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‘The Autocracy of the Spirit’

IRINA LEVINSKAYA

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, it has become well known in the West that the churches, and especially the Russian Orthodox Church, have recovered a respectable place in Russian society. What is less well known is that other, more sinister forces are also at work to subvert the gospel witness within these churches. Most dangerous of all is the revival of anti-Semitism, which links some prominent church leaders with political extremists on the far right. Many Christians in Russia are disturbed by this, because they realise that the gains of the past few years may be lost again if the church is compromised on such a sensitive moral and spiritual issue. In 1994 Metropolitan Ioann of St Petersburg published *The Autocracy of the Spirit* which purports to be an explanation of the Russian Orthodox Church and its traditions, intended for a lay audience. In fact, much of it is a distorted reading of Russian history, in which anti-Semitism is only barely concealed.

There would be no point writing about *The Autocracy of the Spirit* if it had been published anonymously, or by a less prominent figure. The ideas behind this book are not new. In essence it is a collection of religious material which is reminiscent of the propaganda of the Black Hundred (a far right organisation in Russia at the beginning of this century). The book, which claims to be a ‘general historical work’, is also hardly distinguished by professionalism, but it is necessary to consider this second-rate nationalistic work for two reasons. The first is that the author is the Metropolitan of St Petersburg, and therefore a senior member of the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church. The second is that this book has not been repudiated by the Church authorities, which leads us to think that it may represent the official position of the Church. And that is serious indeed.

First of all, the historical basis of the book is unbelievably naïve. The claim is made that, throughout her history, Russia has been the victim of a global conspiracy, aimed at wiping her off the face of the earth. The reason that Russia is worthy of so dubious a distinction is that she has been chosen by God to carry true Orthodox Christianity to the world. Consequently, the enemies of Russia are the enemies of Orthodoxy, and, since only Orthodoxy represents true Christianity, they are the enemies of Christianity itself. What we have here is a ‘Christian’ version of the well-known conspiracy theory, even though the whole notion of a conspiracy

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contradicts the Christian understanding of history! But look with what Machiavellian brutality the Metropolitan has resolved this problem. He writes:

A sensible understanding of historical development doubtless has nothing in common with the idea of a world conspiracy reflected in human history as a result of the conscious, single-minded activity of evil Jews and Masons. So simple an interpretation of history, a characteristic, as a rule, of very aggressive and primitive racist ideologues, can lead to tragic and unjust consequences if it is adopted in practice. (p 286)

It is hard not to agree with this assessment. And if the author had not himself reproduced such a 'simple interpretation of history' there would be nothing further to say. The problem is that the author has made this declaration in order to protect himself against over-attentive readers who might otherwise be inclined to call a spade a spade. Having protected himself in this way, he goes on in a very different spirit:

But there are people, associations, religious systems and whole states which abuse their free moral choice and incline, consciously or unconsciously, to the spiritual and dynamic source of evil. Yes, their political, social and religious practice can be historically traced to antiquity. There also exists a technology of destructive practice, which has been perfected over time.

The author goes on with the challenge 'to fight with all our strength, evil in all its forms, including its social expressions – political, economic and religious'. So against whom are we to fight, and how? The Metropolitan has no difficulty finding an answer to the first question. Russia, as the constant victim of the conspiracy, has many enemies, but the main one, both historically and eschatologically, is Judaism, which is implacably opposed to Christianity. This enemy constantly weaves a web of lying intrigue in order to establish a world government of its own. Through manipulation, Jews are the true rulers of the world. They have corrupted all humanity, and now Russia, with the infection of democracy etc etc – according to the scenario set out in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The whole history of Russia, according to the Metropolitan, revolves around the struggle with Judaism, which in its deepest religious sense is a struggle of light against dark, of the People of God against the God-killers.

Metropolitan Ioann has formulated this so clearly that there is no possibility of any other interpretation of his understanding of history. Consider the following:

All the burden of the hatred of the God-killers was naturally and unavoidably concentrated on the People of God, who had been given the task of maintaining the true faith. (p 119)

It seemed in the tenth century that the Jewish diaspora stood on the threshold of an unprecedented triumph. It seemed that the chosen people, who for a thousand years had been devastated by a spiritual catastrophe which was the consequence of their terrible crime of killing God, would finally fulfil their dream of world domination. There was very little left for them to do other than to wipe out a newly-born and still inexperienced Russia. But at that time there were two people at the helm of Russia, whose activity thwarted a successful outcome for this global Jewish enterprise. (p 19)

The Orthodox understanding of being chosen is an understanding of an obligation to serve one's neighbour. The Jewish understanding of being chosen is a desire to dominate surrounding peoples. It is thus understandable how contact between such radically different ways of looking at life and at one's place in the world could only produce noxious, destructive and catastrophic events. (p 256)

The author quotes Prince N D Zhevakhov's remarks about the 1917 revolution from his book *Reminiscences*:

In reality it was the very real, cynical and open war waged by the Yids against Christianity; it was one of those old attempts to conquer the world . . . , which . . . began long before the coming of Christ the Saviour into this world. The same means and methods are repeatedly used throughout history.

Metropolitan Ioann comments on this as follows:

Today such a witness is exceptionally important for us, because it demonstrates and confirms the underlying religious character of the second great betrayal of Russia, which continues to this day. (p 267)

Taking into consideration the misanthropic contents of the teaching of the Talmudic religious sects, which recognise human dignity as a unique possession of the chosen people, and consign the rest of humanity to the same level as cattle, devoid of an eternal soul, it is fully understandable that association with the Khazar Jews did not leave the true Russian with any pleasant memories. (p 44)

The conversion of Russia only increased the hostility of the Jews to Russians. History has brought us echoes of this burning religious

hatred . . . with time, the list of Orthodox Christian martyrs at the hands of the Jews has grown, but even this could not arouse any sympathy for Russia. (p 44 n)

With such a terrible and insidious enemy, which threatens eschatological catastrophe for the Russian people, it is understandable that a way of salvation must be found. In the opinion of Metropolitan Ioann this salvation can come only in the form of an ideal Christian state. Such a state, which of course is also based on Russian national consciousness, involves central control of economic planning, absolutism, isolationism, strict centralism, war against democracy, and a denial of human rights, not only as a priority but even as a concept! This state, which would be completely identified with the Russian Orthodox Church, would introduce spiritual censorship through the control of the mass media, and at the same time, it would support an Orthodox foreign policy. In addition, the Russian Christian state would be re-established in its 'natural' borders, that is the borders of the former Russian Empire. If we transpose all this into the language of political theory, the state would be 'totalitarian'. That is no accident! The Metropolitan is sympathetic to totalitarianism. Not without a certain logic, he finds the most attractive political system after 1918 to have been early German fascism, and in Russia, Stalinism in its last phase (1945-53).

Metropolitan Ioann's attitude to fascism deserves special mention. He separates the development of fascist ideology into two distinct periods: one positive and the other negative. In the first period, according to him, a 'healthy national-conservative ideology' was created thanks to the strong influence of the 'Russian idea' on the early fascists. Once again, he quotes the memoirs of Prince Zhevakhov with a sympathy bordering on adulation:

The merit of the Germans consisted in the fact that they looked to the Russians as their cultural teachers and accepted their accounts of the bestiality of Bolshevism and the conquest of Russia by the Jews as a threat to their own existence, and as a great world danger which threatened all Christianity, civilisation and culture. (p 291)

In the Metropolitan's opinion everything would have gone well had not the Nazis, sometime soon after the Munich beerhouse *putsch*, rejected Christianity, and at the same time also rejected their Russian teachers as members of an inferior race. From the moment of that rejection, the Nazi sheep became Satanic goats, and the Metropolitan proceeds to expose fascism. But even this *exposé* gives him the opportunity to make a particularly vicious attack on Judaism:

German Nazism (with its geopolitical aims) and its principal visible enemy Jewish Nazism (which found political expression in the doctrine of Zionism and religious expression in Talmudic Judaism) have a single source which inspires their claims to world domination – militant anti-Christianity. This has its roots in the deep hatred of the Devil towards the Son of God, the Saviour of the World and the Redeemer of Mankind from slavery to sin and evil. (p 296)

The extent to which this reconstruction of Nazi history corresponds to reality does not concern us now. What matters is that the Metropolitan thinks it is true. And even more important is the fact that the basis of Nazism which was later successfully implemented in the Third Reich was developed a good three years before the Munich *putsch*. It is true that the ‘final solution’ to the Jewish question had not yet been accepted, but the conditions for such acceptance had already been established.

The Metropolitan also sees a similar dichotomy in the Soviet history of the Stalin period. But whereas Hitler was at first right and then went wrong, Stalin was at first wrong and then got it right! Soviet history, the Metropolitan explains, was a battleground between two parties, irreconcilable in their attitude towards the country which they ruled. One group hated Russia intensely, and consisted mainly of non-Russians. The other, in contrast, cared about the interests of the country and the needs of its population. (p 317) Stalin initially supported the former of these groups, but then, more far-sightedly and pragmatically, he began to support the other. The first was personified by Beria, the second by Zhdanov. The author thinks that Zhdanov’s great contribution to the Russian cause was that in 1946 he came out with a sharp condemnation of ‘rootless cosmopolitanism’, a condemnation which, according to Metropolitan Ioann, meant ‘the recognition of the deep roots of a Russian self-consciousness which went back many centuries’. (p 321) But then the good Zhdanov died, and the bad Beria eliminated the good nationalists, even though they were members of the Party. Then the situation changed yet again, and another anti-Semitic campaign, the so-called ‘Doctors’ Plot’, was initiated, which was intended to establish the principles of National-Bolshevism. But the far-sighted and pragmatic Stalin died (not without the assistance of those ‘rootless cosmopolitans’ the author hints), and thus the hope of victory for the national idea, even if it was in Bolshevik dress, was buried. It is not necessary to be a professional historian to see the absurdity of such a reconstruction, not to mention its political slant. It has been built on the same alliance which has united the new, post-Soviet Communists with the national patriots. It is enough to point out that in 1946–48, when Zhdanov persecuted Akhmatova, Shostakovich and Zoshchenko he did not accuse them of

cosmopolitanism, a term which was not introduced into Soviet jargon until 13 January 1949, shortly after Zhdanov's death.

One of the most important characteristics shared by Nazism and Stalinism is anti-Semitism. Having studied the context of the Metropolitan's book, I dare to suggest that it is precisely this factor which explains his priorities. To demonstrate this, a short excursus into the past is necessary.

Historically speaking, relations between Judaism and Christianity have not developed smoothly. Christianity emerged from Judaism, but by the end of the first century it had broken away from its mother religion. Jewish Christian communities continued to exist, but they were marginal. Active missionary activity among the Gentiles, combined with simple religious practices (in contrast to the more complicated Jewish rituals), quickly made Christianity a world religion. But for a few centuries the split with Judaism was not absolute. Some Christians continued to observe the Sabbath on Saturday, and even visited synagogues. This caused concern among the bishops, and led to the appearance of texts with sharp anti-Jewish leanings. Both Melito of Sardis and John Chrysostom fought for the attention of their flock, and their sermons reflect concrete historical situations in Sardis (second century) and in Antioch (fourth century). Later things changed, and Judaism was no longer a competitor of Christianity, but thanks to the reputation of their authors, these anti-Jewish polemical tracts were preserved in the written traditions of the Church. In Byzantine anti-heretical literature, the theory became popular that all heresies which arose after the victory of Christianity could be traced back to Judaism. Thus the word 'Judaizer' was broadened in meaning, and came to be synonymous with 'heretic'. It was in this soil that the poisonous seed of Christian anti-Semitism grew. We cannot recount all the tragic consequences of this, but suffice it to say there had been centuries of Christian anti-Semitism. When it came to the Nazis' final solution to the Jewish question, many Christians were either unaware or even indifferent to what was happening. Six million lives were destroyed before the Christian world shuddered in horror and realised the depths that had been plumbed. What shocks us most about Metropolitan Ioann's book is the date of its publication. We live in a world after Auschwitz. The holocaust imposes upon Christians an absolute moral prohibition against Christian anti-Semitism. This is non-negotiable and final, and whoever breaks it puts himself on the same moral level as the butchers of Auschwitz.

Let us try to think through the logical implications of Metropolitan Ioann's ideas. If there is such a powerful, terrible and destructive force which is waging war against Russia, if Russia alone in the world possesses authentic Christianity, and if in addition we are talking here about the

cosmic battle between God and Satan, then the only truly good outcome of it all must be the annihilation of the enemy! It would seem that the Metropolitan is not calling for this. He rejects violence and speaks about the need for spiritual effort, for Christian selflessness, for the gift of faith. And yet how can we explain that at the same time he is becoming a symbol for the extreme, aggressive nationalist movement? How do we explain the fact that his articles are willingly printed by the radical right-wing newspapers, and that his blessing is sought by (and given to!) Russian black shirts? Researchers have long discovered that in fascism it is possible to find only those opinions which lend themselves to radically aggressive interpretations. Is it not worth reflecting on the end result of such an accusation of Judaism, and such a sympathetic description of fascism? Such thinking, after all, falls on the well-cultivated soil of Soviet state anti-Semitism at the very time when Nazi salutes and swastikas have become part of daily existence.

It does not matter if Ioann Snychev, ordinary citizen, personally loves totalitarianism. What can we do if one person loves freedom and another prefers slavery? In a totalitarian state the question of different ways of thinking is solved in a very simple way. Differences are not tolerated, and if there are any, there are always drugs, walls or gas chambers to cure the infection. In a democratic state, dissidence cannot be disposed of so easily. We are free to demonstrate our indignation and to protest, so long as we do not encroach on the freedom of others to do the same. 'Love your neighbour as you love yourself' says the Old Testament. And Jesus teaches: 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you'. The Talmud states: 'Do not do to your neighbour that which you yourself would not want'. The demand of democracy is that we enjoy our freedom, without limiting the freedom of the other person, which means that the other person has the right to be exactly that – other! It is a sad paradox that a senior figure in the Church has drawn a portrait of the 'enemy' in his book and encouraged citizen to be against fellow citizen and to promote a 'Christian' anti-Semitism. He thereby not only breaks the law of democracy, which he does not value, and the current law of Russia, which he does not like, but also the command of the religion which he is called to serve.

Given that Metropolitan Ioann has written from an historical perspective, we must now look briefly at the quality of the historical material which he offers his readers. As we have already seen, the book fully reflects the theory of a Jewish conspiracy, and reproduces the thoughts of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Hence the repertoire of his sources and his free (to put it mildly!) use of them, which leads to a result worthy only of schoolchildren.

When describing Russian history as a constant struggle between Jews and Russians, Metropolitan Ioann depends a great deal, especially for his understanding of ancient Russian history, on the work of L N Gumilyov (*Russia and the Great Steppe* Moscow 1992). The works of Gumilyov deserve special attention. Professional historians consider them to be riddled with mistakes, logical absurdities and incorrect evidence, but even so, he has been fantastically popular with ordinary readers. Partly this must be due to his own tragic fate as the son of the poets Nikolai Gumilyov and Anna Akhmatova; every Russian knows that his imprisonment in the 1930s was the occasion for his mother's greatest poem, *Requiem*, which stands as an eternal monument to the horrors of Soviet power. Then too, there is the broad sweep of his pen, his grand ideas and the alluring readability of his pseudo-scientific texts. All this makes a fascinating study for a social psychologist. Gumilyov's attitude towards the Jews is clear – he resents them. As L C Klein has ironically commented:

This unbearable tribe, by its very existence, challenged Gimulyov's conception of the unbreakable link between ethnicity and territory . . . This people should have perished, yet it existed everywhere and had achieved well-known success. (*Neva* 4 1992 p 229)

Yet here in the pages of Metropolitan Ioann's book, we meet this very same fantasy world, built on Gumilyov's resentment! There is only one exception. A principal cornerstone of Gumilyov's interpretation of Judaism as an anti-system (a negative religious confession in comparison with the positive systems of Christianity and Islam) is his belief that the God of the Old Testament was sharply opposed to the God of the New. For Gumilyov, the Old Testament Deity was the Devil, whom Jesus drove away during his temptation in the wilderness (see p 167 of his book). Such an explanation contradicts Christian teaching, which since the second century (in opposition to Marcion) has considered all attempts to tear Christianity away from its Jewish roots as heretical. For this very obvious reason, the Metropolitan cannot adopt Gumilyov completely, although he does accept his main conclusions. But it is a very different story with the Talmud, which Metropolitan Ioann feels he can revile quite freely, without any risk of being called heretical.

Everything he has written about Judaism and the Talmud is tendentious, and is based on ignorance. This is because the author, though accusing another religion of 'hatred towards humanity', has not found time to examine the original sources. One might have thought that in taking on Judaism he would have read the Talmud, which is available in Russian, and acquainted himself with at least some of the serious literature written by both Jewish and Christian scholars. But Metropolitan Ioann has

preferred to learn about Judaism from anti-Semitic tracts! How would he react if somebody started to explain Orthodoxy as an expert, basing his analysis exclusively on Communist atheistic literature, and not thinking it necessary to consult even the New Testament?

In his dependence on anti-Semitic classics, Metropolitan Ioann goes so far as to quote Russian chronicles, not according to the sources, but according to the book by A Diky, *Jews in Russia and in the USSR*, in which events of the year 1113 are transposed to 1069. Mistakes of this kind abound in this book. The Metropolitan confuses Archbishop Vassian Rylo, the author of the *Letter to Ugra*, with the brother of Joseph Volotsky, who was also called Vassian, but had a different surname. He, too, was Archbishop of Rostov but 25 years later! (p 105) Similarly, the Metropolitan does not know that the famous Ipatyevsky manuscript is so called, not because of its place of origin, but because of its place of preservation. (p 50) Metropolitan Zosima was not removed from his diocese at the council of 1484 for 'the heresy of Judaism, depravity, drunkenness and blasphemy' because there was no such council; according to Archbishop Gennady of Novgorod, a contemporary source, Zosima's retirement was entirely honourable. It was also Zosima, and not Joseph Volotsky, as the author affirms (p 124), to whom we are indebted for the idea that Moscow was the new Constantinople, an idea subsequently modified by the elder Filofei (Theophilus) into the theory that Moscow is the Third Rome. But Ioann's reluctance to accept Zosima as the source of this theory is understandable, given that it is so attractive to him! One final example must suffice to demonstrate how his ideological stance has forced Ioann to ignore his sources.

Apart from the earlier Hitler and the later Stalin, Metropolitan Ioann is also attracted to Ivan the Terrible. As befits a true hero, Ivan had to strengthen the power of the Russian autocracy, eradicate heresy, struggle against Jewish dominance and lead a moral life. If the historical sources fail to support this beatific vision, then they have to be ignored. The murder of his son? A slander of foreign mischief makers! The Tsar lived ascetically and did not have seven wives. (In this, the Metropolitan is probably right, since the correct number seems to have been five, but this hardly makes Ivan an ascetic!) The bloodbath in Novgorod was a result of Ivan's policy of eradicating Judaism and Judaizers, about whose existence everyone apart from Metropolitan Ioann is entirely ignorant! Particularly significant is his handling of the murder of Metropolitan Philip by Maluta Skuratov, which was carried out on the orders of Ivan. Metropolitan Ioann calls into question the official version of the life of the saint, canonized by the Russian Orthodox Church. On p 160 he states that Maluta, having been sent to Metropolitan Philip by the Tsar, did not find him alive. But the life

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of St Philip, composed twenty years after the event, says that Maluta found him very much alive, and suffocated the good man with a pillow!

In recent times Orthodox clergy have sometimes been heard to complain that the intelligentsia is leaving the Church. There is some truth in this, and the activities of people like Metropolitan Ioann merely deepen the split. We cannot eradicate the twentieth century from the history of Russia, and return to a world we have lost. The challenges of today's world need today's answers. If the Russian Orthodox Church is going to insist on searching for cosmic enemies and doing battle with fantasies, she will end up as a mere relic of history, of interest only to archaeologists and anthropologists. Among today's clergy, there are some remarkable pastors whose heroic activity commands deep respect. But people who care about the fate of the Russian Orthodox Church can only be alarmed by the fact that a significant number of the senior clergy support the position of Metropolitan Ioann. On the cover of another of his books, *Struggle for Russia*, no fewer than five bishops rapturously applaud his work!

As a member of the Russian Orthodox Church, I humbly turn to her head, Patriarch Alexii II, with a request that he repudiate Metropolitan Ioann's book, *The Autocracy of the Spirit*, and put an end to all attempts to make the Church a refuge, if only by reputation, for fascism.

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