

## Orthodoxy And The Twentieth Century

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Mrs. Koulomzin was much too modest when she claimed to be unqualified to speak on "Orthodoxy and the 20th Century". In fact, I know very few people better qualified. One only has to read her recent autobiography to recognize this. This IS Orthodoxy, this IS the 20th century, perceived, captured, presented in a uniquely personal way. I am very pleased that she took a similar approach today. Her presentation, for all its apparent simplicity, showed very clearly the complexity of the subject; it avoided the simplistic reductions, the glib and patronizing pronouncements that we so often get- that we so often give.

Over the years, I have become more and more sensitive on this point. I teach canon law and Church history; presumably that should professionally qualify me to pontificate on "Orthodoxy and the 20th Century". And I know very well how easy, how tempting it is to take a different approach, the obvious approach: to review the various revolutionary changes of our century and their effect on Church organisation; to lament divisions, schisms and other blemishes on the canonical order; to marshal statistics illustrating various aspects of institutional growth and vitality- or, as often, the absence thereof. You perhaps know the approach. For thirty minutes, the 20th century is denounced as the source of all Orthodoxy's problems and then, for the next thirty minutes, Orthodoxy is lauded as the solution for all the 20th century's problems: "This country is sinking to the lowest depths of moral and a spiritual degradation...but if we achieve Orthodox unity in America, if we put the liturgy in English, if we establish a new mission in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, then everything will be done, all problems solved." Of course I exaggerate; but I believe there is a temptation to view the ills of Orthodoxy in this century- and the cures for these ills- simply in institutional terms, with health measured quantitatively in terms of membership statistics and budget size. Mrs. Koulomzin reminds us that Orthodoxy is not just a matter of being a member in good standing in a "canonical" Church, of receiving appropriate doses of this or that grace administered through the proper channels. It is a matter of life itself; of participation in divine life through personal relationship with God; of communion with the Father through the Son in the Spirit. (And here, I would also like to thank Mrs. Koulomzin for calling attention to the trinitarian dimension of our life as Orthodox Christians.)

So Orthodoxy means life, not just institutions. Given this understanding of Orthodoxy, what special dangers, challenges, and opportunities does Orthodoxy face in this century that

distinguish this century from all others? Part of the answer to this question may be discerned in the very topic assigned to this session: “Orthodoxy and the 20th Century”. We have here what I believe the logicians call “two completely distinguished subjects”. Is the and between Orthodoxy and 20th century conjunctive or disjunctive? Are Orthodoxy and 20th century thereby united or opposed? After all, we usually speak of Orthodoxy in this or that century. Orthodoxy and... usually is reserved for competing ideologies or for movements somehow external to Orthodoxy: “Orthodoxy and Marxism”, “Orthodoxy and the ecumenical movement”... “Orthodoxy and 10th century Byzantium”, for example, sounds a bit strange, precisely because 10th century Byzantium had no life apart from Orthodoxy. But “Orthodoxy and the 20th Century” does not sound so strange or unnatural. The century itself is identified as having a life of its own, its own ideological content external to and perhaps even alien from Orthodoxy. This may seem a verbal quibble. But, in fact, we are given often the impression that time itself, usually considered as neutral, an empty vessel whose content must be supplied- that time itself has become external, foreign, inimical. How many try to preserve Holy Orthodoxy from a contact with the 20th century, as though it would somehow be contaminated thereby, and thus they reduce Orthodoxy to a sect! How many use Orthodoxy as a means of escape from this century to one or another golden age: to imperial Byzantium, Holy Russia, or one of those other holy empires that once dotted the Balkans.

The spiritual bankruptcy of these efforts to divorce Orthodoxy and the 20th century is, I think, clear. To remove Orthodoxy from our history in effect is to remove Orthodoxy from all history, implicitly denying the power of the Christ-event itself, that decisive Intervention of God in time, in history. But, in fact, even if we recognize and deplore the crudeness of these sectarian or escapist reductions of Orthodoxy, even we don't advocate the divorce of Orthodoxy and 20th century, we still permit their separation and even contribute to their alienation, right in our theological schools.

That is particularly true in an area which Fr. Schmemmann mentioned in his Keynote Address: that of language. Some years ago, C.P. Snow pointed to Two Cultures, humanities and science; absence of common vocabulary, a common term of reference. How much more is this true of Christianity generally, and in particular of Orthodoxy! This works two ways:

- a.) increasing illiteracy in religious matters on the part of the population at large
- b.) increasing illiteracy in virtually every other area on the part of those professionally involved in religion. How many of us make the least effort to know and understand what is going on now in the natural and social sciences or in the arts? We don't make the effort. Worse, we are not just ignorant of for example subatomic particles; we are contemptuous of them, and of much else as well. Too often you run into Orthodox- seminarians especially- who have never heard a Mozart symphony, who have not seen a play by Ibsen or Shaw, who have never so much as heard of Crick-Watson model for DNA, and at the same time freely vociferate on the bankruptcy of Western Civilization. It just makes me mad.

But the separation, the alienation of Orthodoxy and 20th century can take a subtler, perhaps more dangerous form: it can be, it is internalised in each of us. It is almost impossible to miss a double-mindedness bordering on schizophrenia in the life of many Orthodox today. On the one hand and at the same time, one notices this also in seminary life. Here I am not trying to reduce Orthodoxy to morality, to a code of ethics. I am sure that Orthodox have lied, cheated, stolen, fornicated in other centuries. What is alarming is that the discrepancy between Orthodoxy and other aspects of life is not even noticed.

“Orthodoxy and the 20th Century”: the problem is how to incarnate Orthodoxy in the 20th century. Here theological education is much less effective than it should be; and at the risk of going somewhat beyond the assigned topic for this session, I would like to sketch areas that cry out for change.

As Fr. Schmemmann indicated in his Keynote Address, Orthodox theological education generally has adopted the forms imported from without: the counter-reformation seminary, the continental graduate school of theology, etc. One result is that Orthodoxy (and Orthodox Theology) no longer is regarded as a matter of life itself, but rather as a scholarly discipline, trying to hold its place among the other disciplines in the humanities or the natural and social sciences. Another result is compartmentalization: “Academic” subjects opposed to the “pastoral”; “historical” opposed to “systematic”. Crucial areas- marriage, conversion, the nature of the priestly ministry- may be taught from a dozen perspectives, but the student is given little incentive or opportunity to relate all the knowledge thus gained to his own situation, to our own place and time.

Even more pernicious is another form of compartmentalization: the classroom is opposed to the chapel, to daily life with others; time required for classes, services, this or that common task is opposed to “free time”, my time. But Orthodoxy cannot, must not be imprisoned in a classroom or, for that matter, in a chapel: it must penetrate all aspects of life. Only when this happens will we be able to turn from discussion of “Orthodoxy and the 20th century” to “Orthodoxy in and for the 20th century”.