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https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_sbct-01.php

The Need for a Christian Critique of National Messianism

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The articles by Lezov and Krakhmal'nikova represent a very significant attempt to face candidly the dangers of a rebirth of the crudest forms of traditional Orthodox antisemitism in the present climate of revived Russian nationalism with a religious flavour.

It is quite fair to say that Orthodox *theology* in the strictest sense is no more antisemitic than any other kind of Christian theology; and, in the Middle Ages, Byzantium was probably less overtly and violently menacing an environment for Jews than most parts of Western Europe. The massacres of twelfth-century England are not paralleled in the Eastern Empire. However, popular religious literature in the Orthodox world, from the early mediaeval period onwards, does undoubtedly show the same disturbing traits as the pathologies of the western Christian mind of the same era: one has only to think of the casual abuse of 'unbelieving Jews' in the hugely popular *Pilgrimage of the Mother of God among the Torments of Hell*, for instance.¹ However, the most appalling manifestations of anti-Jewish feeling belong to the end of the nineteenth century – the activities of the Black Hundreds, the pogroms in Polish and Ukrainian territory. If the Orthodox Church cannot be blamed for these exactly, there were plenty of clerics who colluded with and even actively encouraged them. Despite Krakhmal'nikova's quotation, Metropolitan Antoni Khrapovitsky of Kiev had a very ambiguous record in this respect, and was generally believed to have had close contact with the Black Hundreds in the earlier days of his career; in later life, exiled in Western Europe, he initially showed some sympathy with fascism. His case illustrates vividly how a theoretical commitment to Christian universalism and a theoretical disapproval of vulgar antisemitism could coexist with practical condoning of antisemitic activities in the name of integralist Russian politics ('Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nation').

Here we touch on one of the distinctive dimensions of the question of antisemitism in the Russian context. The late nineteenth-century outbursts of violence owed something not only to popular religion but also to an intensified sense in the public sphere of the unique mission of the Russian people, and the consequent need to secure the dominance of the Orthodox Slavic population within the imperial territory (we can compare with this the widespread paranoia about people of Jewish descent in sixteenth-century Spain, also a society increasingly conscious of a unique national vocation). And although the writers of the articles under discussion distinguish the concept of Russian vocation found in the greatest of the Slavophile writers from the crudities of more recent quasi-Nazi polemic, there remains an ambivalence in the whole idea of national vocation. It is true to say that the Slavophiles refused to consider the future of Russia independently of the Orthodox Church, and so cannot be accused of simplistic racism; but what is to be said about a non-Christian minority

in a nation whose calling is defined by the Church? The Church may be committed to a universal mission for all peoples, and is indeed inimical in its very essence to doctrines of racial superiority: it is good to see these things said with the clarity with which they are expressed in the essays of Lezov and Krakhmal'nikova. But there remains surely something questionable in a doctrine of national (or even racial) destiny that does not take account of ineradicable differences within a state, and the Slavophiles cannot be completely absolved of the charge of intensifying the darker side of national consciousness in the nineteenth century.

It may be worth referring here briefly to one writer whose debt to Slavophilism is beyond doubt, but who has shown himself remarkably alert to these areas. Andrei Sinyavsky (Abram Tertz) not only endows himself with a strongly Jewish pseudonym, but has dealt in his fiction in various ways with the problem of Russia's feelings towards its Jewish population. Apart from his treatment of the doctors' plot in *The Trial Begins*, there is a notable passage in *The Makepeace Experiment* about how the Jewish people act as a reminder to the mercurial, apocalyptic tendencies in the Russian spirit that 'history didn't begin today and that noone can tell how it will end'.² In other words, the Jewish presence is precisely what relativises clear doctrines of national destiny and racial teleology. This is all the more interesting in coming from a writer whose Orthodox commitments and whose fascination with and love for traditional Slavic culture are not in doubt. His own ironic and iconoclastic idiom has itself been regarded by some commentators as 'Jewish'.

The underlying question raised by these articles is, I think, about the varieties of antisemitism. It is possible to say with perfect truth that Orthodox Christian theology repudiates national messianism. The two writers here discussed rightly make great play of this, and recognise that a large part of Russian antisemitism (like the Spanish antisemitism of the sixteenth century) has to do with rival claims to unique and saving status: there can be no more than one messianic people. Issues that are not so clearly addressed here are: firstly, the degree to which even the most rigorously Orthodox varieties of Slavophilism share some of the responsibility for forming and sustaining this national messianism; secondly, the problem that has so troubled western theology in recent years, that of the ways in which Christian theology itself can be seen as implicated in antisemitism. Lezov is sharply aware of how the experience of the Holocaust makes a massive difference to what Christian theology can now say with integrity; but there is a further question as to whether it is not simply distorted caricatures of Christianity but the very enterprise of theologising Christian uniqueness that is responsible for the foundations of antisemitism.

The question is not only about Russian national messianism, but about 'ecclesial messianism': is Judaism the failed version of what the Christian Church successfully realises? While the answer to these questions is not an easy one, the awareness of their urgency has affected even quite conservative western theologians, and has led to a renewed effort to find ways of discussing the Church's relation with the Jewish people that do not beg the question of whether the Church renders the Jewish reality in some way obsolete – a bitterly problematic notion in the light of this century's experience. The next stage in the Russian discussion of the issue must be a new theological engagement with this wider problem.³

For the present, though, these articles are to be warmly welcomed, affirming as they do, quite uncompromisingly, the need for the Orthodox community to distance itself from the kind of Great Russian nationalism that more or less identifies the Christian with the Russian identity, at the expense especially of Russian Jews. Westerners who are not familiar with the recent history of Russian antisemitism – not only the various

brands of official Soviet antisemitism, but the views of dissident reactionary groups – may not realise how urgent this matter is. And as the Soviet Union rapidly disintegrates (I write at the end of August 1991), the need for a Christian critique of national messianism becomes ever more urgent, if we are not to see an empire replaced by a map of warring tribes. It is precisely the universalism that our authors discern in Christian theology that has the capacity to prevent the corrupt identification of the gospel with racial power and security so prominent in so many national histories.

Notes and References

- ¹ Text translated (by R. Williams) in P. Pascal, *The Religion of the Russian People* (London, 1976); see especially pp. 74–5.
- ² *The Makepeace Experiment* (New York, 1965), p. 49. There is some useful, though sketchy, comment on this aspect of Sinyavsky's work in Richard Lourie, *Letters to the Future. An Approach to Sinyavsky-Tertz* (Cornell University Press, 1975).
- ³ Among western theologians who have reflected on this, it is worth mentioning the German Dorothee Sölle and the Americans Rosemary Ruether and Paul van Buren.
- ⁴ The recent murder of Fr Aleksandr Men' has been very plausibly attributed to nationalist extremists, hostile to his critique of Russian messianism (Men' himself, of course, was of Jewish extraction). Further back, there is much useful information in M. Meerson-Aksenov and B. Shragin (eds), *The Political, Social and Religious Thought of Russian Samizdat – an Anthology* (Belmont MA, 1977), especially Section VI.