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International Consultation on Orthodox Peace

June 29-July 3, 2009

Thematic Report

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This report highlights some of the main thematic outcomes of the first Pan-Orthodox expert consultation on Orthodox Peace Ethics, held during June 29-July 3, 2009 at the Patriarchal Palace in Bucharest Romania. The consultation was financed by the Institute for Theology and Peace (Hamburg, Germany), and co-organized with World Council of Churches DOV (Geneva, Switzerland), the Institute for Peace Studies in Eastern Christianity (Boston, USA), and The Romanian Orthodox Patriarchate (Bucharest, Romania) with the endorsement of the Boston Theological Institute (Boston, USA.) The event included prominent ethicists representing twelve Orthodox and Oriental Churches. The keynote address was offered by His Beatitude Dr Daniel Ciobotea, Patriarch of the Romanian Orthodox Church.

The themes explored during the consultation included the question of blessing weapons, canon law, church-state, good and evil, victimization, nationalism, globalization, and chaplaincy. The participants had been encouraged to explore these themes exclusively from the perspective of their own church, as historically defined and developed.

Church-State Relations

In terms of Church-State dynamics, it was noted that in countries where the Orthodox Church is a minority group, the tendency is to be more pacifist in nature (Western Europe, North America, Middle East, India), whereas in countries where the Orthodox Church represents the major group, the tendency is to be more approving of State's use of coercion, usually due to State's pressure or cooptation (Russia, Romania, Serbia, Bulgaria, Greece.) Furthermore, all participants agreed that the Orthodox Church approves the existence of State as divinely ordained form of authority; thus praying for its wellbeing and local authority.

The following specifics had been pointed out:

In Lebanon and Syria, the Orthodox Church has authority over Family Law of its members, which under existing jurisprudence, is defined as "Personal Status" and refers to marriage, divorce, and inheritance. Currently, in Syria, priests are not required to serve in the military, and religious institutions have a tax-exempt status, also apparently enjoying privileges for infrastructural services, such as water, electricity, and phone.

In India, the model is based on Church-State separation, within the framework of secular democracy. Marriage can be performed by the Church (priest serving more as a witness), and divorce can be challenged in the courts.

In Egypt, where the Coptic Church is a minority, the Church has taken a “measured, wise approach” in its relations with the State. Although Egypt defines itself as a secular state, numerous times, the Egyptian government interfered with Church matters, particularly during the presidency of Anwar al-Sadat.

In Greece, the Greek Orthodox Church experienced periods of Church-State equality, close cooperation, as well as occasional political competition. The Church of Greece was in a position of submission to the State after the Greek independence in 1821, but it gradually became autonomous and re-shaped its relations of cooperation, currently characterized as *synergy*.

In the history of Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church experienced periods of Church-State equality (during its “golden age,” or “symphony”), submissiveness, oppression, and cooperation. The submission of the Russian Orthodox Church to the State from Peter the Great’s time until the restoration of the Patriarchate in 1917, left its marks over the Church, with an increased level of submission observed during Communist times. Yet, the Church was allowed to consecrate bishops and young men were accepted into seminaries with the approval of the state authorities. After the fall of communism in the USSR and the Soviet Union’s disintegration in 1991, the Church has renewed its prophetic voice, although somewhat mutedly. The Church’s relations with the State have been characterized several times by the highest church hierarchs as “critical solidarity” with the State: criticism whenever necessary (e.g. when the State *Duma* was considering replacing the miserly pensions of military servicemen with goods in kind, seen as unjust by many), and solidarity in certain areas concerning the moral education of the people (anti-alcohol, pro-family campaign, priests for the military). Still, in view of the yawning gap between the rich and poor, this prophetic voice seems rather weak.

In the history of Romania, the Orthodox Church experienced the status of equality and submissiveness towards the State. As the Church represents the main moral authority in Romania in terms of social stability, it occasionally challenged the State on moral issues, and also intervened in times of internal political crisis, such as Patriarch Miron Cristea, serving as a Prime Minister of Romania in 1939, or Bishop (now Archbishop) Gherasim Cristea, mediating between the Romanian Government and a crowd of uprising miners in 1999.

Victimization

Concerning the problem of victimization, it was generally agreed that this has had negative consequences over the self-esteem of a religious or ethnic community. It was also generally agreed that when the Church overemphasizes victimhood, it distorts the concept of humility as a personal choice, and tends to demonize enemies, thus distorting God’s image in every human being.

The tendency in Romania was to overcome victimization and generally project an optimistic attitude towards life in general, which serves as the basis for the acclaimed Romanian “culture of tolerance.”

It was noted that the Coptic Christians have been victimized by many: the Greeks, Romans, Turks and the Ottomans. Millions of martyrs shed their blood for the faith. As for a *national* identity, since Islam has, to a certain extent, annihilated the Copts’ culture and language, they have been deprived of their national identity, identity recognized as *ecclesial* in nature.

For the Greeks, it was noted that historically, the greatest trauma was inflicted not by the Ottomans, but by the Crusaders. This trauma, which still survives in the collective memory, runs deep and had not yet been fully overcome. This historical trauma is often exploited by those Orthodox who are against dialogue with the West. As for their attitude toward the Turks today, this depends on the generation; it is a challenge for the younger generation to move on and start over.

In Russia westerners usually note that the Russians seem to project the attitude of “non-victimhood,” while manifesting a surprising ability to forgive and forget the persecution imposed by the political regimes that came in power after the Bolshevik Revolution. Although the communists killed tens of thousands of Christians, no lasting sense of victimization can be observed. Nevertheless, for most believers the positive and negative sides of communism are clear.

Nationalism

Regarding nationalism, it was generally agreed that this was a political identity movement that had a strong impact on the Orthodox Churches, leading to their fragmentation. With the eruption of the nationalist ideology, the Church felt increased pressure from the State, which, on behalf of the nation, it demanded Church’s loyalty to itself.

Nationalism has also played a strong influence in cases when the Orthodox Church has been silent in cases of State’s using death penalty. Nationalism was condemned as a heresy at a council in Constantinople in 1872, when the Ecumenical Patriarchate sent distressing theological messages as an attempt to safeguard the universalistic nature of the Orthodox Church.

The intent to identify with successful ancestors “acclaimed” by the nationalist discourse as the forefathers of the nation, the Orthodox Churches had been also affected by being infused with a “national” self-perception. Thus, while stressing that the self-perception of the Coptic Christians is more ecclesial and less national, it was also noted that the Copts see themselves as the descendants of the Pharaohs, rather than Arabs.

In the case of the Greek Orthodox Church, it was noted that the Greek national identity is a very strong sentiment among the contemporary Greeks, who are very conscious that Greek is the language of the New Testament, the Church Fathers, and the Liturgy. Nevertheless, the Greek Orthodox Church is currently making attempts to counter nationalistic tendencies of the Greeks, recommending a more pastoral and gentle attitude towards non-Greeks.

In the case of the Russian Orthodox Church it was noted that while all forms of nationalism (not to be confused with patriotism) and disdain towards other people was clearly condemned in the *Bases of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church* of 2000, the situation on the ground is often different. While the educated and “normal” believers are friendly toward people and nations of the West, in conservative Orthodox circles and particularly in monasteries, the attitude is usually negative.

It was noted that in the case of the Romanian Orthodox Church, the nationalist discourse has tapped increasingly into the religious narrative, but was dominated by the cultural “spirit of tolerance” towards immigrant communities that has been historically specific of the Romanians.

Blessing Weapons

The sacramental endorsement of war is reflected in the ritual of blessing weapons, as well as of prayers for armed forces. Regarding the blessing of weapons ritual, it was noted that this is currently present in ritual books published by the Orthodox Churches of Romania, Russia, Bulgaria, and Serbia. It was also noted that not all Orthodox Churches have the service for blessing weapons in their ritual books, such as in Antioch, India, and Greece. Yet, in the case of the Greek Church, at times of war, churches borrow such services from other traditions.

Concerning praying for the armed forces, these this is apparently an universal practice in all Orthodox traditions. In this sense, the meaning of the cross as a weapon is generally perceived symbolically, as a spiritual element—even as a magic symbol in India. Additionally, it was noted that in the sixth century India and in Armenia, although both churches prayed for the armed forces, weapons were not allowed into the church, but were left in a special place outside the church in India, and at the entrance in Armenia.

Canon Law

Given the variance between St. Basil's Canon 13 (which expresses disapproval of collective violent defense), and St. Athanasius (who considers it praiseworthy), it was noted that while the Antiochian Orthodox Church identifies itself exclusively with Saint Basil's position, the Greek Orthodox Church identifies itself with St. Basil in times of peace, and with St. Athanasius in times of war. On the other hand, the Russian Orthodox Church identifies itself exclusively with St. Athanasius.

The Indian Church identifies itself with both St. Basil's and St. Athanasios', depending on the context; yet, and in the absence of a specific canonical tradition, the adjudication of sinfulness for killing in war is discretionary to the spiritual father, or confessor.

Conclusions and Future Work

It was concluded that the field of peace studies in the traditions of the Orthodox Churches is in its infancy and is in need to be developed. New themes that need further exploration include iconography, protection of the weak and the Responsibility to Protect, the development of studies that would analyze pacifistic trends in places where the Orthodox Church is a minority by analogy with contexts where the Orthodox Church is a majority; exploration of an "Orthodox Political Theology" designed to analyze Church-State dynamics in a historical and cumulative fashion; the development of peace-studies curricula, etc. The following is an outline of topics that Orthodox ethicists should further explore, preferably from a local perspective.

Iconography

- contextual analysis of military symbols: cross, sword, weaponry;
- contextual interpretation of military symbols during times of war and peace;
- opportunities for interreligious dialogue in light of iconographic representations such as St. George's icon from Balamand which depicts a Muslim sitting on the horse behind St. George, helping to defeat the dragon;
- the meaning of the sword such as in the icon of Jesus holding a sword from Visoki Dečani Monastery in Kosovo;
- the meaning of evil, in light of iconographic representations such as St. George killing a dragon, versus St. Demetrius killing a human being.

Protection of the weak & the Responsibility to Protect (R2P)

- common values & social ethics;
- charity, solidarity, and advocacy;
- personal versus communal violent self defense;

Formulating an "Orthodox" Political Theology

- formulating criteria for dealing Church-State issues, war and peace, law and society, etc.

Peace Studies Curricula

- development of studies to the benefit of theologians and policymakers;
- awareness on what Orthodox priests and professors teach in public schools, theological seminaries and in churches;
- focused courses on Orthodox peace education are being offered apparently only in the USA, where the Orthodox Church is a minority;
- peace education needs to be linked with interreligious dialogue, liberation theology, Christian sociology, social ethics, moral theology, social engagement and prophetic teaching, rather than as a separate field;
- developing theological explanations to “The Right to Resist” at the level of cultural resistance, military resistance, and non-violent resistance;

Future Plans

All participants agreed with the overall teaching in the Orthodox Church that peace cannot be achieved in the absence of justice. Therefore, it was suggested that a follow-up consultation is necessary in order to explore how churches have historically engaged the concept of justice in theory and practice. This follow-up consultation will explore a theology of *just peace*, which will explore whether justice is: retributive, restorative and distributive.