



# EAST-WEST CHURCH REPORT

VOL. 26, NO. 3, 2018

## Before and After 1968: One Spiritual Journey in Communist Czechoslovakia

MILAN CICEL WITH  
GERALDINE FAGAN

*Editor's note: Milan Cícel is a key figure in Církev Bratská, an Evangelical congregation in the Slovak capital, Bratislava. Two of Církev Bratská's distinctive local initiatives engaging young people—Kaplnka Church and the C.S. Lewis Bilingual High School—featured in vol. 26, no. 2 (2018) of the East-West Church Report. Now in his seventies, Cícel was instrumental to both projects, as well as to the foundation of a number of Slovak enterprises seeking to operate according to Christian values. This account describes his personal efforts to discover, uphold, and transmit those values during the portion of his life lived under Communist rule, including the tumultuous times of the Prague Spring 50 years ago.*

As Warsaw Pact troops rolled through Czechoslovakia on 21 August 1968, I was one of a team escorting our church's youth choir on a tour of northern Bohemia. A local pastor woke us at 4 a.m. as the streets filled with tanks. We were in charge of about 40 children, and we raced to catch the last trains back to Bratislava, to the great relief of those children's parents. If we had not made it home that day, we would have been stranded for a week, as everything came to a standstill. We returned to find Bratislava also filled with tanks, and crowds trying to reason with the soldiers.

were repressed as an ideological enemy of the state's atheistic policies. Other non-Communists—including nationalists and the Jewish community—were also targeted, along with the kind of "idealistic Communist" who would later inspire the Prague Spring of 1968. All expressions of independence from state power were severely crushed. There was a climate of fear, denunciation, and lies.

This was a far cry from the jubilant post-World War I atmosphere in which our congregation came to be. In the dying days of the war, on 28 October 1918, Czechoslovakia



(Left to right) Sign in Slovak: "Russian occupiers killed a seventeen-year-old girl here on August 21, 1968"; Soviet tanks in the center of Bratislava, 1968; Sign in Russian: "Occupiers go home!!" (Source: Jānis Sikstulis papers, Box 1, Hoover Institution Archives)

The choir was in fact a way of masking our church's work with young people. From the outside it looked like liturgical activity, even to the ŠtB, the Czechoslovak secret police. After all, a church should sing! Under the atheistic regime it was a criminal offense to lead young people to faith through Bible study and prayer groups. Yet we had managed to revive this youth ministry in 1962.

Previously—following the Communist Party's seizure of power in Czechoslovakia in February 1948—Christians

won her independence. (In addition to the 50th anniversary of the Prague Spring, 100 years since the opening of formal diplomatic relations between the new state and the United States are commemorated in 2018.)

By 1919, our congregation of the Union of the Czech Brethren in Bratislava was meeting as a mission outreach of the Free Evangelical Church in the Czech city of Brno. The second element of our congregation consisted of

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members of the Blue Cross [Slovak: *Modrý križ*], which started as a missionary movement within the Lutheran Church. In 1950 the new Communist government suspended all organized activity by civic groups, including the Blue Cross [Slovak: *Modrý križ*], and many of its members—including my parents—transferred to the Union of the Czech Brethren.

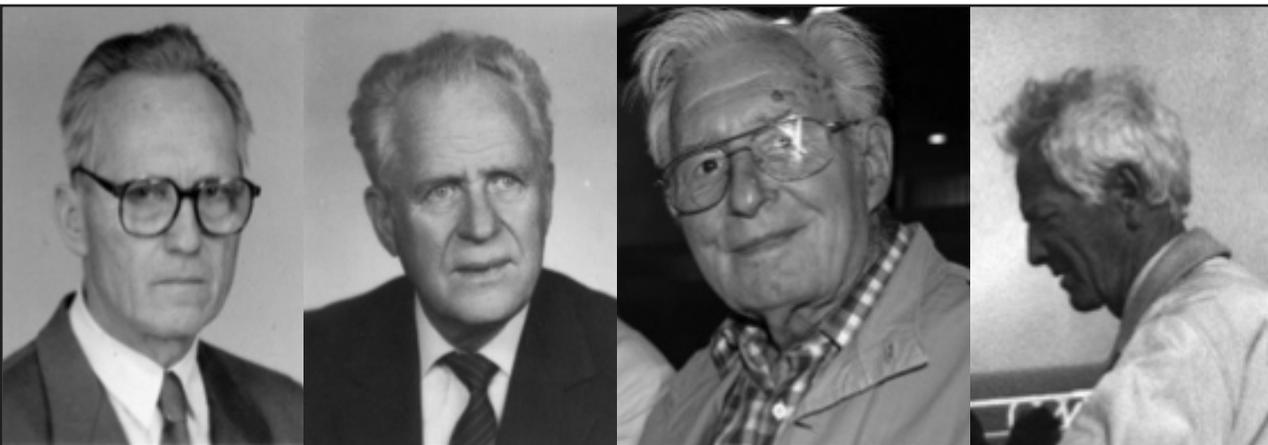
The third element of our congregation consisted of Slovaks who had been repatriated from Hungary following a citizen exchange with Czechoslovakia after World War II. When in Hungary, these Slovak Christians had belonged to the Methodist Church, but the Union of the Czech Brethren—later renamed the Church of the Brethren [Slovak: *Cirkev Bratská*—was spiritually closer to them once they relocated to Slovakia.

Each of these groups brought their own emphasis with them, and aligning these to create one community turned out to be a formidable task. The more or less traditional founders were bound to the Prague headquarters, while the Blue Cross members were young, fiery, and mission-minded Evangelicals who did not care too much about church tradition. The repatriates of Methodist origin from Hungary, meanwhile, were imbued with the strong national sentiment that had drawn them back to Slovakia.

after Hollý, Lupták, Matej, and Rosa were put in prison, I remember an ŠtB agent standing in front of our church and taking photographs in a blatant attempt to instill fear. There was no agent inside our church, but the ŠtB had informers. This could actually go two ways: If an informer told the church's leaders that he had been interrogated, it could be helpful, because the church would know what issues were of interest to the secret police. But if an informer hid and was afraid to talk about what invitations he had received, it was dangerous, as you never knew what had been discussed.

### Moral dilemma

It was the 1959 trial that led me, then a teenager, to internalize the Christian faith. The imprisonment of the four church members posed the moral dilemma of whether I was on the side of those in prison or on the side of those who had put them there. It was very clear to me that those in prison wore the white hats, while those who put them there wore the black hats. That initiated in me the whole process of embracing the Christian faith. There were other factors, of course, but that was when I truly understood that I was a Christian.



(Left to right)  
Jan Hollý, Ondrej  
Lupták, Vladislav  
Matej, and Ján Rosa  
(Collection of Milan  
Cicel)

Initially, the difficult process of harmonizing these three currents weakened our church community, and the ŠtB secret police took advantage of the situation. In 1959 a show trial culminated in four members of the church—Jan Hollý, Ondrej Lupták, Vladislav Matej, and Ján Rosa—being sentenced to prison terms ranging from one to three years. The main charge against them was “ideological diversion.” They had created Christian youth groups in a local university, and this was understood to be in opposition to Czechoslovakia’s scientific atheist education; they were “ideologically twisting” young minds. The law was also articulated in such a way that religious activity was permitted solely on church premises, so Bible study—even with just three or four people—was clearly illegal in university dorms or halls.

It was following this trial that our church’s youth work came to a halt. Everything came under surveillance. Not long

Despite continuous monitoring and persecution by the ŠtB, my generation of Christian youth continued to be formed under the guidance of church secretary Milan Jurčo. Critically, Brother Jurčo removed from us the fear of the Communist system. Rather than starting with the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, he said, we are able to look back on a spiritual history spanning 2,000 and more years; the Communists are the ones who should fear, because they will be gone one day. He also insisted that we are not second-class citizens, as the whole of society rests upon the values of believers even if society may not currently recognize it. Milan Jurčo’s principles for spiritual development gave our generation hope, and a sense of meaning in the fight against injustice and oppression. We were able to experience inner freedom as individuals, in our families, and in small groups.

At the same time, in the years leading up to 1968, the

Czechoslovak political system cautiously began to liberalize. Liberalization in terms of parliamentary socialism—or “socialism with a human face,” as it has been named—threatened to reduce the power of the Soviet Union over the satellite states of Central and Eastern Europe. When this liberalization attempt was curtailed by the August 1968 invasion, it had a spiritual as well as political impact upon Central Europe. People became much more cynical.

Almost one million members of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia failed to pass political loyalty checks. Conservative Communists tried to tighten their grip on power in what was dubbed a “normalization process.” Many people stopped believing in Communist ideals, however, and if they were in the Party, they remained there only out of fear or to maintain individual privileges. This included some officials charged with supervising churches. After 1968 even the ŠtB understood that the Communist system was no longer about helping humanity, but a power game. They did their job, but the point was no longer to participate in an ideological fight against enemies.

In my heart I had wanted to study philosophy or sociology, but I chose computer science in order to avoid this initially genuine ideological conflict. After graduating in 1964, I worked at the Slovak Academy of Sciences in its Institute of Technical Cybernetics, an early term for computer science. Yet this choice would still have enormous consequences on my personal life in the wake of 1968. From the point of view of the “normalizers,” the Slovak Academy of Sciences was a center of counter-revolution. As an insufficiently politically loyal worker, I and many other colleagues were fired.



**Wedding of Cirkev Bratská member Daniel Laco, mid-1980s**  
(Collection of Milan Cícel)

From 1970 onwards I worked at the Department of Automatic Control at the State Forest Product Research Institute, where Milan Jurčo of our church was a department leader. Jurčo recommended me for a study stay in Finland—a great power in the research field of wood processing—to study the optimal control of solid wood lumber drying processes. Thus I spent the academic year of 1973-4 in Finland. At that

time, The Navigators—a worldwide missionary movement focusing on the spiritual growth of university students—had recently established a presence at Helsinki Technical University. Milan Jurčo’s earlier spiritual mentoring propelled me to join their mission work, and this time in Finland would become a turning point in my life.



**Milan Jurčo**  
(Collection of Milan Cícel)

My encounter with The Navigators in Finland helped me to crystallize the awareness of my personal calling. I stopped perceiving my faith as something private or internal and instead began to see it as a responsibility to transform myself and the world around me. Parallel to this, I stopped perceiving Communist Czechoslovakia as a prison from which I should try to escape, and began to see it as a place where new tasks awaited me. I felt compelled to take them on in order to contribute to the liberation, healing, and recovery of individuals and my community in general. I became convinced that restored and transformed people could shape and nurture new communities, and ultimately a new society. I even felt equipped to proceed in fulfilling this mission: To concentrate on the spiritual training of individuals so as to form communities of “positive deviation.”

### Support from The Navigators

After returning from Finland in May 1974, I started to organize Bible study groups for young people at our Cirkev Bratská Church on Cukrová Street in Bratislava. In our group work, we followed the *Design for Discipleship* lessons developed by The Navigators, which I reproduced and disseminated together with Pavel Kailing and Milenka Uhlíková (Jurčova). We used the best underground publishing technology we could find at that time, including an Apple II computer-controlled Olivetti typewriter.

At the same time, I benefited from friendships beyond the Iron Curtain that became a long-term source of encouragement and support in accomplishing my personal calling. Here, I must emphasize the role played by the foreign Evangelical mission of The Navigators. In the mid-1970s they formed a “traveling team” in Vienna consisting of about ten families. The team’s task was to support Christians inside the Communist bloc. Although individual team members were primarily responsible for only one specific country, they rotated their country visits for security reasons, so that no one person travelled to the same country more than twice a year. We were careful never to use our real names or to take notes; everything had to be learned by heart. My main

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contact was with Paul Wyckoff, and this grew into a personal friendship. The greatest benefit to our family was that Paul strengthened not only our faith, but also hope for freedom and democracy, and the feeling that we were not alone behind the Iron Curtain, but linked to a larger family beyond.

Parallel to our Bible study groups, church members were at this time working on a major building project at Cukrová Street. Older members of the church community expressed concern that our work could distract young people from helping with construction. With some reluctance, we therefore put the study groups on hold in 1975, but this later turned out to be an inspiration from above. I did continue individual meetings with my friends Pavel Kailing, a therapist for children with learning difficulties, and Daniel Raus, who had come to Bratislava from the Czech town of Vysoké Mýto in order to study electroengineering.

Since I had promised the older members of our congregation that I would not invite younger church members, we then started to address people from outside the church environment, primarily university students who had existential questions and were searching for answers in the realms of freedom, truth, or beauty in art. In this way Jozef Kerekréty, a chemistry student at the Slovak Technical University, strengthened our trio in 1976.

From 1977, with the elders' consent, we again started to meet as a church Bible study group movement on condition that our work would focus on young people outside the church. The key idea in The Navigators' ministry is to pass on the Christian faith from one person to another, and the experience of re-orienting away from group work toward investing in individuals was a milestone in my personal development. I started to understand that the Christ-like attitude towards social transformation is to look at the world through the prism of helping individuals become more mature

### Influence of Václav Havel

people.

I was also greatly influenced by Václav Havel, who by this time had become a key dissident figure with the Charter 77 human rights initiative. Havel did not identify as a Christian, but his 1978 essay "The Power of the Powerless" maintained that the whole world functions according to values such as truth, righteousness, and love. He argued that if history gets out of balance, such as through fascism or Communism, it will return to those fundamental values. One of his key ideas

is that the strength of a community lies in the truth, which cannot be eradicated by living a lie:

Individuals can be alienated from themselves only because



(Left to right) Pavel and Daniel Raus, Pavel Kailing, Jozef Kerekréty, Milan Cícel, Summer 1975 (Collection of Milan Cícel)

there is something in them to alienate. The terrain of this violation is their authentic existence. Living the truth is thus woven directly into the texture of living a lie. It is the repressed alternative, the authentic aim to which living a lie is an inauthentic response. Only against this

background does living a lie make any sense: it exists because of that background.

The Communists were therefore afraid of the truth. That was an absolutely revolutionary thing for us to think, because everything was run by fear. Yet we felt that we were free from that oppression to the extent that we were ready to follow the truth. As long as you were prepared to risk that, you were free.

The risks were real. During the 1970s the "normalization process" was in full swing, and this included intrusive church supervision by the ŠtB and other bureaucratic authorities. In the early 1980s the leaders of our congregation, Pastor František Ciesar and Milan Jurčo, asked me if I would become officially responsible for youth development within our congregation, including before the state authorities. This meant that the supervisory authorities would register my



Milan Cícel (G.FAGAN)

name. I accepted this request readily as I personally knew both Pastor František and brother Jurčo to be courageous, creative and honest people who had stood in the frontline of the fight against the oppressive regime for many years. What I admired in them was that, under ever-changing political circumstances—whether favorable or unfavorable—they knew how to take the right stand, not only to protect the church, but also to open up space for its spiritual growth.

As it turned out, my professional endeavors in lumber-processing technology assisted me in my dealings with the government. Since 1970 I had participated in a long-term state research and development project, which was recognized by

the Czechoslovak Ministry of the Economy as an example of the successful transfer of scientific research into practice. Our research team received a state award in 1979, and this had a huge impact upon how the secret police interacted with me as the head of the church's youth work. (At first, the authorities wanted to remove me from the team as I was Christian, but my colleagues explained that this would be impossible because I had authored the research!) Instead of summoning me for an interrogation with an aggressive senior agent at the ŠtB headquarters on Račianska Street, a philosophy graduate who had only become an agent in order to receive an apartment would interview me at a café. I had been afraid that I might be beaten during the two interrogations I had with the senior agent, but this was a totally different discussion. When I explained that the Christian conversion process actually saves the government the expense of providing rehabilitation in the case of a drug addict, for example, the young ŠtB agent even asked if I minded that he was getting in the way of my work!

In all, we developed The Navigators' ministry in three cities in Czechoslovakia: Bratislava, Prague, and Ostrava. This saw around 100 people meeting secretly for Bible study in private homes by 1985. These groups had a natural attraction. Communist culture was saturated with lies, suspicion, and denunciation, but here was a little place where you felt accepted unconditionally, could discuss freely, and make friends whom you could trust.

The participants were mostly students, and 60 or 70 percent came from a secular background. Some were even from staunchly Communist families. In one case, an engineering student was afraid to tell his father, a school inspector, that he had become a Christian. To ease the situation, I went to see his father, who listened to what I had to say in stern silence. Then his wife recalled that she too used to pray the "Our

Father" when she was young. We turned out to be tapping on deeply buried cultural roots.

In another case, an economics student was knocked down by a bus and fell into a coma that lasted a week. My wife is a medic, and so we did everything we could for this girl. Her father was a judge in the city of Kosice and so very close to the secret police. It was an awkward situation as we were technically enemies; he knew we were the ones who had led his daughter to Christ. On the other hand, he had to trust us to take care of his daughter, and so he came and stayed with

## Open theology

us. Here too, a rootedness in Christian values would come to the fore, as his wife—a schoolteacher—began to attend church regularly after 1989.

In the light of experiences such as these, our theology became open, somewhat akin to a centered set in mathematics. In mathematics, a bounded set is defined by its boundaries; as soon as we define them, we determine whether an element is inside or outside the set. In contrast, a centered set has no boundaries but is defined by whether the vector of an element is pointing towards or away from the center. An element may be situated rather far from the center, but if its vector is pointing toward it, it is considered inside the set.

We know that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed, and once it becomes a great tree, it provides shelter for all kinds of other life. By being open to people and serving society, I believe that we Christians can participate in the formation of culture. To this end, I am seeking to assist all those who currently bear the responsibility for this ongoing work in Bratislava as they strengthen the identity of those young people who are just setting out upon their spiritual journey.

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# Remembering Catholic Sacrifice in Communist Czechoslovakia

GERALDINE FAGAN

**B**efore 1968, socialism in Czechoslovakia wore an inhuman face. Along with the shuttering of civic associations like the mission-oriented Blue Cross within the Lutheran Church, the year 1950 saw an intense government crackdown on Catholic religious orders. On the night of 13-14 April, some 2,400 monks were rounded up and transported to a few monasteries-turned-concentration camps as part of an operation entitled Action K. This was preceded by a show trial in which nine of the orders' superiors received prison terms ranging from nine years to life for "treason" and "anti-State activity."<sup>1</sup>

The damage wrought by Action K upon the spiritual formation of later Catholic generations still resonates, as young Catholics Zuzana Babicová and Michal Brnický detailed to the *East-West Church Report* in Bratislava in late

2017.<sup>2</sup> Religious orders such as the Dominicans and Salesians worked to provide theological education and motivate young people, while their direct links with Rome boosted resistance to Communist influence within Czechoslovakia. The rupture of their activities thus denied vital spiritual lifeblood to the local Church.

## Fr. Titus Zeman

With the beatification of Fr. Titus Zeman in Bratislava on 30 September 2017, the Catholic Church in Slovakia is now highlighting members of religious orders who suffered for their faith during the Communist period. "Fr. Titus' desire to donate his life for others is an excellent example of how to live the Gospel today," Salesian priest Fr. Andrej Kňaze

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## Catholic Sacrifice *(continued from page 5)*

told the *East-West Church Report* in Bratislava a few weeks after the beatification ceremony. “This is really what we need—testimonies like this. Not just of people who tell us [the Gospel], but ones who live it.”

While a member of the Salesian order, 35-year-old Fr. Titus was at a parish presbytery in the town of Šenkvice on the night of 13-14 April 1950 and so escaped internment. As Action K began to suppress theological education, however, he grew concerned that Salesian students would not be able to complete their studies. Consulting with other clergy, Fr. Titus proposed the solution of smuggling the students out of Czechoslovakia so that they could graduate and be ordained in Italy before returning as missionary priests. With the assistance of an experienced people-smuggler, Josef Macek, he then organized two successful crossings over the River Morava into Austria in August and October 1950.<sup>3</sup> In total, 21 young Salesians were able to flee Czechoslovakia on these trips, including future missionaries in France and Japan, teachers and translators in Germany and Italy, broadcasters at Vatican Radio, and a composer of sacred music. One still serves as a priest in the state of New York.<sup>4</sup>

Despite Macek’s arrest by Austrian police following the second crossing, Fr. Titus managed to return to Czechoslovakia with his less-experienced colleague in March 1951. Following preparations for a third crossing, Fr. Titus set out before dawn on 8 April from Šaštín, a town close to the border. This time, his group of 22 included novices, theological students, and priests at risk of arrest. They had fewer than 20 miles to walk, but the journey proved exhausting due to muddy ground. The group reached the Morava River three hours behind schedule in the early hours of 9 April. As it was already beginning to get light, there was no guarantee that the whole group would reach the opposite bank under cover of darkness. Conditions for the crossing were also poor, as the river was overflowing due to heavy rain and snowmelt. Fr. Titus pressed the group to continue, but most were dispirited, and they decided to turn back. Border patrol guards soon spotted and arrested 15 of the party; the rest managed to escape on a train heading towards Bratislava.

### Torture

Fr. Titus later described to a friend the period of incarceration following his arrest:

When they caught me, my Calvary began. I experienced the most difficult moments, physically and mentally, in pre-trial detention. ... There was a place of execution under the window of my prison cell. People were brought there every day. I heard horrible inhuman shrieks and laments. They were even tortured there. I lived in constant fear that at any moment the door of my cell could be opened, and I would be taken to that execution place. ... When I return in my mind to the unimaginable torture during the investigation, I have to tell you frankly that the mere

thought of it overwhelms me with sheer terror. They used inhuman, extreme methods of beating and torture. For example, they used to bring a bucket full of excrement from a cesspit, stick my head into it and hold me there until I started to suffocate. They kicked me all over, beat me hard with some instrument, and slapped me across the face. After one of those slaps, I went deaf.

When his trial began in February 1952, Fr. Titus was alleged to be a Vatican secret service agent who had illegally transported other enemies of the state out of Czechoslovakia. He responded:

I do not feel any guilt in my conscience. I did everything that is proclaimed as my guilt out of my love for the Church, and especially for the Salesian Society, which I have to thank for everything that I am.

I considered it my duty to accompany “to the West” priests who were prevented from carrying out their priestly ministry here. I considered it my special vocation to help Salesian theologians and young novices complete their studies in Turin because they could not realize their earnest desire to become priests here after the monasteries were closed.

### Prison term

Fr. Titus was sentenced to 25 years’ imprisonment. In 1967, three years after early release on parole, he received permission to celebrate Mass in his hometown of Vajnory, albeit alone and in civilian clothes. He did this daily. From early 1968 he was able to celebrate Mass publicly and to carry out other priestly ministry, but his main occupation remained a stocktaker. Fr. Titus died on 8 January 1969 aged 54, the harsh conditions of his incarceration a contributory factor to heart failure.



Entrance to St. Martin’s Catholic Cathedral, Bratislava (G.FAGAN)



**Catholic Theological Faculty Library,  
Saints Cyril and Methodius University, Bratislava (G.FAGAN)**

The formal beatification process recognizing Fr. Titus Zeman as a martyr began in 2010 under Pope Benedict XVI, and concluded with Pope Francis' final approval in 2017. (Beatification permits local veneration, but is a stage away from canonization as a saint of the Catholic Church.)

For Fr. Andrej Kňaze in Bratislava, the most significant moment in Fr. Titus' life occurred after the second crossing, while he was waiting in Austria to return to Czechoslovakia. In January 1951 he wrote two letters to a friend, the first musing on the admonitions he had received concerning his smuggling efforts and whether this indicated that God wished him to stop. A few days after this letter, however, Fr. Titus attended a Mass where the readings were 1 John 3:14-16 ("We know that we have passed out of death into life, because we love one another... We ought to lay down our lives for our brethren.") and Matthew 10:28-31 ("Do not fear... Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? And not one of them will fall to the ground without your Father's will. But even the hairs of your head are all numbered. Fear not, therefore; you are of more value than many sparrows.")

### For the brethren

In his second letter, Fr. Titus told his friend about the powerful inspiration he felt when he heard these two passages:

We have an obligation to be ready to sacrifice our lives for our brethren, and for that reason we should not be afraid. ...I was wrong when I sent you the previous letter ... Those were my first impressions, influenced too much by thoughts of this life instead of thinking about the next, the better life, which we hope to receive through the mercy of God. Maybe some people will call this false heroism, even madness, or irrational behavior. Let people call it whatever they like. I call it a duty that was entrusted to me by my superiors, to whom I am responsible before God.

The same two Gospel passages that inspired Fr. Titus were read during the September 2017 beatification Mass, Fr. Andrej told the *East-West Church Report*, in addition to part of Fr. Titus' second January 1951 letter, prefaced as "from a letter of Blessed Titus Zeman, priest and martyr."<sup>5</sup> "As we brought forward the [Eucharistic] gifts in the Offertory Procession, there was a very strong moment when I was able to understand a little more deeply what Jesus asked us to do," Fr. Andrej recalled. "His life was given for us, and Titus gave his life for his brothers."

### One of many

Fr. Andrej Kňaze stressed to the *East-West Church Report* that—as Archbishop of Bratislava, Stanislav Zvolenský had noted during the beatification ceremony—Fr. Titus Zeman was not being singled out, but represented hundreds of other priests and nuns persecuted by the Czechoslovak Communist authorities. Fr. Andrej recalled Fr. Ernest Macák (d. 2016), who escaped from a detention camp following Action K but was arrested in 1952. In order to avoid having to disclose the names of other members of religious orders, Fr. Ernest faked madness to the extent that he was formally certified as insane and released from prison in 1955. For the next 13 years he lived on his parents' farm, where only seven people knew that he was in fact sane. Permitted to travel to Rome in 1968, Fr. Ernest dropped his pretense and stayed to work with Vatican Radio, going on to produce over 600 episodes of a youth program. He returned to Czechoslovakia only in 1990, once the Communist regime had fallen.<sup>6</sup>

Of the 19 of Fr. Titus' associates also put on trial following the unsuccessful third crossing, all but one received prison terms ranging from 12 to 22 years.<sup>7</sup> Pastor Daniel Pastirčák of Kaplnka Evangelical church in Bratislava fondly remembers one, Fr. Anton Srholec, as his "greatest friend." Together, they led worship services at Pohoda, Slovakia's largest music festival, prior to Fr. Anton's death in 2016.<sup>8</sup> Aged 22 at the time of the trial, Fr. Anton was sentenced to 12 years; most of the ten he served were as a forced laborer at the notorious uranium mines at Jáchymov, close to the Czechoslovak-East German border.

Following his release, Fr. Anton independently studied theology and professed his final vows as a Salesian secretly in 1964. Permitted to travel to Italy during the Prague Spring, he completed his studies there and was ordained by Pope Paul VI in 1970. On returning to Czechoslovakia, Fr. Anton eventually won permission to serve as a priest. However, he was closely watched by the ŠtB secret police and repeatedly transferred between parishes. When he organized a youth program in 1985, Fr. Anton's permission for parish work was rescinded.<sup>9</sup>

Two of those sentenced along with Fr. Titus Zeman are still alive. Ján Brichta (b. 1928) served almost half of his 15-year term, partly also at the Jáchymov uranium mines, before working on a collective farm from 1959 to 1989. He was finally able to graduate in theology after 1990.<sup>10</sup>

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Anton Semeš (b. 1930) was sentenced to 14 years. Some of the six he served were similarly at Jáchymov, which he characterized as “actually a liquidation camp.” Also barred from studying theology after his release, Semeš married, raised four sons, and became a translator of technical literature from Russian and German. In 2015 Slovak journalists asked him how he had managed to remain optimistic despite everything he had gone through. “I have learned to accept the things that I cannot change with a light heart,” Semeš replied. “I get by with the words of one Russian song, ‘Whoever goes through life singing/ Will never ever fall behind.’”<sup>11</sup> ♦

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> “Czech Priests’ Trial Exposes Set ‘Pattern’ To Crush Church”, *Catholic Weekly* (Sydney, NSW), 20 April 1950, 3; Karel Kaplan, “Church and State in Czechoslovakia from 1948 to 1956. Part II,” *Religion in Communist Lands*, vol. 14, no. 2 (1986), 185-7.

<sup>2</sup> “Quo Vadis? Seeking Young Catholics in Slovakia,” *East-West Church Report*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2018), 1-4.

<sup>3</sup> The details of Fr. Titus Zeman’s life and beatification here are collated from material at <https://tituszeman.sk/en/>.

<sup>4</sup> <https://tituszeman.sk/en/titus-zeman-en/saved-by-titus/>.

<sup>5</sup> Condensed video footage of the beatification events may be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkm08Ifj31o>.

<sup>6</sup> “Slovakia – Death of Fr Ernest Macák, former Provincial who pretended to be insane during the communist regime,”

*Agenzia Info Salesiana*, 18 October 2016, <http://www.infoans.org/en/sections/news/item/1950-slovakia-death-of-fr-ernest-macak-former-provincial-who-pretended-to-be-insane-during-the-communist-regime>.

<sup>7</sup> <https://tituszeman.sk/en/titus-zeman-en/they-suffered-with-titus/>.

<sup>8</sup> “Towards “a culturally understandable expression of our faith”: An Interview with Pastor Daniel Pastirčák, *East-West Church Report*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2018), 5-7.

<sup>9</sup> “Priest, former dissident Srholec died,” *Slovak Spectator*, 7 January 2016, <https://spectator.sme.sk/c/20070713/priest-former-dissident-srholec-died.html>; [In Slovak] “Slovensko sa rozlúčilo s Antonom Srolcom (†86): Kritizovaný Ficov poradca neprišiel,” *Tópky.sk*, 12 January 2016, <https://www.topky.sk/cl/10/1521037/FOTO-Slovensko-sa-rozlucilo-s-Antonom-Srholcom---86---Kritizovany-Ficov-poradca-neprišiel>.

<sup>10</sup> “Ján Brichta (1928),” *Ústav Pamäti Národa*, <https://www.upn.gov.sk/en/jan-brichta-1928/>.

<sup>11</sup> [In Slovak] “VÁZENĚ Č. A-05658 ANTON SEMEŠ,” Lenka Eremiášová and Ludovít Števkó, *Extraplus*, 1 July 2015, <http://www.extraplus.sk/clanok/vazen-c-05658-anton-semes>. The Russian song is “Marsh veselykh rebiat” from the 1934 Soviet movie *Veselye Rebiata*.

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## Why Does the Orthodox Church Fight Against Society in Russia?

ROMAN LUNKIN

Over the past decade, conflicts between representatives of the Orthodox Church and Russian society have deepened. It would seem that the opposite should be the case, as the atheistic Soviet period is long gone, and the role of the Church has increased in all spheres of people’s lives. In particular, Orthodoxy has become an important component in the political ideology of the state and features prominently in the speeches of parliamentarians and bureaucrats. As a result, Orthodoxy has come to enjoy the status of Russia’s quasi-official religion. Whence came this confrontation between society and the Orthodox Church?

Relations between the Orthodox Church and the public may be compared to the relationship between parents and their children. After the devastation of the Bolshevik Revolution, most people retained only a vague notion of religious life and Christian values. Today, representatives of

the Russian Orthodox Church are generally dealing with a society that is ignorant of the meaning of Christianity. The Church was thus faced with the task of educating millions of its fellow citizens; its former, current, and future members. While the Church acknowledged this task, its structure and hierarchy were formed in the Soviet period and consequently did not—and still do not fully—possess the pedagogical skills needed to deal with the recalcitrant child that is Russian society. The authority of the Church as mother and father seems obvious to all, but the disobedience of the child only incites anger in inept parents, along with the desire to punish and to prove that they are right by force.

Above all, the Orthodox Church seeks to strengthen its position by protecting Russia from “outsiders”: missionaries of other denominations and faiths. In practice, this means fighting against the Protestant churches that are

the most energetic and successful in their mission. In most regions of Siberia and the Russian Far East, Baptists, Pentecostals, and other Evangelicals compete successfully with Orthodoxy. East of the Urals, more Protestants than Orthodox are in church on Sundays. That is why Patriarch Kirill regularly makes statements about the existence of a “sectarian” threat (“sectarians” being all non-Orthodox, except Catholics) beyond the Urals, where Orthodoxy is weaker than in Central Russia. Material that is offensive to non-Orthodox Christians is regularly broadcast on national television. In addition, Russian Orthodox representatives played an active role in the adoption of the June 2016 “Yarovaya Law,” which introduced additional restrictions on missionary activity. Infringements of freedom of conscience—restrictions on mission by non-Orthodox citizens, as well as the exclusion of Protestants and others from mass media and the public sphere more generally—are justified as a means of defending Orthodoxy.

The leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church harks back to pre-revolutionary grandeur, to “Holy Russia” and the 19th century as the heyday of Russian piety. The Moscow Patriarchate is trying to embody the historical ideal of a strong Church. But in fact, it is an ideal based largely upon illusions and demands that are unrealizable for society and the state today.

### The fight for property

The Russian Orthodox Church’s fight for property is the most dramatic illustration of these demands. The restitution of historical church property has been a particularly contested process since 2010, when the Moscow Patriarchate successfully lobbied for the adoption of the Law on the Transfer of Religious Assets to Religious Associations. Conflicts arose in many locales over the transfer to the Church of monasteries and church complexes that house museums, for example, in



**Decorative relief above doors to the Cathedral of the Intercession, Convent of Martha and Mary, Moscow (below) (G.FAGAN)**

Intercession was vacated by art experts only in 2006. Some of their workshops were located in the nearby Church of the Resurrection in Kadashi, and in 2004 believers seized that church building and essentially drove the art experts out.

### St. Isaac or St. Peter?

In 2017 another property dispute gained notoriety at the national level. It is a story that illustrates the high level of mutual distrust between the Russian Orthodox leadership and a significant portion of society. Back in 2015 the powerful Metropolitan Varsonofy of St. Petersburg requested the return of the city’s landmark St. Isaac’s Cathedral to the Orthodox Church. At that time the St. Isaac’s Cathedral Museum Complex consisted of four churches, including the cathedral itself. Two of the churches were transferred to the Russian Orthodox Church, but they were not the most visited ones. These are the city-owned museums of St. Isaac’s Cathedral—where regular worship services have been permitted since 1991—and the Church of the Savior on the Spilt Blood, erected on the site of the assassination of Emperor Alexander II.

In December 2016, after a personal meeting between Patriarch Kirill and St. Petersburg Governor Georgy



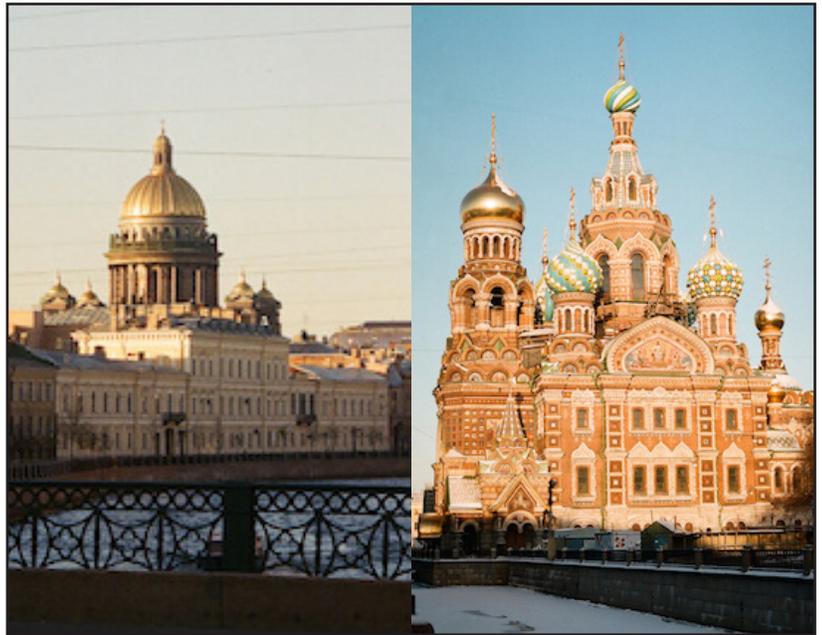
the cases of the Ryazan Kremlin and the Ipatiev Monastery in Kostroma. One high-profile controversy involved Moscow’s Convent of Martha and Mary and its Church of the Resurrection in Kadashi, where the secular Grabar Art Conservation Center was located. This convent was partially returned to the Russian Orthodox Church in 1992, but its Cathedral of the

Poltavchenko—renowned as practicing Orthodox—it was announced that the city would transfer St. Isaac’s Cathedral to the Church. Against the backdrop of an open conflict between the museum and the Orthodox Church, this decision provoked a storm of outrage in St. Petersburg society. Demonstrators

*(continued on page 10)*

## Church and Society in Russia *(continued from page 9)*

protested outside the Cathedral holding up signs declaring “Giving up Isaac’s means betraying St. Pete!” and “Poltavchenko should resign!” The museum director told Metropolitan Varsonofy: “This city survived the Siege [of Leningrad], and I believe it will survive you!” On 1 May 2017, the date of the former Soviet Labor Day holiday, a public demonstration took place made up of a seemingly improbable coalition of human rights advocates, Communists, and intellectuals, all identifying as Orthodox but nevertheless opposed to the transfer of St. Isaac’s to the Church. At the same time, Orthodox faithful supporting the transfer organized religious processions around the cathedral. The oddity of the situation was further underscored by the fact that lawyers for the Church announced that no official application for the transfer of the Cathedral had been submitted.



**St. Isaac’s Cathedral (left) and Church of the Savior on the Spilt Blood, St. Petersburg (G.FAGAN)**

### Public backlash feared

Faced with a public backlash and fears that the Church would scale back the museum inside St. Isaac’s Cathedral, St. Petersburg City Hall assumed a wait-and-see position. But the question of the fate of St. Isaac’s Cathedral was becoming grounds for political opposition to the authorities. In 2017 some St. Petersburg Legislative Assembly deputies proposed a referendum on the possibility of transferring the Cathedral. However, a majority in the Assembly blocked that proposal, largely because the Church had spoken against further aggravating the situation. In addition, the Church anticipated an executive decision in its favor, which a referendum might have complicated. For his part, Patriarch Kirill declared that critics of Orthodoxy were organizing rallies for their own mercenary political purposes

and were trying to oust the Russian Orthodox Church from the public sphere: “When today some intellectuals say that nothing should be transferred to the Church, that we won’t cope or be capable of maintaining or restoring it, these voices are not pursuing their stated aims. The aim is different—that the Church should not be in places marked by the talents of builders, architects, and artists; that the Church should be on the periphery of life.”<sup>1</sup>

### Bolshevik legacy

The controversy surrounding St. Isaac’s Cathedral marks a deeper faultline in Russian society, above all, concerning the proper understanding of Russian history one hundred years after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. One part of society is drawn to the Soviet period and the might of Stalin’s Russia, while a second part lauds the pre-revolutionary tsarist empire. A third portion of society combines elements of both these historical perspectives. The Church is largely a pillar of the anti-Stalinist position, opposed to those who feel nostalgia for Soviet times. In contrast, judging by opinion polls, the figure of Stalin is popular in Russian society, and the enlarged role of Orthodoxy today in many ways irritates those who were brought up in the non-religious Soviet era. Another hierarch, Metropolitan Hilarion, who heads the influential Department for External Church Relations and is an ally of Patriarch Kirill, actively opposes any justification of Stalin. At the same time, he has become renowned for startling statements supporting the return of monarchy to Russia, opposing supermarket openings on Sundays, and calling for the burning of “sectarian” literature.<sup>2</sup> Metropolitan Hilarion also approved Russia’s 2017 ban on the Jehovah’s Witnesses.



**Ipatiev Monastery, Kostroma (G.FAGAN)**

## Growing volunteer movement

Is the Russian Orthodox Church seeking a way into the hearts of its compatriots? The most effective approach to winning the support of such a conflicted society is through advocacy for volunteer social and cultural projects. The Martha and Mary Convent, for example, is a base for the charitable work of *Miloserdie* [Russian: Mercy], Russia's largest volunteer movement for assistance to the needy.<sup>3</sup> Orthodox Christians are also developing alcohol and drug rehabilitation centers, of which there are about 70 so far (as against about 500 sponsored by Protestants), family crisis centers for mothers, and youth clubs.

In the town of Kimry in Tver Region, for instance, Ascension Orthodox parish has been running the Raduga [Russian: Rainbow] drug and alcohol rehabilitation center since 2013, following a long association between its director, parish priest Fr. Andrei Lazarev, and the Polish organization Familia.<sup>4</sup> Since the early 1990s, the *Stary Svet* [Russian: Old World] Foundation—largely staffed by parishioners of two Orthodox churches in central Moscow and Moscow Region—has also been offering such a rehabilitation program. According to its director Yevgeny Protsenko, its influences include the Twelve Steps and Minnesota Model approaches to addiction treatment.<sup>5</sup> One notable Orthodox youth club is *Ekkleziast* [Russian: Ecclesiastes] headed by Fr. Dimitry Struev in the city of Lipetsk. Whereas many Orthodox churches were turned into movie theaters by the Soviets, this is an example of an Orthodox community that is transforming a Soviet movie theater into a worship and cultural space.<sup>6</sup>

Unlike 15 years ago, every Orthodox diocese now engages in social initiatives. Orthodox priests and young people also now communicate informally—sometimes secretly—with Protestant pastors and Catholics about their



Fr. Andrei Lazarev with parishioners (R. LUNKIN)

common social concerns. In contrast, Orthodox Church leaders are still finding their way in relation to society as a whole. The severity of their statements varies according to their perception of the effectiveness of forceful language upon society. The nature of society's criticism of the Church, meanwhile, indicates that it is not so much Orthodoxy that most people dislike, but the anti-democratic, heavy-handed tactics with which the Church hopes to "educate" society. ♦

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> "Patriarkh Kirill kritikuet protivnikov peredachi khramov Tserkvi iz sredi intelligentsii," *Interfax-Religion*, 5 June 2017, <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=news&div=67340>.

<sup>2</sup> For example, "Met. Hilarion supports proposal to restrict shopping on Sundays," *Pravoslavie.ru*, 10 May 2017, <http://www.pravoslavie.ru/103344.html>; "Mitropolit Volokolamskii Ilarion sovershil chin prisoadineniia k Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi liudei, vremenno otpavshikh ot nee," Moscow Patriarchate official website, 26 December 2016, <http://www.patriarchia.ru/db/text/4723568.html>.

<sup>3</sup> [In English] <https://miloserdie.help/en/>.

<sup>4</sup> [In Russian] <http://www.vozneseniekimry.ru/center>; [In Polish] <https://familia.org.pl/>.

<sup>5</sup> [In Russian] <http://stsv.org/reabilitatsionnyi-tsentr-terapevticheskoe-soobshchestvo.html>; [In English] <http://en.stsv.org/christian-therapeutic-community-addiction-treatment-eugene-protsenko-about-old-world-charities-histor>

<sup>6</sup> [In Russian] <http://www.ekkl.ru/contacts/conception>.

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Yevgeny Protsenko (right) and Fr. Andrei Deryagin discussing the work of *Stary Svet* (R. LUNKIN)

## BOOK REVIEW

### *Holy Rus': The Rebirth of Orthodoxy in the New Russia*

by John P. Burgess

New Haven, Yale University Press, 2017,  
280 pp., \$30.00 (hardback), ISBN 978-0-300-22224-1

MARK R. ELLIOTT

In a decidedly sympathetic, but ultimately ambivalent assessment of contemporary Russian Orthodoxy, John P. Burgess provides a wealth of discerning observations on Russia's majority faith. A professor of Reformed theology at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary, the author has spent considerable time in Russia, including sabbaticals in St. Petersburg (2004-05) and Moscow (2011-12), teaching and immersing himself in the life of the Orthodox Church.

Employing the disciplines of theology, history, and sociology of religion to good effect, Burgess focuses particular attention on religious education, Church social work, commemoration of Russia's New Martyrs, and parish life. A

theme throughout *Holy Rus'* is the Church's effort to inculcate faith (*votserkovlenie*, literally translated as "in-churching") in a still largely secular population. (Russian polls consistently indicate high levels of identification with Orthodoxy, but respondents frequently affirm their Church as a cultural marker, rather than as a repository of faith accompanied by regular attendance [16-17; 188-89; 211].) In case study vignettes, Burgess enthusiastically commends such phenomena as the exemplary education provided by St. Tikhon's Orthodox Humanitarian University, the multiple charitable outreaches of Moscow's revived Convent of Martha and Mary, the drug rehabilitation program in St. George's Parish in the Ivanovo Region, and the devotion attendant upon veneration of Russia's roughly 2,000 New Martyrs.

Still, the author expresses reservations almost as frequently as commendations. For example, "Do state policies that privilege the Orthodox Church in education and social work—all in the name of promoting 'traditional moral values'—respect Russians' freedom to choose faith for themselves, or do these policies inevitably compromise freedom of conscience" (119)? On the other hand, "Whatever the Church's faults and failures—and they are real—I have seen how Russia is the better for the Church's efforts to bring its values into society" (12). Further illustrating his mixed review, Burgess recounts walking daily during his Moscow sabbatical through an underground passageway past shops plying clothes, shoes, souvenirs, and keys. In the same concourse he recalls "a tiny Church kiosk" selling crosses, icons, and religious books. "Orthodoxy, it struck me, has a firm place in Russian society again—but to the tens of thousands of people who passed those kiosks every day, it

was just one more consumer option in a crowded marketplace" (207).

The author's ambivalence is a constant. Russia, Burgess is confident, "is indeed a healthier, more vital society today" because of Orthodoxy's efforts at spiritual restoration (208). Yet, with regret, he also observes, "In my more sociological moments, I see a Church that is barely noticeable in a pluralistic society" (207).

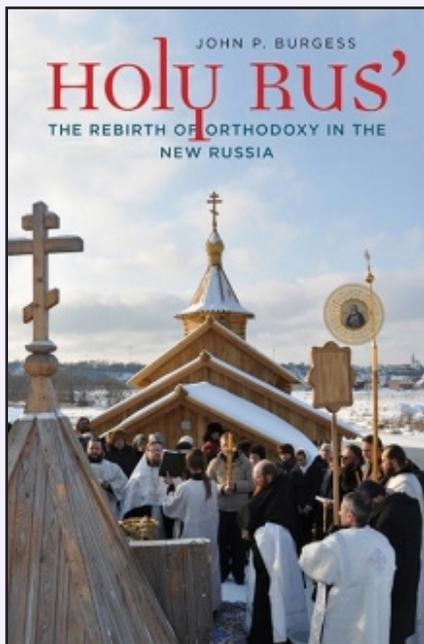
To the extent Burgess finds himself alternating between admiration and reservation, it undoubtedly stems in good measure from the fact that contemporary Russian Orthodoxy exhibits a host of contradictory tendencies. To this

point, the author identifies not one, but five, "Orthodoxies:" an "official" Orthodoxy of the Moscow Patriarchate and its bishops, a moderate Orthodoxy favoring modest reform, a miniscule liberal Orthodoxy advocating more thoroughgoing democratic reform, a larger conservative Orthodoxy antagonistic to modernity, and a popular, folk Orthodoxy largely outside the control of the institutional Church (195).

Burgess's parsing of a multi-faceted Russian Orthodox Church calls to mind an earlier, equally insightful set of sociological case studies found in Wallace L. Daniel, *The Orthodox Church and Civil Society in Russia* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2006). Similarly, *Holy Rus'*, in delineating Orthodoxy's perquisites and constraints in the post-Soviet political order,

joins other notable studies in the past decade and a half with the same intent: Zoe Knox, *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church: Religion in Russia after Communism* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005); John Garrard and Carol Garrard, *Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Irina Papkova, *The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011); Katja Richters, *The Post-Soviet Russian Orthodox Church: Politics, Culture and Greater Russia* (New York: Routledge, 2013); and Geraldine Fagan, *Believing in Russia—Religious Policy after Communism* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

Besides its strengths, what may be considered missing from *Holy Rus'*? For one, conservative Orthodoxy, especially its fundamentalist variant, deserves greater attention. This contingent within Russia's majority faith can amount simply to benign traditionalism. However, the fundamentalist wing



of conservative Orthodoxy has devolved into chauvinistic nationalism; violence-prone, anti-Western xenophobia; anti-Semitism; and intolerant triumphalism. Fundamentalists are, in turn, emboldened by the state's extension of privileges to Orthodoxy and its widespread discrimination against minority faiths.

One wishes, in addition, that Burgess had taken note of those obscurantist Russian Orthodox brotherhoods that are anti-global, anti-ecumenical, and monarchical, and of the proto-fascist geopolitics of Alexander Dugin. Conservative Orthodox nationalists gravitate to Dugin's racially charged, anti-Western message that some contend resonates with Putin.

*Holy Rus'* could also have explored in greater depth instances of Russian Orthodox collaboration with the state. The two worked together to orchestrate the 2007 union of the Russian Orthodox Church Outside Russia (ROCOR) with the Moscow Patriarchate, to the latter's advantage; and Putin supported 2012 prison terms for punk rockers who defiled Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior with anti-Orthodox and anti-Putin protest songs. For his part, after early tentativeness, Patriarch Kirill supported the Kremlin during Moscow's anti-Putin street demonstrations in 2011-12; the Patriarch also failed to speak out against Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and pro-Russian separatists in eastern Ukraine (2014-).

While Burgess does note the broadly united church-state stance over the punk rockers and Ukraine, the work of the two in tandem further afield also deserves attention. New Putin-era Moscow Patriarchate churches from Pyongyang (2006) to Paris (2016) serve as extensions of Russia's political and cultural influence worldwide. At the same time, these new church outposts are meant to undermine the Moscow Patriarchate's chief competitor in the Orthodox world, the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The fact that the new Russian Orthodox Holy Trinity Cathedral complex near the Eiffel Tower is actually owned by the Russian government underscores the reality of intimate church-state coordination in the deployment of Russian soft power abroad. (Andrew Higgins, "In Expanding Russian Influence, Faith Combines with Firepower," *New York Times*, 13 September 2016).

The Moscow Patriarchate and the Kremlin have also coordinated their efforts in highlighting persecution of

(mostly Orthodox) Christians in the Middle East and Orthodox charitable projects in Assad's Syria. The very appellation *Holy Rus'* connotes the Kremlin's support for Russians abroad and the Moscow Patriarchate's claims to preeminence within worldwide Orthodoxy. The Church's international efforts abroad may thus be seen as part of a larger project aimed at spreading Russia's political sway beyond its borders.

To be sure, Burgess is well aware of the pitfalls of the Church doing the bidding of a state bent on utilizing it for its own secular purposes. He laments Orthodox "hierarchs' unwillingness to speak out against obvious social injustices and the political machinations of the Putin government" (26). "Many of my Orthodox friends," he notes, "see a repetition of the Soviet era, when the official Church yielded to state control in order to secure a measure of public institutional life" (202). Burgess quotes approvingly the warning of historian-priest Georgii Mitrofanov that the Church must fight "the temptation once again to seek a privileged status...at the cost of dependence on the state" (160). He also agrees with now out-of-favor former *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* editor Sergei Chapnin who bemoans a "Church of Empire...that consistently supports the political status quo and never places it under divine judgment" (203). Likewise, Burgess sees merit in Father Alexander Shargunov's "criticisms of the Church's worldly compromises with the Putin government" (206). Yet, once again, the author of *Holy Rus'* changes course as he opines that "the Church knows that it will be able to develop its social ministries only if it maintains a good working relationship with government officials. A policy of quiet but persistent negotiation with the state seems more fruitful than open confrontation, even if such a policy comes at the cost of making the Church seem dependent on and even subservient to the state" (18).

In Burgess's defense, *Holy Rus'* repeatedly hoists red flags in noting the Kremlin's use of the Church for its own purposes. While greater attention to this theme seems warranted, no author can satisfy every reviewer who would desire more coverage of a given subject. Suffice it to conclude by applauding Burgess for a nuanced and judicious accounting of present-day Russian Orthodoxy. ♦

**Dr. Mark R. Elliott** is Editor Emeritus of the East-West Church Report.

On 7 February 2018 the *East-West Church Report* attended a side event at the National Prayer Breakfast—a large Evangelical forum held annually in Washington, D.C.—devoted to the religious and political situations in Russia and Ukraine. Over two hours, participants engaged in a frank and intense discussion in answer to moderator John Bernbaum's opening question: "What role can the churches play in the reconciliation process in this part of the world?" Over the following pages, the *Report* features two presentations given at the event by a Ukrainian Orthodox priest currently in the United States, and an Evangelical theologian from Russia now based in Ukraine.

Discussion participants Mikhail Cherenkov and Fr. Cyril Hovorun are second and sixth from the left. Moderator John Bernbaum is on the right (Source: Mission Eurasia)



# Utilitarian Symphony: The Church-State Relationship in Russia

FR. CYRIL HOVORUN

I would like to share some ideas that I have been entertaining since my work in the administration of the Moscow Patriarchate. I have tried to comprehend the ethos of the church-state relationship in Russia and articulate it in a concise way, and now I think I can summarize my findings in one word: utilitarianism.

I should start by clarifying that this utilitarianism has little to do with the homonymous moral doctrine produced in the 19th century by thinkers like Jeremy Bentham (1748-1832) or John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). For them, “utility” was human happiness caused by morality. In our case, utility occurs when a person or institution uses other persons or institutions for their own ends. These ends may be morally justifiable. However, the methods used in utilitarian relationships are rarely acceptable from a moral standpoint.

How does this principle of utilitarianism work in church-state relations? Each partner in this type of relationship pursues its own goals. In Russia, the state wants total control, much like Mussolini’s *stato totale*. Outside the country, Russia wants to restore a hierarchical order of nations and secure for itself the upper tier in this hierarchy. It also seeks restoration of the imperial order, similar to what existed in the 19th century. The Russian war against Ukraine and its persistent confrontation with the West are means of pursuing these goals in a utilitarian way.

What are the methods used by the Russian state to achieve its geopolitical goals? Russia draws its methods from many different ideologies that are often incompatible, such as radical left and radical right, Marxism and nationalism, and promotes a strong state while assaulting institutions. Nevertheless, Russia’s methods work well, and the state manages to mobilize people of opposite persuasions to united action against the current democratic world order. Because the Russian state propagates ideologies that are incompatible with one another, it does not have to subscribe to any of them officially. Rather, they are just tools that allow the state to promote its ideas in a completely utilitarian way.

Russia uses this same utilitarian approach with the Orthodox Church. For the Russian political regime, Orthodoxy is just another ideology that can be used in the same way as conservatism, libertarianism, nationalism, and so on. The Russian political leadership does not believe in theology, just as it does not believe in any other ideology it promotes. Or, to be more precise, Russian leaders accept Orthodox Christianity in their own self-serving way, which I call “political Orthodoxy,” Orthodoxy designed for achieving political goals. This sort of “religion” was very common during the Soviet era. Today, while Russia’s leaders may have personal sympathies and spiritual experiences with some religious ideas, they utilize religion and the Church as vehicles for their own political goals.

For instance, state representatives use participation

in religious ceremonies, such as during trips to Mount Athos, the monastic center in Greece, to divert attention from the kleptocracy they have planted throughout the former Soviet Union. Post-Soviet kleptocrats likewise use the Church as a substitute Communist ideology in modern-day Russia. The new quasi-Soviet ideology, which is expressed through Orthodox symbols and theology, helps the Russian state to keep society in check. The Russian regime also uses the Church to justify its intervention in Ukraine. The Russian political regime uses the Church as a soft power against Western countries, such as for lobbying against Western sanctions.

What about the Orthodox Church? Is it also a victim of Russia’s utilitarian efforts? Sadly, the Orthodox Church uses the state in the same way as it is used by the state. The Church needs resources that it can obtain only from the state, so it trades its own assets in exchange for those resources. And the Church’s most valuable asset is its influence upon individuals. This is why Orthodox priests often bless Russian missiles and prisons, along with openly supporting the state in their sermons. The Church also develops and presents state-based ideology to its congregants. For instance, the notorious concept of the “Russian World” [Russian: *Russkii Mir*], which was used to justify Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, was designed by the Church.

However, just as the Russian state is not sincere in supporting the Orthodox Church, so the Church is not sincere in supporting the state. They are both aware that they are only a means to an end, but they still use one another to achieve their own goals. Both sides in the post-Soviet Church-state symphony employ the utilitarian method, and both subscribe to the Machiavellian principle that the end justifies the means.

The leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church understands that the state is committing military crimes in Ukraine, is fraught with corruption, and that Russia’s political leaders have no moral code. Nevertheless, the Church turns a blind eye to the actions of the Russian state and instead sees only an opportunity to achieve its own goals.

The followers of utilitarianism in the 19th century believed that morally appropriate behavior does no harm to others and increases happiness in society. In contrast, the utilitarianism practiced by the Russian Orthodox Church in the 21st century harms both society and the Church itself. And the “happiness” that this utilitarianism produces stems from propaganda that is ephemeral, delusional, and fake. Sooner or later, the people who consume it will be dissatisfied, and the Church will be discredited. ♦

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# Churches as Agents of Change in Eurasia

MIKHAIL CHERENKOV

Russia is once again clamping down on freedom of thought and belief due to a fear of change and Western influence. This time, the leader of Russia is positioning himself as the defender of Holy Rus' and true Christianity. The situation is eerily close to the 2007 projection of nationalist writer Aleksandr Prokhanov, in which a strong leader will construct a "Fifth Empire" to follow Rus', Muscovy, the Romanovs, and the Soviets.<sup>1</sup> People who are not opposed to the West are once again being viewed with suspicion. In the past they were "enemies of the people;" now they are called "foreign agents."

"Foreign agent" is a convenient label for individuals and organizations that refuse to conform. But what if these "agents" are able to help Russia and the surrounding region make necessary changes and open up to the rest of the world? We are not talking here about agents who serve another country. We are talking about "agents" who serve the world on a global level and therefore each country individually. A Christian church may be considered a major agent of this type of change.

In these brief reflections, I will highlight just one thought I have regarding the role of the churches in the socio-political processes that are taking place in the region known as Eurasia, that is to say, the cultural space which Russia is seeking to dominate. No matter what plans might be made in the Kremlin, the transformation of this space depends upon the Church. And transformation will happen in spite of the Church going through a crisis—or maybe even because of it, because the crisis of the Church is continual and dynamic.

Why the Church? Because there is no greater force than this. And if society undergoes transformation without the Church, this transformation will only be harmful. People in Russia and neighboring nominally Orthodox countries place their highest trust in the Church. In Moldova, 77 percent of people have confidence in the Orthodox Church.<sup>2</sup> 84 percent of Belarusians associate themselves with an Orthodox identity.<sup>3</sup> With a credibility rating of 48 percent, the Russian Orthodox Church takes fourth place in Russia after the presidency (75 percent), military (69 percent), and FSB security police (57 percent).<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, this support for the *siloviki*—the military and security forces—has grown sixfold over the past five years.

In Ukraine, the situation has parallels but remains strikingly different. According to a December 2016 poll by the Kyiv International Institute of Sociology, Ukrainians place the most trust in the Church (56.7 percent), above volunteers (53.5 percent) and the Ukrainian military (53.1

percent).<sup>5</sup> Another trend in Ukraine is that trust in the Church as a social institution is higher than trust in it as a moral authority. According to March 2017 data from the Kyiv-based Razumkov Center, 63 percent have trust in the Church, while only 42 percent recognize its moral authority.<sup>6</sup>

This brings to mind the gospel plea, "Lord, I believe; help my unbelief" (Mark 9:24). When people say that they "have trust," what they mean is that they "want to have trust." Jesus' disciples also asked, "To whom shall we go?" (John 6:68). Whom can we trust if not the Church? In conditions of a weak civil society and no real political opposition, the Church stands as the only alternative. And even if churches withdraw from civic responsibilities, they inevitably change the status quo. That is why the Kremlin, with the Moscow Patriarchate, is fighting against missionary activity under the cover of the 2016 counterterrorist "Yarovaya" legislation. It is not just that the authorities are afraid of any social activity that is ideologically motivated or uncompromising. Missionary activity changes the religious landscape, which in turn changes public life.

It is thus precisely the churches that can become



**The Sviato Podiaki Thanksgiving holiday celebration, Kyiv, 16 September 2017 (M.CHERENKOV)**

agents of change in the post-Soviet space, as long as they stay faithful to their mission and set a good example of faith and faithfulness in repressive conditions. This is sure to renew both Church and society.

Renewal takes place when people imagine another world. But today's young generation has only experienced life in the Putin era. How can they imagine the possibilities of

*(continued on page 16)*

## Agents of Change *(continued from page 15)*

a different kind of life? With no picture in mind of anything different, they may be infected by a destructive state of mind: “We will destroy this world of violence down to its foundations, and then we will build our new world. He who was nothing will become everything!” These words come from the early Soviet translation of “The Internationale,” the socialist anthem. Yet just as a century ago, Russia still faces this simple yet pivotal choice: violent revolution or spiritual transformation.

There are signs of the latter in Ukraine. On 16 September 2017 many thousands of people packed the streets in Kyiv. This was no new Mайдан of demonstrations and civil unrest. Instead, the *Siato Podiaki*—or Thanksgiving—the new national holiday celebration brought together Evangelicals and curious members of the public. This is the Christian revolution of the spirit. This is where change begins.

We have only one chance in the shadow of the Kremlin. We have to help the Church change for it to unlock its transformational potential and to lift up its prophetic voice. There is no other institution or force that can do this. Churches are both messengers of reconciliation and prophetic voices to the governing authorities.

If the Church does not regain its moral credibility, its missionary activities will have no impact. If we do not want Eurasia to suffer any bloody and destructive revolutionary scenarios, we have to do all we can for the Church to regain its initiative and special calling. If we want to help the countries of Eurasia, we have to start with the Church, including the more conservative churches and the Orthodox Church. All must be open and true to the Gospel.

If we believe in the power of change, we must maintain international partnerships and involve promising spiritual and intellectual church leaders in the opening of

new pages in the history of Eurasia, pages of renewal and reconciliation, awakening and transformation.

So let them be called “foreign agents” in Russia. We know better than that: They are international agents of positive change. In this age of new divisions and conflict, the Church is the only universal force that can transcend borders for the common good, build bridges between people, and deliver them from historical downfall. ♦

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> Aleksandr Prokhanov, *Simfoniia “Piatoi Impirii”*, Moscow: EKSMO, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> “Tserkov’ sokhraniaet za soboi samyi vysokii uroven’ doverii v Moldavii – sotsiolog,” *Interfax*, 24 February 2016, <http://www.interfax-religion.ru/?act=news&div=62033>.

<sup>3</sup> Zmiter Lukashuk, “95% belorusov odnosiat sebja k opredelennoi konfessii, a v boga veriat 64% iz nikh,” *Euroradio.fm*, 26 December 2017, <https://euroradio.fm/ru/95-belorusov-otnosyat-sebja-k-opredelyonnoy-konfessii-v-boga-veryat-64-iz-nih>.

<sup>4</sup> “Institutsional’noe Doverie,” Levada-Center, 12 October 2017, <https://www.levada.ru/2017/10/12/institutsionalnoe-doverie-3/>.

<sup>5</sup> “Ukraintsy radikal’no ne doveriaut institutam vlasti – sotsopros,” *Apostrof*, 1 February 2017, <https://apostrophe.ua/news/society/2017-02-01/ukraintsy-radikalno-ne-doveriyayut-institutam-vlasti---sotsopros/85391>.

<sup>6</sup> “Tserkva, suspil’stvo, derzhava u protistoianni viklikam i zagrozam s’ogodennia,” Razumkov Center, 2017, [http://razumkov.org.ua/uploads/article/2017\\_Religiya.pdf](http://razumkov.org.ua/uploads/article/2017_Religiya.pdf).

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©2018 ISSN 2576-344X (formerly 1069-5664)  
Indexed by American Bibliography of Slavic and East European Studies (ABSEES), OCLC Public Affairs Information Service (formerly PAIS), Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI), and Christian Periodicals Index.