



# The Relevance of Western Post-Holocaust Theology to the Thought and Practice of the Russian Orthodox Church

31/03/2002 | Hackel, Sergii

**Archpriest Dr. Sergii Hackel of the Russian Orthodox Church challenges his church to confront the 'endemic antisemitism' in Slavic lands and to re-evaluate its theology in the light of the Shoah.**

## The Relevance of Western Post-Holocaust Theology to the Thought and Practice of the Russian Orthodox Church

**Sergii Hackel**

### The Reason for the War

It was more than thirty years ago, but I still remember her well, or at least I remember her feelings well. We met at the administration desk at her hotel in the centre of Moscow. On her way she had passed the Moscow Synagogue, where she had noticed a large gathering of people around the entrance. She had not found this disturbing: if you have a synagogue, then people must pass in and out. "How can they dare to laugh on our streets?", she asked me fiercely, "when it was them who caused the Germans to invade."

At least she knew that Jews had been subjected to special victimisation, something which was not officially admitted even during the war. On the contrary, the facts were either craftily disguised or denied. No one can forget the reluctance to officially commemorate Babii Jar. Later, when a memorial was finally erected, they even avoided mentioning that the victims were Jewish by referring to the nearly 70,000 "Soviet Citizens" who had perished there. Before this, in 1952, a unique monument to Jewish victims of the Nazis, which the Jews of Ponary (Lithuania) had dared to erect at the end of the war, was simply destroyed.

The Soviet authorities were no less restrictive about such things while the war was still in progress. It was in vain that Solomon Mikhoels, at a time when the Holocaust was still taking place, tried to persuade the Soviet media to specifically mention the Jewish casualties.<sup>1</sup>

In Moscow, in March 1944 there was a rare gathering of 3000 people, at which Mikhoels, Feffer and Ehrenburg were allowed to speak openly about the sufferings of the Jews. Ilia Ehrenburg and Vasilii Grossman nearly broke the official silence by preparing a comprehensive book on such sufferings. The book was even set in type, but in 1948 it was suppressed and all the printing plates destroyed.<sup>2</sup>

A symposium on the subject of this silence, which curiously did not extend to every book of this period, was published by Z. Gitelman last year (1997).<sup>3</sup>

Gitelman's work demonstrates just how thoroughly the programme of forced silence was conducted. In effect it was a silent counterpart to the massacres committed by the Nazis. For both

sides wanted to present a world which was *judenrein*, "free of Jews".

It has never been easy to find words to describe the sufferings of the Shoah, that Tremendum, to borrow the words of Arthur Cohen. However here we not only have survivors finding it difficult to express what they experienced, this was a whole social system which dismissed and distorted the facts.

In due course there was to be an additional reason for suppressing the memory of the Jewish massacres. A proportion of the local Slavic population (and not only Slavic) participated in the extermination of their Jewish neighbours. The Nazis liked to emphasize such facts in their reports. Indeed one of these alone, referring to the killing of 229 Jews in Khmel'nik, might explain the Jewish distrust of the post-Shoah dialogues and reconciliation which I shall be discussing later. In 1941 Einsatzkommando 5 reported that "the reaction of the population here in Khmel'nik to deliverance from the Jews has been so strong that it resulted in a thanksgiving service" (presumably a moleben).<sup>4</sup>

## **The Role of Experience**

In our discussions last year there was a natural division of our inquiries. When we spoke of theology "after Auschwitz", our concerns were largely related to western and central Europe. However the peoples of the former USSR experienced similar suffering over a much longer period, this we decided to call the "Gulag". In the process of doing so we ignored a vast number of people in the Soviet Union who also experienced Nazi rule. Therefore we ignored the Shoah as something experienced by our immediate forebears, whether Jews or gentiles. It is only by redressing the balance that we might face the problems of post-Auschwitz as our own in the simplest and most "domestic" sense. If the preceding centuries could have allowed any one of us, as a believer of the Orthodox Faith, to have sung in that Khmel'nik moleben, then we have to ask, with particular urgency, how this could have ever been the case, and even more importantly, must be prevented from recurring ever again in the future. That is not to say that one's absence from the moleben would have been much better: passivity provides no answers when dealing with urgent moral problems. At Khmel'nik, as at countless other places, the only Christian response in the face of the anguish of the Jews should have been to risk one's own welfare even one's own life, in support of defence of the victim.

## **Could righteous gentiles point the way?**

The Israeli authorities have taken the lead in perpetuating the memory of those non-Jews who risked, and often lost their lives in the defence of Jewish victims of the Shoah. They are known as righteous gentiles. Every righteous gentile has been commemorated with the planting of a tree on the outskirts of Jerusalem at Yad Vashem.

So where are the equivalents of such trees in Russia? Or failing that, lists of the names of righteous gentiles? The thoughtful, but ill-fated speech, delivered by Patriarch Aleksii II to a largely Jewish audience in New-York in 1991, at least touched on this subject. He only mentioned one Kievan priest, Aleksii Glagolev, as an example of someone who had sacrificed his own welfare to do much work. He might also have mentioned Fr. Aleksii's wife, Tatiana, as they had worked together. Both husband and wife survived. The Patriarch also mentioned two martyrs, a priest and a nun. However, both of these had to be borrowed from the martyrologies of Russian emmigrés: Fr Dimitrii Klepinin (1900-1944) and Mother Maria Skobtsova (1981-1945). It cannot and should not be the case that there are no other names of either Russians, Belorussians or Ukrainians waiting to be added to this, at the moment, humble list.<sup>5</sup>

On the contrary we should endeavour to enrich it, and so enrich ourselves. Oral historians should

hasten to supplement the archives, which themselves may have failed up to now to yield their secrets, because the appropriate questions have not yet been asked.

In the beginning many opportunities were missed, deliberately missed, to acclaim those who tried to help the Jews. On 2 November 1941 a representative of the Russian Orthodox Church, Metropolitan Nikolai Iarushkevich, was invited by Stalin (now an atheist persecutor of the Church, although formally he had been Orthodox) to take part in the Soviet State commission charged with the investigation of Nazi war crimes in the occupied territories of the USSR. They required him also to express his outrage at the programme of Soviet propaganda. However he could not discuss the mass extermination of the Jews, and therefore he could not draw attention to any of the righteous gentiles.

This is starkly contrasted to the actions of Metropolitan Andrei Szeptycki of the Greek Catholic Church in Nazi-occupied L'viv. In 1942, ignoring all risks to his position and his life, he did not hesitate to protest against the treatment of the Jews. He addressed Hitler personally and then, also Himmler separately. Among other things he issued a heartfelt pastoral letter to his flock: "Thou shalt not kill".<sup>6</sup>

He was a righteous gentile of the first order, who also risked his life to shelter potential victims of the Shoah under his own roof. Likewise he encouraged the Greek Catholic monastic communities to offer their support.

All this needs to be acclaimed and pondered.

## **A Difference in Comprehension**

As we learn more about the Shoah to the east of Poland, the image of the Shoah as something rooted and developed in the west will be dispersed. In the process we may allow for a creative reassessment of the past, and allow the Shoah to act, even now, as a catalyst. This could redefine our potential and transform our expectations. Jews and gentiles could be allowed to, even encouraged to relate to one another with new openness and commitment, not least Jews and the Orthodox Christians of the former USSR.

Decades of censorship and news-management in the former USSR have not only prevented Jews and Christians from taking this step, but also prevented the citizens of the USSR from gaining a proper understanding, or even any understanding, of western developments in this sphere. Yet it is these very developments which demonstrate the potential for a post-Shoah reassessment of the age-old and inherited attitudes to Jewish-Christian relations. It is gratifying to report that such a reassessment has taken place in many different churches in the west in recent decades. However, I need to be selective, so I shall limit my remarks to the Roman Catholic Church.

These remarks in turn will prompt me to turn to the Orthodox Church, and in particular to the Russian Orthodox Church, seeking to establish what comparable developments might be encouraged there.

I say, "might be encouraged", as if we are free to accept or deny other proposals, which sound equally valid. In fact we may find that our choices turn out to be moral imperatives, and to ignore them will be at our peril.

## **The Making of Nostra Aetate**

The Roman Catholic Church faced similar imperatives in modern times, even before the Shoah happened. But it was the Shoah which was the most powerful motive: after the Shoah "we have to

make every effort to cleanse Catholic thought of any residue of religious anti-Judaism or anti-Semitism", as Cardinal Willebrands has recently noted. This is "because we have looked into the abyss of horror where the hatred for the Jewish people exploded in our midst in Europe".<sup>7</sup>

But it was not only because we had looked into the abyss of horror, it was also because the Catholic world was beginning to accept responsibility for its teachings and attitudes which contributed to create the context, even the "justification" for the horror. Is it not true that a Catholic bishop in Slovakia responded to the personal appeals of a rabbi and his people, when in 1942 they faced the threat of "deportation to the east", with words to justify this threat? "It is not just a matter of deportation. You will not die there of hunger and disease. They will slaughter all of you, old and young alike, women and children, all at once. It is the punishment you deserve for the death of our Lord, the Redeemer?"<sup>8</sup>

The Second Vatican Council during the years 1962-5 sought to eradicate the words and concepts which could lead to this kind of un-Christian, and indeed anti-Christian, withdrawal of one's love for people. Also any suggestion that the Jews were responsible for the death of Jesus (the Jews collectively at that time and, even, more outrageously, the Jews collectively forever) was soon to be dismissed.

Therefore the all too familiar accusation of deicide was also to be withdrawn. At the Council the Bishop of Texas insisted that: "For so many centuries, and even in our own, Christians have buried this word against the Jews, and because of it they have justified every kind of horrid excess, [...] even their slaughter and destruction. It is not up to us to make a declaration about something philosophical but to [...] damn a word, which has furnished so many occasions of persecution through the centuries. We must tear this word out of the Christian vocabulary so that it can never again be used against the Jews."<sup>9</sup>

In any case the term is inappropriate, argued Cardinal Bea in an anonymous article which he wrote on the eve of the Council, when it seemed no longer certain that the Jewish question would find its due place on the agenda. Not least is it inappropriate since "the circle of true actors in the drama [of Jesus Christ's crucifixion] is restricted [and] the Jews who were then living dispersed throughout the world cannot be accused of the grave crime of deicide, still less their descendants through history." But it is most of all inappropriate as the alleged perpetrators must have "acted in ignorance" (these words are attributed to St. Peter [Acts 3:17]) because according to St. Paul these same perpetrators "did not recognize Jesus, or understand the words of the prophets [...]" [Acts 13:27]. Moreover, as Bea hastens to point out, "deicide can only be imputed to those who committed it [while] knowing the divine-human nature of Christ".<sup>10</sup> Whereas the apostles lacked clear knowledge of his nature, even at a later stage.

However, the Council's impressively compact decree on the subject, *Nostra Aetate*, was less concerned with the problems of the past than with the prospects of the future. These prospects were enhanced by the overwhelming support which they gained at the meeting of Vatican II: no less than 1763 votes were in favour, and 250 were against.

Thus the decree became part of that wide-ranging *aggiornamento* which future Pope John XXIII had already anticipated in 1957. "You have probably heard the word *aggiornamento* repeated many times", he had written to the then diocese of Venice. "Well, the Holy Church, who is ever youthful, want to be in a position to understand the diverse circumstances of life so that she can adapt, correct, improve and be filled with fervour."<sup>11</sup>

It follows that maybe, without the necessary adaptation, correction and improvement, fervour could be lacking and faith itself could be distorted or depleted. As to the diverse circumstances, which the Church wants to understand, these must include the Shoah, the anguish and the decimation of

the Jews.

## Dialogue

The *Nostra Aetate* deliberations and decisions had their own internal logic and justification. But it is important to note that they are also the result of dialogue with at least one representative of the Jewish community. Indeed, had not a Jewish scholar suggested that such a project was desirable, it might not have proceeded at the time, or at the pace that it did. It is particularly gratifying to us at this conference that the Jewish scholar in question, Professor Jules Isaac (1877-1964), was acting on behalf of the International Council of Christians and Jews (ICCJ), one of the major sponsors of our present meeting. Moreover it was an agreed statement from the [first ICCJ conference of 1947](#) which he put before Pope John XXIII at their fateful meeting on 13th June 1960, this, was itself the result of inter-religious dialogue.

No sooner had Pope John received the document, than he passed it into the hands of his trusted friend Cardinal Augustin Bea, the first president, of his new secretariat for promoting Christian unity. The dialogue was to continue. By October that year, Cardinal Bea had arranged a meeting with the president of the World Jewish Congress, Nahum Goldmann. Bea was to be the principal promoter of *Nostra Aetate* and all that ensued after 1965.

I am stressing the idea of dialogue because it is an important element in the preliminary procedures. But it is an equally important element in the proposals and the promise of the Council's own words, that "the spiritual patrimony common to Christians and Jews is [...] so great, this sacred synod wishes to foster and recommend the mutual understanding and respect which is the result, above all, of biblical and theological studies and brotherly dialogues".<sup>12</sup>

## The Dialogue and its Effects

The Christian-Jewish dialogue proceeds until the present day and we ourselves are taking part in it. In the Catholic world it was realized early on that it must be wide-ranging, if not all-embracing; that its success must depend on the careful definition of concerns and targets. In 1974 Cardinal Willebrands was soon to issue [Guidelines and Suggestions for Implementing the Conciliar Declaration \*Nostra Aetate\*](#).<sup>13</sup>

It was only the first in a number of documents to guide practitioners into disparate, yet equally important, areas of discourse, among which we can include (1) dialogue itself, (2) liturgy, (3) teaching and education, and finally (4) joint social action.

The task of all practitioners was made more important and more necessary because of the need to help each other and themselves to escape from centuries of prejudice and misrepresentation: "the past spirit of suspicion, resentment and distrust", as it was described in a joint Catholic/Jewish statement of 1992.<sup>14</sup>

Every schoolroom through its teacher, just as every parish through its preacher, could benefit from this gigantic undertaking, and maybe take it one stage further. Robert Daly's remark, which effectively said that " 'Removing anti-Judaism from the pulpit' is, in this post-Holocaust era, one of the most profoundly urgent Christian tasks", could be extended to every aspect of public life.<sup>15</sup>

This operation (in some cases, in the words of John Pawlikowski, "major surgery" is required)<sup>16</sup> is all the more impressive because Roman Catholics, no less than Orthodox, are the heirs and guardians of an immutable deposit of faith. However, in no way should this deposit of faith be treated as gospel talent, which is fearfully buried in the ground. As Pope John XXIII put it in his own words at the inauguration of Vatican II: "Our task is not merely to hoard this precious treasure,



as though obsessed with the past, but to give ourselves eagerly and without fear to the task that the present age demands of us, and in doing so we will be faithful to what the Church has done in the last twenty centuries".<sup>17</sup>

It was in this spirit that the Catholic Church was enabled to reestablish its profound and indeed genetic links with the Jewish world of its Savior, to bypass the polemics of the first centuries (even though these were reflected in scripture) and perhaps more importantly, to reconsider, even to reject, supersessionism. Before this it was accepted that the Christian Church was the New Israel, which overshadowed, displaced the Israel of old. Now it is being realized more and more that this theory was long ago rejected by its supposed originator, St. Paul. "Has God cast away His people?" asked the apostle rhetorically in Romans 11:1, then straightaway dismissed the thought: "Of course not!" For, ultimately, as Paul argued, "the gracious gifts of God and His call are irrevocable" (Romans 11:29). Judaism thus has its own integrity, holiness and promise.

## **The Orthodox Perspective**

How is any of this heard or heeded in the Russian Orthodox Church? The Church begins with a disadvantage, which I have already described: being ignorant of the Shoah. The Shoah as such has therefore not prompted any reassessment of the situation. But there is a second disadvantage. In marked contrast to the positive attitude of the Russian Orthodox hierarchy to the Roman Catholic Church at the time of Metropolitan Nikodim of Leningrad and Novgorod (1929-79), the Moscow Patriarchate had little enthusiasm for its sister Church in the west. Neither the latter's alleged missionary outreach into Russia, nor their supports of Greek/Ukrainian Catholics in the Ukraine have endeared it to the Russian Church. Apart from anything else, the gradual withdrawal of the Moscow Patriarchate from ecumenism provides yet another reason for the weakening of links with Rome. So Catholic developments, of which I have spoken, remain distant and indistinct for many of its members.

There is another disadvantage, which should also be challenged: endemic antisemitism, of which there were powerful reminders at last year's conference in this city, and not only at the unofficial interventions.

All the more need, therefore, with all these disadvantages, to consider what the Russian Orthodox Church, and the Orthodox Church as a whole, might one day do to reform.

But as I write that last word I realize that there is yet one more disadvantage. In contemporary Russian Church circles the very word 'reform' is itself used with extreme reluctance, not least because it is a reminder of the disreputable reformers and renovators (obnovlentsy) of the 1920s and 1930s. Their reforms were secretly supported by the communist party in order to polarize and diminish the appeal of the patriarchal Church. This is enough to provoke cries of neo-renovationism (neo-obnovlenchestvo) the moment any scrutiny of received tradition is proposed. But this is hardly an argument in itself. Nor is it to the point, since the original obnovlentsy did not concern themselves with Jewish-Christian relations.

## **Tradition Reconsidered**

No reform in Orthodox Church life would be conceivable without scrupulous consideration of the scripture and of tradition. But such consideration should not be hampered by unscholarly fears and inhibitions. There is a simplistic tendency to believe that scripture and tradition are both equally immutable, that not even a minute detail can be changed or added for fear of heresy and/or damnation. Yet if the truth is to be highlighted, safeguarded or restored, no amount of details should be allowed to stand in the way, regardless of their apparently venerable age.

The details are indeed many, and collectively they are therefore important. Some of them must be seen as impediments to a meaningful dialogue between our faiths. Nevertheless, it is important not only to identify the negative factors in the situation, but also to place them in perspective. Certainly doctors learn from symptoms. But mere suppression of the symptoms will not lead to full health.

## **Exegesis**

So, certain symptoms need to be discussed. Several of them are to do with limitations in our understanding of the gospel texts. These limitations are of two kinds.

The first involves a superficial or selective reading of the text itself. This allows the reader to conclude that the Jews crucified Christ. In order to do so he needs to ignore vital parts of the narrative concerning Pilate and the Roman administration, whose responsibility it was to sentence and to crucify this special prisoner like any other, if it comes to that.

But the reader may be helped in this selective reading by the phraseology of books like Acts. Thus, according to Acts 2:36, St. Peter speaks on the first Pentecost to a Jewish audience about "this same Jesus, whom you crucified". This you is emphatic. Elsewhere in Acts (3:13-15; 4:10; 10:39) its author makes similar assertions. And this, despite the fact that he allows the occasional reference to the "lawless men", by whose hand the actual deed was done (2:23).<sup>18</sup>

This brings one to the second type of limitation. Russian Orthodox New Testament scholarship has hardly begun the task of determining the impact which contemporary disputes made on the writing and editing of sacred texts. Yet, here is an example of that impact. The early Christians determined their separateness from Judaism ever more strongly as the first century drew to a close. This may have been a defensive reaction against increasing pressure and persecution of Christians by their former brethren in the Jewish faith.

Hence the repeated, and usually, negative use of the term 'the Jews' in the last gospel of St. John. There are no less than seventy mentions of 'the Jews' and nearly half of these are derogatory. Under their influence readers, not seeing the truth, could easily overlook the fact that Jesus himself was a Jew, that His mother was Jewish and that all His apostles (not only Judas) were Jews, indeed that His teaching is deeply rooted in Judaism. As Russian scholarship begins to convey the authentic image of Jesus the Jew to preachers and teachers of this land, the Christian basis for dialogue with Judaism could be rediscovered.

## **Homilies against the Jews**

At the moment teachers and preachers are deterred from taking even the preliminary steps towards such dialogue by those who turned the early, first century, anti-Judaic polemic into something even more overt and striking.

By the fourth century, Christian rhetoric depended as much on stereotypes as reason. There were many, who used this rhetoric to disparage all remaining links or any sympathy with Judaism or with the Jews. Gregory of Nyssa did not hesitate to speak of the Jews as "murderers of the Lord, murderers of prophets, rebels and full of hatred against God [...]". Indeed, "they resist God's grace, they repudiate the faith of their fathers". Thus they are nothing but "confederates of the devil, the offspring of vipers [...], Sanhedrin of demons, accursed, utterly vile [...]".<sup>19</sup>

However the most memorable words, as they were the most striking, were those of St. John Chrysostom in his 'Homilies against the Jews' of 386 and 387. In Chrysostom's submission, it is God himself who has abandoned the Jews, not least because they have crucified His Son. Therefore they were justly punished. "You Jews did crucify Him," he insists, "but after He died on

the cross, He then destroyed your city [...], [and] scattered your nation over the face of the earth". Let no one harbour delusions about the sacredness of synagogues: "God is not worshipped there". Do Christians not realize, asks Chrysostom, that the synagogue is now nothing other than "a brothel, a strong-hold of sin, a lodging place for demons, a fortress of the devil, the destruction of the soul, the precipice and pit of all perdition [...]"? For "here the slayers of God gather together [...], here God is blasphemed, here the Father is ignored, here the Son is outraged, here the grace of the Spirit is rejected."<sup>20</sup>

It could be said that Chrysostom's arguments are feeble and that his rhetoric is dated. Furthermore the inter-religious problems of fourth century Antioch, where he preached, can hardly concern us now. But there is a popular misconception which still allows such Fathers of the Church to be heeded, regardless of the obvious limitations of a given set of texts. They argue it is not for simple members of the Church to question the wisdom or sanctity of the Fathers. After all, it is they who determine tradition. Therefore their utterances have a strange weight. To all intents and purposes, they are not far short of infallible. So we should not question, let alone dismiss them.

There are two other impediments to dialogue: two different expressions of the anti-Judaic mode of thought. One of these is latent in church life. The other is possibly the most prominent of all. Both concern the Orthodox Church as a whole.

## **Canon Law**

Orthodox canon law is too often believed to have permanent implications and effects. Archbishop, Peter L'Huillier, notes: it is not realized in enough cases that it is "sometimes only a knowledge of the historical context [which] permits us to affirm that, despite its formulation, a canon law has an application strictly limited to a moment in Church history". Or to a period in Church history, one could add.<sup>21</sup>

Hence no one has questioned the retention of the ruling made by the council in Trullo in 692, which required the segregation of Jews and Christians: "Let no one [...] have any familiar discourse with them [the Jews], nor summon them in illness, nor receive medicine from them, nor bathe with them".<sup>22</sup>

In no way should Christians recognize their sacred meals, let alone partake of them. According to the mid-fourth century council of Laodicea "it is not lawful to receive unleavened bread from the Jews or to be partakers in their impiety".<sup>23</sup>

## **Liturgical Concerns**

More serious, as they are potentially more influential, are the Orthodox services for Holy Week. These provide such laws with a poetic glass, a liturgical view of anti-Judaic thinking in the early Church. The texts date back to the early middle ages and they could be Palestinian in origin. They may be used uncensored to this day.

The matins service for Good Friday gives a particularly convincing picture of Jesus as a victim of the Jews, who accordingly deserve the name 'deicides' which was given to them by the authors of these texts ('deicidal assembly' [bogoubiits sobor] or 'company of deicides' [bogoubiits sonmishche]).

"Here is what the Lord says to the Jews," reads this shameless invention, "my people, what have I done to you? By what means have I dismayed you? I have given sight to your blind, cleansed your lepers, and raised the cripple from his bed. My people, what have I done to you? And by what means have you repaid me? For manna you have given me gall, vinegar in return for water. In



return for love you have nailed me to the cross [...]. I can bear no more. I shall call my nations [=gentiles] and they shall glorify me together with the Father and the Spirit. And to them I shall grant eternal life".<sup>24</sup>

Here is the displacement theory fully displayed. The Jews are the crucifiers and the deicides. And it is the gentiles who receive eternal life. Meanwhile, as the preceding readings have already urged, the Jews should expect what comes to them: "punish them according to their deeds [dazhd' im Gospodi po delom ikh], for they have vainly arraigned thee".<sup>25</sup>

This petition is all the more regrettable since it might well have been understood by many worshippers: the Slavonic is not so far removed from the Russian as it is elsewhere in this linguistically demanding service. It therefore could have been misinterpreted as a simple call for revenge. Although Thursday and Friday of Holy Week were not so often days of violence in pre-Revolutionary Russia, there is no doubt that "traditionally the worst time for pogroms was Easter".<sup>26</sup>

This was demonstrated to the full at Kishinev in 1903. But such seasonal pogroms have not yet ceased happening, as was seen last Easter night at the Jewish cemetery of Smolensk. Thus it is clear how wrongly motivated piety can result in evil deeds.

An Orthodox Good Friday service has only the authority, which has been attached to it through centuries of use. It required no major council of the Church to bring it into being, and it requires no major council to edit or replace it once and for all. Such reforms have sometimes been proposed, not least by the Greek theologian Hamilcar Alivizatos (1960). But the service is with us to this day.

## **Myths of Ritual Murder**

Finally, who would ever have expected that medieval fears of ritual murder should have survived in our midst? Yet such is the society in which we live and such is our Church.

Let me mention two examples to prove such fears are still felt, it is not easy for the most authentic new martyrs of the Soviet period to be canonized. Even a man as dedicated as Metropolitan Petr Polianskii was canonized only last year, sixty years after his execution. As for the canonization of Mother Maria Skobtsova, it is not even on the agenda. Yet it was many years ago that a little-known child, Gavriil, occupied a place on the Russian Church calendar, without any formal canonization, simply because a plain secular court in the Belostok region decided in 1960 that he had been killed and therefore martyred by the Jews (ot zhidov ubiennyi is the usual phrase for such things). His day is commemorated with enthusiasm year after year in the place where he met his death. The day service repeatedly mentions the Jews, who, it is alleged, killed this boy for their own ritualistic reasons.

It is regrettable that such things still happen. But even more regrettable is the indication given by the present chairman of the Holy Synod's commission on canonization of the Moscow Patriarchate, that Jewish ritual murders need not be discounted. For when the question arose in connection with the death of Nicholas II and his family, the chairman felt bound to consult experts at the Moscow Theological Academy on the subject. He was to receive an ambiguous reply, which went as follows. The trial of Beilis in 1913 had "failed to prove" that the ritual murders could take place among the Jews. In any case, this particular murder had "few of the characteristics" associated with such killings by those people who [nonetheless] accept that they take place. Furthermore, "nothing is known about the religious affiliations of those participants in the murder whose origins were Jewish".<sup>27</sup>

In no way can this be treated as a declaration that no such things ever happen. And so we have to treat the myth of Jewish ritual murders as yet one more impediment to dialogue between the

different faiths. The more so since these conclusions were accepted without demur at the Moscow Bishops' Council in 1997.

## How Far to Go?

We have a long way to go. As of yet the Russian Orthodoxy has not been able to learn much from the Shoah. It has certainly brought them no nearer to the Jewish people. It has given them no insight into the meaning of their faith. And in the process they have failed to understand the fullness of their own.

We should not say that there is no prospect of a Council open to the Holy Spirit. At any rate, a Great and Holy (=Ecumenical) Council has been promised for years. However we lack the scholarship, humility and persistence to reach beyond familiar norms, even in preparation for the Council. Still less are we prepared to consider, let alone to take, hard conciliar decisions in this sphere. For each stage of this process we shall need much daring.

The day we dare to take decisions, we should also be prepared to implement them, however arduous that task will be. The Catholic experience is there to guide us in this field. But first we need to dare.

Only if we proceed beyond the various symptoms, I have mentioned, will we generate this daring. Thirst for recognition of and by the other must play a leading part. If only we could take the words of the Greek Metropolitan Damaskinos seriously, which were spoken at the conclusion of the third international conference of Jews and Orthodox Christians in 1993, we would be moving in the right direction. For [Orthodox] Christianity recognizes in "the theology, anthropology and cosmology of Judaism basic elements of its own corresponding teaching", said Damaskinos. This is confirmed "by a sincere respect not only for the Old Testament, but also for the spiritual experience of the chosen people in the divine plan of man's salvation". The spiritual experience of the chosen people, as he might well have added, which includes the Shoah.

Such beliefs would allow him to appreciate and emulate the gesture of the future Pope John XXIII in the days when *Nostra Aetate* could hardly be envisaged. It was 1960, and he was still patriarch of Venice. A delegation of Jews had come to see him. He greeted them with poignant words of welcome: "I am [Joseph,] your brother". For here were long lost kinsmen. There were tears at the prospect of their reconciliation.<sup>28</sup>

## Notes

1. Rapoport, L. *Stalin's War against the Jews*, New York and Toronto, 1990, p.250, n.3 (however, Rapoport casts doubt on the story).
2. Rapoport L., *op. cit.*, p.78. The Ehrenburg/Grossman book, entitled *Chernaya Kniga*, was only to appear in Israel several decades later (Jerusalem, 1980). Also a Ukrainian edition (two volumes), *Zaporozh'e*, 1991 ET *The Black Book*, New York, 1981).
3. Gitelman, Z., ed., *Bitter Legacy*, Indianapolis, 1997 (Among the novelists who have dwelt honestly on the plight of the Jews are V. Grossman in 1943, I. Ehrenburg in 1948 and T. Valennitskaya managed to publish her work on the v Ghetto, Solntse vostko, in 1946, but its sequel never appeared).
4. Cit.: Headland, R., *Messages of Murder: A Study of the Reports of the Einsatzgruppen of the Security Police and the Security Service 1941–1943*, London and Toronto, 1992, p. 114.
5. On Glagolev see *Chernaya Kniga*, 1991, ii. 67-71. On Maria Skobtsova and Dimitrii Klepinin see: Sergii Gakkel, *Mat' Mariia* ( Paris , 1992) , pp. 192–261 or Sergii Gakkel,

- Pearl of Great Price*, London , 1981, pp. 98–149.
6. Pis'ma-Poslannia Mitropolita Andreia Sheptytskogo [...] chasiv nemetskoi okupatsii (Saskatchewan , 1969), pp. 222–231.
7. Cardinal Johannes Willebrands, *Church and the Jewish People* ( New York and Mahwah NJ), pp. 169.
8. Cit.: Greenburg, I., 'Judaism and Christianity after the Holocaust', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 1975, p.525. The response could perhaps be related to the passage in I Thessalonians 2:14–16, the authenticity of which is widely doubted.
9. Cit.: Miller, J. H., ed., *Vatican II: An Interfaith Appraisal*, Notre Dame and London , 1966, p.358.
10. Cit.: Willebrands, *Church and the Jewish People*, p.58.
11. Cit.: Hebblethwaite, P., *John XXIII: Pope of the Council* ( London , 1984), p.264.
12. Cit.: Willebrands, *Church and the Jewish People*, p.205.
13. Cit.: Willebrands, *Church and the Jewish People*, pp. 211-219.
14. Text 'Joint Statement on the Shoah and Antisemitism ( Prague , 1992)' cit.: Willebrands, *Church and the Jewish People*, p.250.
15. Kee, H. C. and Borowsky, I. J., ed., *Removing Anti-Judaism from the Pulpit* (Philadelphia and New York, 1966), p.50.
16. *ibid.*, p.35.
17. Translated from the original [unpublished] Italian cit.: Hebblethwaite, P. *John Pope XXIII: Pope of the Council*, London , 1984, p.431.
18. As John Pawlikowsky has noted: 'Jesus was killed by some Jews and some Romans, but Christians have played up the Jewish involvement [...]. Historically, Romans probably had more to do with the death of Jesus than the Christian scriptures lead one to think' (Cit.: *Removing Anti-Judaism from the Pulpit*, p.98).
19. PG 46:685.
20. John Chrysostom, *Logoi kata Ioudaion*, v. I, i.3, vi.7, and i.6.
21. P. L'Hullier, P., *The Church of the Ancient Councils: The Disciplinary Work of the First Four Ecumenical Councils*, Crestwood NY, 1996, p. 8.
22. ET A *Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, Second Series, vol. 14, The Seven Ecumenical Councils, RP Grand Rapids, 1979, p.370.
23. *Ibid.*, p.151.
24. Triod' Postnaya, Moscow, 1992, matins for Good Friday, antiphon 12, after the fourth gospel reading. Russian translation (quoted in the Russian version of this paper): Adamenko, V. *Sbornik, sutochnykh tserkovnykh sluzhb pesnopenii glavneishikh prazdnikov I chastnykh molitvoslovii Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi na russkom iazyke* ( Paris, 1989), p.336. Translation into English mine. For 'deicides' see *ibid.*, p.339, third sticheron for the beatitudes and ninth canticle of canon, verse 1.
25. Triod' Postnaya, antiphon 11, after the fourth gospel reading.
26. Kenez, R., *Pogroms and White Ideology of the Russian Civil War*, ed. Klier, J. D and Lambroza, S., ed., *Pogroms: Anti-Jewish Violence in Modern Russian History*, Cambridge, 1992, p.306
27. Doklad o rabote Komissii Sviashchennogo Sinoda (MI) po kanonizatsii sviatykh nad voprosom o muchenicheskoi konchine Tsarskoi Sem'i: predstavlen Mitropolitom Iuvenaliem na zasedanii Sinoda 10 oktiabria 1996.
28. The actual words may not have included the name Joseph (hence the square brackets), but the greeting was proceeded by some words about Joseph's tearful encounter with his brothers (Genesis 45:4). Quoted from: Hebblethwaite, *John XXIII: Pope of the Council*, p.193.

This paper by Archpriest Dr. Sergii Hackel was first published in the Proceedings of

the Second International Conference "Theology After Auschwitz and Its Correlation with

Theology After the GULAG: Consequences and Conclusions". St. Petersburg, Russia.

January 26-28, 1998.