britain, has announced his intention of moving his diocese from the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate to that of the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Ever since the fall of the Byzantine Empire to the Ottomans in 1453, and the subsequent adoption of title of Tsar (Emperor) by the Grand Prince of Muscovy Ivan III, the Orthodox Church in Russia (by far the largest of the Orthodox Churches) has frequently aspired to leadership of worldwide Orthodoxy.

This is a communion of more or less self-governing Churches, each usually identified with a particular nation-state. Those Churches with the most complete independence enjoy 'autocephaly', or self-governance, and have their own patriarch. A problem for Moscow, however, is that primacy of honour for all Orthodox Churches belongs to the Ecumenical Patriarch in Istanbul, which dates back to long before any claims by Moscow.

Potential clashes between Moscow and Istanbul lay dormant while the Ottomans ruled Turkey and Eastern Europe; and, just as the Ottoman Empire finally collapsed, the Bolsheviks were consolidating their atheist regime in Russia. It is only since 1991 that rivalry for control has become a lively issue again.

Issues of control have been particularly acute over Orthodox Churches that have had a history of various allegiances. In Ukraine, for instance, there have been two major Orthodox schisms, and now there are three distinct Orthodox hierarchies competing for the parishes, clergy, and faithful: the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Moscow Patriarchate), the

Ukrainian Orthodox Church (Kiev Patriarchate), and the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church.

In the mid-1990s, a significant dispute arose in Estonia. An autonomous Estonian Orthodox Church, set up after the First World War and in exile in the Soviet period, claimed to be the only legal Orthodox Church in Estonia. The Church under the Moscow Patriarchate was denied registration, and this meant that it was unable to claim property if felt was its own. Soon the quarrel involved the Moscow Patriarchate and the Ecumenical Patriarchate, which for months in 1996 were out of communion with one another. Bishop Basil of Sergievo and Bishop Kallistos of Diokleia, who celebrate in the same church in Oxford, but who belong to different Orthodox jurisdictions, found themselves unable to celebrate the liturgy together, as the crisis between the two Patriarchates came to a head.

This is not the first time in recent years that the Moscow Patriarchate has sought to reassert its control over its British diocese. In 2002, Moscow sent Bishop Ilarion Alfeyev to join the diocesan administrative team. He was removed after a few months when church members protested at his role.

This time, it seems, the Moscow Patriarchate had decided to act more decisively, barring Bishop Basil from appealing to the Ecumenical Patriarchate, and dismissing him from his post. Now the question of allegiances has come closer to home for the Orthodox in Britain, of whom a significant proportion are non-Russian converts to the faith. The issue is now not one of property, as it was in Estonia, but of spiritual style in a pluralist environment, and it thus involves the very essence of Orthodox witness in the world.

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