

Problems of Orthodoxy in America:

A Retrospective of Father Alexander Schmemmann's Analysis of Orthodox Spirituality In America

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Written over 30 years ago, the series of articles by Father Alexander Schmemmann outlining the problems of Orthodox Christianity in America continue to offer insights and challenges. At the time of their publication, they were an attempt to alert all the Orthodox jurisdictions of their common failure to engage American culture with the Gospel of salvation. Indeed, the liturgical, canonical, and spiritual problems not only hindered the Church from carrying out the missionary mandate of the Gospel but were seen by Father Alexander as symptoms of a deeper crisis i.e. the capitulation of Orthodoxy to secularism.

For Father Alexander, secularism was the corner stone upon which was built a Christianity that retained its form while embracing a worldview that had no link with the living God. Secularism was the root of the spiritual problem for the Orthodox in America and consequently was the cause of all the betrayals and anomalies that ultimately distorted the Image of Christ, the Church and the human person.

The power of secularism reduced Christianity to a "religion" - to an institution using the correct words and rituals while opting for another Gospel. Thus, Orthodoxy, while triumphantly proclaiming itself to be the right faith, rapidly became disconnected - from reality. It had ceased to unite human life with divine life.

From his perspective Father Alexander saw Orthodoxy in its secular context as the right faith for a people who basically cared very little, if at all, about Orthodox belief. He clearly understood the impact secularism had made on the Church by the way it appealed to the human craving for autonomy. "The secular sphere of life is thought of as autonomous, i.e. governed by its own values, principles and motivations" (p.173). This meant that there was a radical shift in orientation. No longer was God the center and goal of human existence. Through secularism God was being usurped by the "individual" who declared himself the center of existence.

One of the most striking features of American secularism for Father Alexander was its religious inclusivism. This versatility allowed Orthodoxy to assume a respectable place in American society while at the same time depriving it of the power to save and transform. Like all other religions in the American context, Orthodoxy was reduced to a facet of life that was deemed important and even necessary so long as it did not intrude upon the "individual's" autonomy - so long as it did not disturb the way the "individual" chose to live:

"...it is a characteristic feature of American secularism that it both accepts religion as essential to man and at the same time denies it as an integrated world view permeating and shaping the whole life of man. A 'secularist' is usually a very religious man, attached to his church, regular in attending services, generous in his contributions, acknowledging the necessity of prayer, etc. He will have his marriage 'solemnized' in church, his home blessed, his obligations fulfilled, all this in perfect good faith. But all this will not in the least alter the plain fact that his understanding of all these spheres: marriage, family, home, profession, leisure and ultimately his religious 'obligations' themselves, will be derived not from the creed he confesses in church, not from the Incarnation, Death, Resurrection and Glorification of Christ, the Son of God become Son of Man, but from the 'philosophies of life', i.e. ideas and convictions having nothing to do with that creed, if not directly opposed to it" (p. 173).

II.

That secularism became tightly woven into the fabric of Orthodox Church life can hardly be disputed. Yet Father Alexander was not satisfied in only diagnosing the Church's spiritual illness. He attempted to trace its origin and to a certain extent succeeded. Referring to Orthodoxy's "progressive surrender" to secularism, Father Alexander names the clergy as "the first to accept and to propagate" its alluring vision and philosophy. It was the clergy who capitulated to the idea that an authentic expression of Orthodox life in America was an impossibility. Given this conclusion the only way Orthodoxy could survive in America was if it compromised virtually every aspect of its life. And though this compromise may have been difficult at the start, it gradually became a way of life - a way of survival - that continues even to the present.

One can argue that Father Alexander was too hasty in naming the clergy as the first to "accept and propagate" secularism. After all, it was often the case that the immigrant community organized itself into a "religious" corporation that intentionally compromised and diminished the ministry of the parish priest. Nevertheless, Father Alexander was right to insist that the clergy were the ones to adopt, and articulate the secular vision in order to sustain themselves and the "diaspora." An immigrant Church - a Church in exile - had no other alternative but to assume the psyche of the American secularist.

The "religious" corporation became the paradigm for American parish life and remains so to this day. Thus, in retrospect, we need to see that regardless of what can accurately be referred to as a renaissance of parish life i.e. educated clergy, liturgical and eucharistic revival, Christian education programs, outreach and missionary awareness a secular vision still prevails in the local parish's perception of itself. Here we encounter a great paradox. On the one hand an attempt to restore Orthodox church life in the parishes is underway. Yet, on the other hand, these same parishes with their by-laws and statutes still retain and rely on a form of governance that is uncanonical and therefore antithetical to the very renaissance they affirm to desire and support. This paradox signifies that another dimension of the spiritual problem is developing which will be more difficult to diagnose and remedy.

III.

Father Alexander equated the local parish with the Church. Though this concept is not universally accepted by Orthodox theologians, the fact remains that the parish "was perceived [[as]...the other, the ultimately serious pole of life, which one could minimize, by- pass or even reject personally, but which no one could reduce to his own image and `needs'"(p.184). Here Father Alexander contrasts the vision of the "old country" with that of American secularism - a vision that opened the way to the revealed Kingdom of God with a vision that was unable to transcend the self.

By no means did Father Alexander romanticize about "old world" Orthodoxy. Throughout his writings he attempted to expose its own infidelities and foibles with clarity and passion. Yet, it is most unfortunate that in his article on the "spiritual problem" he omits a discussion on the development of the "State Church", Yes, the Church in the "old world" was the other "serious pole of life". But at the same time the Church in the "old world" was more than a remnant of the glory of by gone days. The very mentality of these Churches, including those in captivity, emerged from the symphony of Church and State - and from this symphony, the core of the Gospel was being eroded.

The State Church helped prepare the way for the surrender to secularism. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the `victory' of Saint Constantine began the persistent and complex process of the Church's internal defeat - the capitulation to the world - a capitulation to a vision of society in which the Church preached the Gospel while praying for the defeat of all state enemies. The symphony of Church and State helped to instill in the mind of the Christian the idea that the Church was not only in the world, but of the world.

Fortunately the alliance between Church and State did not go unchecked. The monastic movement of the 4th century reminded Christians that the kingdom of God and the kingdom of Caesar could not coexist peacefully. This movement reminded all Christians of their calling to be living martyrs - to be a people who courageously maintain a creative tension between God's kingdom and the world.

Though Father Alexander refrained from discussing the phenomenon of the State Church, he was quite aware that "no society, no culture has at any time truly accepted Christianity and from this point of view there is nothing radically new in our American situation. But at all times and in all 'cultures' there were persons who did accept it and live by it" (p.179). Father Alexander recognized that the courage of the martyrs and the asceticism of the monks provided the antidote to American secularism. "There is no Christian life without martyrdom and without asceticism, this latter term meaning nothing else, fundamentally, but a life of concentrated effort and fight" (pp.179-180).

For Father Alexander, martyrdom and the ascetic life enabled the Church to remain faithful to the Gospel as it sought to transfigure the world. Martyrdom and the ascetic life characterized those who, by renouncing secular autonomy, embraced the freedom "in" Christ. In and through this freedom, Father Alexander saw Orthodox Christianity withstanding the unwaning zeal and seductive allure of American secularism. In and through this freedom, Father Alexander saw the Church remaining faithful to the missionary imperative of the Lord.

IV.

By exposing and diagnosing the problems of Orthodoxy in America, Father Alexander continues to remind us that the *status quo* of Church life cannot go unchecked. Healthy criticism and edifying self-evaluation are not only good for the soul but also good for the Church.

American secularism has definitely left its mark on the Church. But at the same time it offers the Church new opportunities for proclaiming the crucified and resurrected Savior. We live in a society in which there are no external restraints to preaching the Gospel in our parishes; no emperor looking over our shoulder, no sultan confining us to a ghetto, no totalitarian regime sending us to the gulags. For these reasons alone Father Alexander's articles on the problems of Orthodoxy in

America should be received as prophetic exhortations to recover our vocation to be the local Church in America. Yet, in spite of our autocephaly - in spite of the opportunities we have in America - we remain insecure as a local Church. This insecurity is a symptom of the ongoing spiritual malady Father Alexander struggled to treat. Two hundred years of Orthodoxy in America, 30 years of autocephaly and yet the Church continues to think and function as if it were the Church of Byzantium or imperial Russia. And while American secularism can open the door to what could be a new era of evangelical activity, theological reflection and spiritual renewal there are those - both clergy and laity - who want the door to remain closed.

Father Alexander's call for the Church and her faithful in America to assume a posture of martyrdom and asceticism cannot go unheeded. But here we must distinguish between a martyrdom and asceticism that illumines from a martyrdom and asceticism that drives one into darkness. The illumined will seek to love and serve the Lord Jesus and not the self. Like Saint John the Baptist, they will enter that spiritual dynamic in which they become less so Christ might become more (cf. John 3:30). As for the unillumined they will take all that is good, true and beautiful in the Church and twist them into burdens, rules and obligations that stifle the Holy Spirit and destroy the seeking and thirsting soul.

Father Alexander was a sober voice reminding us that if we are to be faithful to our calling as the Church in America, we must overcome the fear of American secularism. By breeding an unhealthy nostalgia for the past, the fear of American secularism has isolated the Church from engaging the present. Nostalgia for the past has turned Christ into an idol unable to guide the Church as a saving and transforming presence here and now. But the fear of American secularism does not end with idolatry. Where the idols are, there too will be the iconoclasts who, being unable to engage the present with a living faith, will subject the Church to the philosophies and ideologies of the day. Adept in imposing what is alien upon the life of the Church, the iconoclasts can reconfigure the face of Christ to fit and accommodate virtually any expression of belief or spirituality.

The life and work of Father Alexander witness to the ongoing activity of the Holy Spirit in history. By affirming this reality, he saw Orthodoxy in America as a providential act of God and not as an historical accident that would correct itself when the "diaspora" returned home. Father Alexander concludes his article with words that are as relevant today as they were when they were written. They echo the missionary mandate of the Gospel by acknowledging the universality of the Orthodox Church, a Church for all people, a Church uncircumscribed by time and space.

"It is clear to every one who wants to see that there are today around us thousands of ears ready to listen, thousands of hearts ready to open themselves not to our human words and human explanations, not to the `splendors' of Byzantium or Russia, but to that alone which makes us sing at the end of each Liturgy: `We have seen the true Light, we have received the heavenly Spirit, we have found the true Faith...!' And if only we could understand this and take it to our hearts and our will, day after day, there would be no problem of Orthodoxy, but only a mission of Orthodoxy in America"(p.193).

[Fr. Schmemmann's article, "[Problems of Orthodoxy in America: III. The Spiritual Problem.](#)" was published in *St. Vladimir's Seminary Quarterly*, Vol. 9, No. 4, 1965, pp. 171-193.