Hierarchs and Dissidents: Conflict over the Future of the Russian Orthodox Church

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In the late 1960s, 1970s and early 1980s, the struggle for greater freedom for the Russian Orthodox Church was waged by so-called 'dissidents', many of whom paid for their efforts with periods of imprisonment. Often they felt themselves to be struggling not only against the Soviet state and communist party, but also against the hierarchs of their own church, who, willingly or otherwise, had become the captives of the state and, in part, its instrument for holding the church in thrall. Under Gorbachev, the church has been given greater freedom, hierarchs are freer to speak out than formerly, and the 'dissidents', along with other newly-emerging independent voices within the church, are able to engage in a variety of activities and movements which, inter alia, continue to call for greater freedom both *for* the church and *within* the church. This paper will attempt to examine how far thinking has been evolving within these two groups under *glasnost'* and to assess what points of confluence and conflict have emerged.

Two remarkably similar statements made recently by leading figures in each group suggest a similarity of thinking that might suggest the two groups are moving towards each other. Archbishop Kirill of Smolensk, a very able and high-flying young bishop, appointed in November 1989 to head the Church's Department of External Church Relations (making him in effect the church's 'foreign minister'), was reported as follows in respect of the situation facing the newly-elected patriarch of the church:

> He predicts that the new patriarch's task will be 'very difficult', similar to that of Patriarch Tikhon after the 1917 Revolution. The Russian people are looking to the church for answers, says Kirill, but 'they forget that the church has been tremendously weakened. The church must have time to be renewed, and the people do not want to wait. There is no time.'[1]

[1] *Time* magazine, 18 June 1990.

In similar vein Father Gleb Yakunin, who has been boldly calling for greater freedom in and for the church since 1965, and who was released from labour camp as recently as 1987 told *Komsomolskaya pravda* that:

> Today a paradoxical situation has come about: our society, seeking a way out of its spiritual crisis, has turned to the church, but the church itself is not far from the situation of society.[2]

Such a similarity of views in analysing the church's problems might suggest that there is scope for working together to tackle them. While that cannot necessarily be ruled out for the future, it has to be said that there is little or no sign of it beginning to happen yet. The two groups, to judge by both public and private statements and comments, remain suspicious and distrustful of one another. The hierarchs appear to fear the usurping of what they regard as their rightful, canonical authority by self-appointed spokesmen, particularly now that the latter can express their views through sections of the Soviet press. The 'dissidents' (and others in the church) find it difficult to trust leaders who until very recently compromised with the state, uttered publicly what are now demonstrably falsehoods about the church's situation, and have shown themselves to be hesitant in responding to the emergence of *glasnost'*.

Before proceeding to an examination of the views of the two groups, two preliminary points need to be made. Firstly, the term 'dissidents' which appears in the title of this paper, chosen two years ago, clearly has little or no relevance in present circumstances. It appears here as a reminder of the recent past and as an indication that inter-church arguments which are currently being waged are nothing new, but have been carried on since the mid-1960s in much less propitious circumstances. Those who spoke out before it was safe to do so deserve not to be forgotten. But since it can be argued that in making their views known now they are not engaging in an act of defiance but are, in part, responding to Gorbachev's call for *glasnost'* in every part of Soviet life, it seems more appropriate to refer to them as independent church activists or independent church thinkers.

Secondly, by no means all of those who now voice criticism of Russian Orthodox church leaders would, now or previously, have described themselves as dissidents. For various reasons there were many dissatisfied with the state of affairs in the church who chose not to take the path of open protest. They include those who believed that this path was simply wrong, or unlikely to achieve the desired results; that it was unfair to criticise church leaders who could not answer back; or who were, understandably, afraid of the consequences. It is

[2] *Komsomolskaya pravda*, 7 June 1990.

of interest that now a number of educated professional church members, sometimes with influential positions, are emerging to express views very similar to those of the former dissidents, and, recently, even to sign joint statements and appeals with them.

Linked to this is the fact that some priests and parishioners in different areas of the USSR, traditionally quiescent in the face of oppression and very far removed from any involvement in dissent, have recently begun to make complaints about the way the church is run, or about their own immediate leaders in the church. Moreover, and less surprisingly, ordinary church-people have become more involved, and more vehement, in battles with local party organs over attempts to reopen closed Orthodox churches. This means that the polarity of hierarchs and dissidents as the only people speaking out publicly about church affairs no longer obtains.

To a large extent, this simmering discontent is similar to that felt in many, even most, other areas of Soviet life. Impatience with the slow pace of change, of promises held out but not yet fulfilled, of dissatisfaction with leaders compromised by their pasts still in power — all these can be found everywhere, not only in the church. But two aggravating circumstances may be instanced. Firstly, there has been no attempt, and there is very little by way of a mechanism, to bring about change in the leadership of the church. This contrasts unfavourably with the opportunities there have been to oust party and government leaders and to replace them, by means of elections, with new faces. (The recent relatively free election of a new patriarch might appear to give the lie to this statement, but that will be discussed in more detail below.) Secondly, although Orthodox church leaders have now begun to respond to the greater opportunities open to the church, their critics maintain that they have done so very slowly, far more slowly than leaders in other areas of Soviet life have responded to changing circumstances. And this at a time when people are looking (as noted in the statements quoted above) to the church for moral leadership. The question is to what extent change, renewal and spiritual regeneration, as well as organisational reform, are necessary within the church before it can begin to respond adequately to the needs of an increasingly despairing and disintegrating society.

New Opportunities

The hierarchy, and indeed the church as a whole, now face almost unimaginably huge tasks as areas of church life which have been banned or severely circumscribed for decades are being opened up to them. Churches and cathedrals are being handed back and need

restoration; monasteries and convents are being opened and need to be peopled; more priests may be trained and need teachers and premises; the Scriptures and other literature may be published and imported in vastly greater quantities, for which personnel, experience and training are needed, as well as means of distribution; churches are permitted to engage in charitable work, such as working in hospitals, with the elderly and needy children, alcoholics and drug addicts, all of which requires a huge investment in terms of time and money, not to mention the strain of carrying out such work with the inadequate premises and facilities which are now being described as endemic throughout the Soviet health and social welfare system; and church spokesmen are increasingly called upon to play a part in public life for which (like many others) they have neither experience or training. In such circumstances, criticism for failing to achieve more may seem churlish. But churlishness is not the only possible motivation for the critics. Their concern is that, given the general impression that the church is now virtually free, continuing problems, disagreements and shortcomings may be ignored and neglected. That is why they need to point out the difficulties involved in making use of new opportunities, and the distance still to be covered now that a start has been made.

It needs to be said that all these concessions to the church are a source of great joy for all church members. Oppressed for decades, they can now begin to rebuild church life. People able to worship in a newly-returned local church for perhaps the first time in their lives, or to read a Bible, or to see honour and dignity restored to a church they love, cannot fail to be thankful and to feel that the prayers of countless thousands over the decades are now being answered. But at the same time, they know that the severe problems of the past cannot be eradicated swiftly, and have left traces which are still causing pain and uncertainty over the future.

One cause of uncertainty is that none of the changes have yet been enshrined in law, and the old, repressive Law on Religious Associations of 1929 is still on the statute books. Publication of the long-awaited draft Law on Freedom of Conscience in June 1990 does appear to grant all the major freedoms for which believers had been campaigning since the 1960s. Yet there is still disagreement over key issues such as registration of churches and teaching of religion and atheism, and both official church leaders and independent activists complain that their views have not been paid sufficient attention.[3]

[3]The Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religion was adopted by the Supreme Soviet of the USSR on 1 October and came into effect when it was published on 9 October. It has clarified the issue of registration of churches (though without completely satisfying all parties) but has left the issue of the teaching of religion not completely resolved. Church leaders and activists appear to have played a greater role in the wording of the published law than they did in the June draft.

This uncertainty notwithstanding, it remains true that the church now has massive new opportunities and is seeking to meet them at parish, diocesan and national level. At the 1988 *Pomestny Sobor* there was fairly open discussion of the church's problems and needs and calls to do more in all the main areas of church life. This has been followed by action. The total number of churches has increased from 6,893 in June 1988 to over 9,000 now — it is difficult to keep a precise count as permission is being given to open more churches, sometimes after protracted wrangles with local authorities. Permission has been given to open between 20 and 30 monasteries and convents — again, discussions about premises can take time and so the status of any given monastery about which discussions are taking place is not always certain. Two of the biggest and most significant monasteries, Valaam and Solovki, now are said to be returned to believers, but there was debate and uncertainty for one or two years before this was established. But there can be no doubt that at both central and local levels the bishops and priests have been actively pursuing the church's interests. Another example is in theological training, with seminaries and a new form of teaching institution, an *uchilishche*, opening in several dioceses — Smolensk, Minsk, Kishinev, Novosibirsk.

The greatest criticisms at the 1988 Sobor were directed towards the church's Publishing Department for failing to provide sufficient literature. Steps are being taken to rectify this, the most obvious example being the appearance of the *Moskovski tserkovny vestnik*, which contains interesting information on diocesan and parish life not available before, spiritual instruction, and even letters from readers, some of which have voiced complaints about aspects of church life and practice. Moreover, diocesan publications have begun to appear in the form of newspapers and newsletters containing local news, and in some cases calendars and other materials. Judging from comments at Bishops' Councils, the motivation for this has been at least partly despair over getting sufficient material to satisfy their needs from the Publishing Department, but it must surely also be a response to increased local opportunities.

Great strides are being made in the realm of charitable activity, with parishioners now able to work in hospitals, homes for the elderly, mental institutions etc. There are now reports of work in more sensitive areas, previously off limits for ideological reasons — childrens' homes, prisons and labour camps. There is talk of work with Afghan veterans, though, as yet, no detailed reports.

Surely all this is evidence of a positive response by the church leadership to a changing situation? Yet it has not, so far as I have been able to discover, led to any reappraisal by the independent activists of their former opinion of church leaders. One of the most criticised

hierarchs has been Metropolitan Pitirim of Volokolamsk. One way in which he has responded to the new situation has been to secure the return of a monastery in Volokolamsk where various ambitious ventures in the field of charitable activity, publishing etc. are being started. Yet no-one appears to regard this as a change of heart, and many speak sceptically of personal ambition.

Analysis of the Church's Problems

There is very little conflict among commentators on church affairs over the problems facing the Russian Orthodox Church and an assessment of what its most pressing needs are. All regard as priorities progress in those areas of church life, outlined above, where it has now in fact begun to take place. What has happened of late is that the hierarchs have begun to voice opinions, and speak of needs, to which dissidents have been referring for decades. To take the most striking example, Patriarch Aleksi II, in an interview with *Izvestiya* shortly after his election, spoke disapprovingly of the removal of priests from the parish council by the Bishops' Council of 1961, and of the fact that in some parishes up to 80 per cent of income was given to the Soviet Peace Fund.[4] These are both highly contentious matters on which the hierarchy had either remained silent or denied there was a problem, in the teeth of evidence provided by dissidents. So there is a convergence of views apparent on the tasks which the church needs to tackle, and the unfreedoms still shackling it which need to be dealt with.

It is of interest that the former chairman of the Council for Religious Affairs, Konstantin Kharchev, ousted from his post in June 1989, had come apparently independently to similar views about the problems of church life. Initially negative about the church and determined to curb its role, he changed his view during his tenure of office and spoke positively about the church's role in public life and the need to make good deficiencies in church life. Whether this was a matter of personal conviction, as he himself claimed, or a volte-face in the face of the pressing needs of *perestroika*, his analysis of church problems, particularly as revealed in three increasingly frank interviews in *Ogonek*, came to sound remarkably similar to the views of church dissidents.[5]

Even more interestingly, he seems to have begun coming to similar conclusions about the role of the church leadership. In his third and frankest *Ogonek* interview in October 1989, after he had been ousted

[4] *Izvestiya*, 16 June 1990.
[5] *Ogonek*, Moscow, No. 21 May 1988; No. 44 October 1989; No. 48 November 1989.

from office, he referred to 'the growing power struggle within the leadership of the church' and also stated: 'I suspect that some members of the Synod, from force of habit, have counted more on the support of the authorities than on their own authority in the church.'

He also advocated more democratic methods of electing the patriarch, suggesting that the method used in 1917 would be more appropriate than the single candidacy used at Patriarch Pimen's election in 1971. This brought down considerable wrath upon his head, chiefly from such a staunch defender of the church leadership as the deputy head of the Ideology Commission of the Central Committee of the CPSU, Aleksandr Degtaryev. (Kharchev had already attempted to criticise the church leadership publicly, particularly over financial matters, in an interview given to *Izvestiya* in April 1989,to mark the anniversary of Gorbachev's meeting with the Russian Orthodox leaders. However, the interview was not published, and one more favourable to the church, by Metropolitan Vladimir of Rostov, appeared in its place.) It appears that it was this criticism of the Russian Orthodox leadership which, almost incredibly as it seemed at the time, led to Kharchev's removal from office. A delegation of the Holy Synod to the Supreme Soviet to complain about Kharchev's interference in internal church matters was the final straw, following complaints from other churches and bodies, that led to his dismissal.

One of Kharchev's allegations which was also an echo of complaints by church activists was the mystery surrounding financial transactions within the Moscow Patriarchate. Complaints of financial mismanagement have surfaced from time to time over the years, but have become more insistent under *glasnost'*. It is not merely a question of inappropriate expenditure of the offerings of the faithful on elaborate banquets for foreigners and official cars for bishops, though these continue to be made. Allegations of state officials enriching themselves at the church's expense with the connivance of church leaders are far more serious, and, though difficult to prove, persistent. Talk of serious KGB interference in the church's finances is becoming more open. Though specifics are hard to come by, it is worth turning the matter around and considering that as the Russian Orthodox Church is possibly the largest depository of revenue in the USSR outside immediate state or party control it is hard to imagine that, under conditions of corruption which are now generally admitted to exist, there would not be those who would have tried to profit by it. KGB interference in the church's affairs generally, not just in financial matters, has been confirmed now by Kharchev, who said in his third *Ogonek* interview that one of his three deputies at the CRA

was always a KGB placement. Further confirmation was provided by Boris Yel'tsin during the confirmation hearings for government ministers last year, when he criticised the KGB for excessive involvement in church affairs.[6]

All this tends to bear out what independent church activists have been saying for some time. It also serves to bolster their distrust of church leaders who, whatever the pressures on them may have been, connived at the situation. It was not just a question of hierarchs remaining silent over the persecution of the church, or even telling untruths about the church's problems, but of them actually handing over the church's cash to outsiders and in some cases, apparently, enriching themselves in the process. Whatever public statements church leaders may now make, the bitterness consequent upon their past actions will take a long time to heal.

The Bishops' Role

One rather curious recent development in the split of views between hierarchs and independent activists occurred over the patriarchal election in June 1990. Patriarch Pimen's death came as no surprise since he had been incapacitated for some time. The fact that the Holy Synod called an election for within five weeks of his death initially seemed like a positive and energetic response to the situation — a resolve to find a new leader as quickly as possible to end the state of paralysis in which the leadership had found itself for some time. Surprise was occasioned by the fact that the election was to take place before the customary 40 days of mourning for the late patriarch had elapsed, but this was explained away by bishops as being not a sign of disrespect but as affording an opportunity to have the 40-day requiem immediately following the Pomestny Sobor which was to elect the new patriarch.

A number of leading church activists, however, took exception to this move in an open letter. It was their contention that the shortness of time did not allow time for proper preparation for the election. In particular, they were concerned that there would not be time to carry out elections of delegates in the dioceses satisfactorily. It was a sign of progress that clergy and lay delegates to the Sobor were publicly elected, not appointed by the bishops as on previous occasions, which gave an air of greater democracy to the proceedings. But the church activists still did not think there was sufficient time for discussion and preparation. They urged the bishops to adopt the procedures used in 1917. They were clearly afraid that the bishops were still determined to

[6] *Keston News Service*, No. 331 3 August 1989.

keep matters very much in their own hands. Even though the fear of the bishops simply acting under state pressure, not of their own free will, may have largely disappeared, there was still an apprehension that the bishops were unwilling to allow any great degree of clerical and lay participation in church administration.[7]

Further evidence of bishops exerting strong control has emerged in other ways. For example, during the elections to republican parliaments and local soviets during spring 1990, there were reports of bishops using their influence against clergy wishing to stand whom they regarded as undesirable candidates. The Bishops' Council had taken a decision that any priest wishing to stand for election must have the blessing of his bishop. By withholding his blessing, a bishop could make a priest who insisted on standing appear disobedient to the church. The best-known example is that of Fr Gleb Yakunin, to whom Metropolitan Yuvenali of Krutitsy refused to give his blessing. This fact became even more pointed when during the second-round run-off election, Yakunin's opponent was another priest who did have the bishop's blessing. Yakunin's successful election to the Russian parliament suggests that the tactic was not effective.

Even before but particularly since his election, Patriarch Aleksi II has shown himself ready to make increasingly frank statements and to tackle some of the urgent problems of church life. This does not necessarily mean that he is as progressive and as pro-Gorbachev as some western press reports have made him out to be, simply that he can move with the times and do what is advantageous for the church without courting trouble. Like other senior bishops, he is very much a product of the era of stagnation. As long as anyone from that era is in a position of leadership, there will be those in the church who will be sceptical as to how much progress can be made.

The change in religious policy which took place in 1987-88, symbolised above all by Gorbachev's meeting with members of the Holy Synod in April 1988, has been left in place but has not been followed up by any further initiatives from the top. A lead was given to herald an important new change of direction, but matters have been left to take their own course since then. This means that state and party officials concerned with religion can continue to exercise blocking tactics. This has been demonstrated during the lengthy discussion of the new law on religion. It has also been well illustrated by Kharchev's account of the bureaucratic pressures he found himself up against. But in addition to this, there has been little or no change in the church leadership or attitudes. (A notable exception to this is the appointment of the gifted and energetic Archbishop Kirill of Smolensk as chairman of the DECR, which may be the first

[7] Their views can be found in *Russkaya mysl'*, 25 May 1990, p. 6.

acknowledgement that change is needed. But though he has already made his mark in certain important ways, it is too early as yet to say that the church leadership is changing in ways sufficient to remove lingering scepticism among activists.) What Gorbachev has done is to make noteworthy concessions to the church, granting it in effect a new lease of life, but without doing anything to tackle the endemic problems of church life resulting from the captivity of its leadership in the past. The church has been set on a new course, but without the internal *perestroika* which many would regard as a prerequisite.

It is against this background that a group of priests and lay independent activists have announced the convening of an All-Russian Orthodox Congress to be held some time in autumn 1990. Its purpose is to review church life and to seek solutions to the problems besetting the church in a way which, the conveners believe, has not been possible within the official church structures.

Splits within the Church

The greatest problem that the Russian Orthodox Church faces at present is the stark fact that many of its faithful are simply leaving its ranks. (This crucial matter deserves more space than has been allotted to it in this paper, but it has been covered quite fully in the paper of Professor John Dunlop.) The fact that large numbers of the faithful in western Ukraine would leave to join the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church as soon as it became possible has been inevitable for some time now. What was not predicted was that a Ukrainian Autocephalous Church would announce its formation, and that parishes in Russia would announce that they wished to join the Russian Orthodox Church in Exile. Orthodox hierarchs reacted to the legalisation of the Ukrainian Greek Catholic Church with statements in December 1989 and January 1990 which suggested something close to panic. They repeatedly made allegations of violence being used by Ukrainian Catholics during the takeover of Orthodox churches. Though there have certainly been reports of angry confrontations, there has not as yet been any substantiation of any incident of actual violence. The new patriarch, then Metropolitan Aleksi of Leningrad, used his status as a people's deputy in the Soviet Parliament to make a speech attacking the Ukrainian Catholics in very strong terms.[8] In subsequent quadripartite talks involving the Vatican, the Ukrainian Orthodox Church (i.e. the newly-renamed Exarchate of the Moscow Patriarchate) and the Ukrainian Catholics, the Moscow Patriarchate

[8] *Izvestiya*, 24 December 1989.

reportedly took a line so negative that the Ukrainian Catholics broke off the talks.

There is no doubt that large issues are involved where the Ukrainian Catholic Church is concerned which should be resolved calmly and over time. It is a question of ecclesiological issues with long-term implications, not only the immediate problem of whether Catholics or Orthodox should worship in any given building in western Ukraine. Church activists recognise this, and, though basically in favour of the Ukrainian Catholics' right to the church of their choice, not all of them are prepared to concede that the legalisation of the Ukrainian Catholic Church is a simple matter which can readily be solved.[9] But there must be at least a suspicion that many of those involved are not so much eager to join the Ukrainian Catholic Church as to leave the leadership of the Moscow Patriarchate. That suspicion is given strength by the more or less simultaneous exodus of believers to the Ukrainian Autocephalous Church and the Russian Orthodox Church in Exile. This adds weight to the call by independent activists for reform within the church.

Conclusion

Two concepts keep recurring with great regularity in the USSR today in many different areas of life, including the church. One of these is community. In a society fragmented by fear, suspicion, informers and denunciations, where until recently it was not safe to share one's deepest thoughts with more than a very few close people, the idea of community embodies a heartfelt need. In the church — where of course the very similar concept of *sobornost* is absolutely central — the search for community is taking the form of repeated calls to develop parish life. Long a theme in *samizdat* writings, this is now being urged publicly by church activists, and of late the theme has been taken up by hierarchs as well, notably in a declaration of the Holy Synod on 3 April 1990. If ways can be found to develop this, and make the concept of community within the parish a reality, that would be a concrete achievement to which both church leaders and activists could feel they had contributed.

The other salient and urgent concept is that of repentance. In Soviet society generally there is now a feeling that the past must be dealt with before the future can be built. Nowhere is this truer than in the

[9]See for example the exchange of views between Russian Orthodox activist Aleksandr Ogorodnikov and the Ukrainian Catholic leader Ivan Hel, discussed in 'Russian Orthodox Attitudes towards the Ukrainian Catholic Church' by Myroslaw Tataryn in *RCL* Vol. 17 No. 4, pp. 313-32.

church. Activists have now begun calling upon church leaders to confront the past and repent of it publicly, for they believe that in no other way can the church begin to construct its future. A future worth having must be based on the truth, not on lies. Steps are being taken with the canonisation of some church leaders of the Soviet period, and the virtual certainty that there will be more to come. This is a start, but is not radical enough as yet to meet the case. Independent church activists who have suffered so much for the truth can never work wholeheartedly together with church leaders on the basis of a cover-up of the past. Public repentance offers the way to healing of past hurts and to the restoration of *sobornost* within the church.