



A JOURNAL OF ORTHODOX FAITH AND CULTURE

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# THE ORTHODOX CHURCH AND SOCIETY

## Part I

### Historic Roots of Church-State Relations

Father George Ryabykh, previously featured in a 2006 interview with *Road to Emmaus* on interfaith dialogue<sup>1</sup>, now returns with a fascinating look at the Orthodox Church and society. The first of this two-part series traces historical Orthodox Byzantine and Russian interactions with the state, while the second will focus on Church-State relations in contemporary Russia. A graduate of Moscow State University of International Relations and the Moscow Theological Academy of St. Sergius Lavra, Father George currently heads the Church and Society Secretariat (Department of External Relations) for the Russian Orthodox Church, and is an assistant pastor at Holy Trinity Church in Moscow.

RTE: Fr. George, I'm glad we have a chance to meet again. Our previous interview was very helpful in understanding the Russian Orthodox Church's participation in interfaith dialogue with other Christians. Today, our topic is how the Church and society have interacted historically, and the contemporary relationship between the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church. To begin, can you tell us what percentage of the Russian population is baptized Orthodox, and of that number, how many are regular churchgoers?

FR. GEORGE: We don't have exact figures of the number of baptized people in Russia, but we do have several reliable surveys and polls that estimate

*Photo: Fr. George blessing Pascha kulichi in Yemen.*

*1 "Interfaith Dialogue: An Orthodox Witness," Road to Emmaus, Issue 26, Summer 2006.*

from 60 to 80% identify themselves as Orthodox. The differences in these percentages are the result of answers to several questions. If the first question is simply, “Do you believe in God?,” over 90% of those asked will answer affirmatively. When they are then asked, “Are you Orthodox Christian, Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, or something else?” usually about 80% of those who believe say that they are Orthodox. If they are asked, “How often do you go to church?” answers vary from “I never go to church” to “I go to church once a week or more,” which could be about 70% of those who call themselves Orthodox. The number of people who regularly try to fulfill the prescriptions of the Orthodox Church for a healthy spiritual life is about 10%.

RTE: Obviously, it will take decades for Russian church life to recover from seventy years of Soviet suppression, but what is the church doing to reach out to those who are not yet practicing?

FR. GEORGE: As you say, the gap between the majority of Russians who identify themselves as Orthodox, and the minority who regularly practice their faith and receive the sacraments, shows the work that needs to be done in society. The Church is now reaching out to those who identify themselves as Orthodox, but frequently know little about Orthodox tradition. One way, of course, is to enlarge the number of parishes, and to build more churches, but another strategy is to go out into society where people live their everyday lives. The vision of the Russian Orthodox Church is to go to schools, to hospitals, to television, to the newspapers – not just for publicity, or to impose psychological or educational pressure on people to become Orthodox, but to try to provide for those who wish it, an opportunity to develop a religious understanding of life, to create a space in the public sphere where people can meet the Church voluntarily.

For me, life in the Church is not only prayer. It is all of life, the community of God and His people. When you live as Christians, you live in connection with God and in connection with other believers. Here in Russia, even those who are not fed through prayer or services are fed through Russia’s Orthodox culture, through her literature and history. By this, I mean not only the concrete knowledge you get in school, but an attitude towards life. Orthodoxy shapes cultural attitudes and ways of thinking here, even if they don’t have an evident connection. For example, the desire to have your own family with one husband or wife for your entire life – this is a Christian value that many people have in their heart, although they might not consciously attach

it to church life. In *The Captain’s Daughter*, Pushkin shows the acuteness of a young couple’s feelings for each other and their faithfulness. He shows the beauty of their relations, and this is also the language of Christianity. Christianity doesn’t just say that you can’t do this or that, but it promotes an ideal that corresponds to our most profound wishes planted in us by God.

There are many places where a person can meet Orthodoxy. For example, when you study Russian history, you learn that it was Metropolitan Philaret who drafted the ukase of Emperor Alexander II abolishing serfdom in Russia, and you might wonder, “What is the realm of the Church in history?” “How has the Church influenced people’s lives?” Or even, “Why had the Church not spoken out before?”

To show this beauty and to attract people to it is important, and Russian culture has many examples of this. Russians think about the same universal problems that everyone ponders, but how they solve these problems, this is the uniqueness of Russia. Under the influence of spiritual life, our culture gave birth to our own ideas and perceptions of these problems. These are our riches.

RTE: Alexander Solzhenitsyn once said “Nations are the wealth of humanity, its generalized personalities, and the least among them has its own special colours, and harbours within itself a special aspect of God’s design.” Is this what is meant by the expression “the Russian soul”?

FR. GEORGE: Perhaps, in the sense that we have always had a general Christian view about how the personal and collective life of society should be lived out. People can follow this or not, but it exists. We have the historical experience of what this “good” life means, and Russians recognize this.

For example, take this bread we are eating. Even today, bread is a basic food for Russians, and crumbs can’t be thrown away because bread is a gift from God. It is a piety towards the natural world, a kind of Christian ecology that comes from a traditional attitude towards creation. Everything comes from God and everything can be used and reused. This is not a value of modern society, but it is a strong tradition in village life, a careful attitude towards the material world. In Russia, from the beginning, the ideal was to live according to Christ, and one could find this in every sphere – in personal life, family life, social life. It was also the guiding principle in the West for a long time.

## Faith and Works

Throughout history we find very beautiful conceptions of the ideal Christian life, but the problem always is to realize them. For example, the beginning of the reign of the Russian Tsar Ivan the Terrible was very bright. He was influenced by Metropolitan Macarios of Moscow, who was like a father to him, and taught him that his position as tsar was a gift from God and that his primary duty was to preserve Orthodoxy in Russia. That is, Orthodoxy not only as an ideal, but in deed, and in his attitude to his people. This was very good from a Christian point of view, but after the death of Metropolitan Macarios, the tsar went quite astray from this, even killing Metropolitan Phillip of Moscow when he tried to correct him. He had very strong, uncontrolled passions. He might pray all morning and then have someone executed in the afternoon.

RTE: Isn't it assumed now that he was mentally ill?

FR. GEORGE: We don't know, but my point is that there are spiritual forces that try to counter this Christian vision and intent, and they must be warred with. In Russia now we have a clash of principles. For many people, Russian tradition has become matroshka dolls, kvass, caviar, samovars, and vodka. This is the principle of making your life as comfortable as possible. "If the state contributes to my comfort, I'll support the state... If my wife makes me comfortable, I'll stay with this woman – if not, goodbye and on to someone else."

Another way of finding a good life in the Christian sense is by experiencing that you are not always right, and this is what you often see in the works of Dostoevsky and other great writers. If we pay attention to this, we come to understand that we can't completely rely on ourselves, that we need some kind of objective criteria. In this context, our dogma of the incarnation of Christ is very important; Christ has both a human and a divine nature, and He is the criterion for a correct life. In Russia, we feel this. We understand that we can't find this right way just by looking to ourselves, that we only find it in Christ, and in being a part of society.

RTE: Those of us from a more individualistic modern West see that Russians do feel themselves closer and more connected to society as a whole.

FR. GEORGE: The spirit of relying on your thoughts and feelings to define your life is now growing in Russia, but this is in conflict with our traditional spirit

*Photo: 17th-century Church of the Transfiguration near Suzdal, Russia.*



of seeking the way out of yourself in God. This seeking for truth was always very important for the Russian heart.

In our judicial codes up to the time of Peter the Great, you will never find the word “law,” because Russians felt that law belonged to the Old Testament. You will only find words like “truth,” “justice,” and “grace.” For the old Russians, the “law” had become obsolete and could no longer regulate the life of Christian people. There were only principles, such as justice and truth, and how one fulfilled them. These differed from law in that they were living criteria, which allowed for both individual circumstances and God-given inspiration by the judges.

### Christian Law and Consecrated Rulers

RTE: The Byzantines, who gave Russia its Christianity, had a codified Roman-based law. Why did that not translate to Russia?

FR. GEORGE: The Byzantine Empire had written laws, balanced with Christian canons, which were above the state law. In theory, at least, they took the first place. According to the Byzantine view, civil law could not contradict the canons, but the Russians were even more radical about law. They didn’t accept the notion of law at all, and this attitude was very much influenced by their early enthusiasm over Christianity. The legalism of the Old Testament had passed away and the New Testament of grace was at hand. Of course, there were various codes of behavior, but these weren’t laws as we think of them, because a law, by its nature, is static and unbending. This fluid ideal was very much linked to the conception of the autocratic power of the tsar, because the emperor was the *embodied* law, the *nomos*. Their thinking was that when you give something a name, you empower it, and when you call something a law it becomes very solemn and strictly adhered to. If the Holy Spirit gives you another way of living, it is very difficult to change anything, because you have “laws” which have great authority, and you can’t be so dynamic in your development of social life or in making changes as the need arises. In the 11th century, Metropolitan Hilarion wrote a sermon called “*Law and Grace*” in which he said, “The Law was the precursor and the servant of Grace and Truth. Grace and Truth were the servants of the future and immortal life.”<sup>2</sup> His idea was that grace could be very dynamic and that the

<sup>2</sup> Metropolitan Hilarion: *First non-Greek Metropolitan in Kiev, proclaimed by Yaroslav the Wise in 1049. Most well-known of the early Kievan metropolitans, he authored four works: Sermon on Law and Grace, Confession of Faith, Sermon on Spiritual Benefit to All Christians, and a collection of instructions for priests.*

Holy Spirit could bring about such changes.

But there was another side, of course – this dynamism could be misused. This is why there is always a balance in the New Testament, and why in the Church itself, these changes are made through Church councils. The Holy Spirit works through conciliarity.

In the East, even in Byzantium, this conciliarity was also embodied in the concept of the emperor, tsar, or prince, who had the canons of religious and civil rules to follow, but who was himself free. This freedom was given to him not to allow him to be a tyrant, but to free him to address real situations. Throughout Byzantine literature there is a strong condemnation of tyranny that is completely overlooked in most people’s conception of Byzantium. It is a long tradition from antiquity, saying that any ruler should come to power legally. If this person came to power by violence or by revolt, this was a tyrannical ruler. Another criterion defined by Patriarch Photios in his famous letter laying out the precepts of Christian rule to the newly converted Khan Boris-Michael of Bulgaria (Michael in baptism), says that, “tyrants often overlook crimes against the community and others, but crimes against themselves they relentlessly pursue. The way of an emperor, however, and of most orderly authority is to bear kind-heartedly those crimes committed against himself and set in order and justly settle those committed against public authorities and against the people.”

When an emperor had this power he was more flexible, he was better able to respond according to actual circumstances. In the psalms it says, “*when justice and peace meet together.*” When this happens in a living person who is striving to live according to the Christian ideal, the Holy Spirit can work through him. The emperor or tsar received an actual consecration so that the gifts of the Holy Spirit could manifest through him. The last Russian emperor, Nicholas II, was very attentive to his consecration as tsar, and the biblical verse, “*The heart of the tsar is in the hands of God,*” was extremely important to him.

A tsar was responsible for his people, and Orthodox peoples believed that a monarch was enthroned to organize and arrange the life of his people in a good way. When a tsar had autocratic power, the freedom to act, he could choose the best response in each situation. Of course, because of our sinful nature – and I’ve already cited the example of Ivan the Terrible – if a tsar doesn’t care about justice, about being a vessel of the Holy Spirit, he may misuse his power and then his people will suffer, but if it is used rightly, this power gives huge opportunities for good that can hardly be matched in any other form of government.

In both Byzantium and Russia, Christians were fully aware of the temptations of autocracy and there were political checks and balances in place, and the means to enforce them; but the traditional Orthodox view is that because the position of a monarch carries both opportunities and dangers, political autocracy and even checks and balances are not enough. The ruler should be making an authentic attempt to follow Christ, and he must have received the rite of crowning. In Russian theology, the rite of crowning is a solemn anointing that is seen as an extension of the sacrament of Chrismation, just as the ordinations of deacon, priest, and bishop are varying rites of the sacrament of Ordination. The ruler is anointed, but he has to follow the same path as all other Christians, he must work on his heart, and his success in this is very much linked to his personal effort, regular prayer and participation in the sacraments. It is impossible to have Christian autocratic power without a corresponding spiritual life on the part of the emperor. You can imagine that as a ruler, the effect of each sin or passion that you have is magnified and affects many people. If a passion rules you, it also rules the country.

### Scriptural Tradition and the State

RTE: This is an intriguing alternative to the push towards secularism that seems to go hand-in-hand with modern democracy, but can you go back further and discuss the foundations of Christian statehood, and how it worked out in history?

FR. GEORGE: For me, thinking about Church-society relations begins with Scripture. What is the State? In biblical tradition, we see that the state is something devised by people and blessed by God. From I Samuel we know that the Hebrews originally had a theocracy, the direct rule of God among His people. The pagan peoples around them had monarchies that they had developed to protect their lives and their lands. These monarchies looked good to the Hebrew people and so they asked the Prophet Samuel to “*make us a king to judge us like all the nations.*”

When Samuel prayed to God about this, the Lord answered “... *they have not rejected thee, but they have rejected me, that I should not reign over them.... Protest solemnly to them and show them the manner of the king that shall rule over them...* [Ed. note: The Hebrew word *mishpat*, which the

*Photo: Church of the Intercession on the Neri, Bogolyubovo, Russia.*

King James Bible translates as “manner” more accurately means “rights or privilege,” and is translated as such in Greek and Slavonic.]

This is very interesting – God Himself declares here that there are “rights” of kings, and after sending His Spirit upon Saul as the first king, Samuel then says, “Behold the king whom ye have chosen, and whom ye have desired, and behold the Lord has set a king over you... If you will fear the Lord, and serve him, and obey his voice, and not rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then shall both you and also the king that reigneth over you continue following the Lord your God: but if ye will not obey the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then shall the hand of the Lord be against you, as it was against your fathers.” God accepted this human invention and blessed it, and He says that He will continue to bless it if they follow His commandments. The value of any state or kingship depends on whether or not this community follows God. (I imagine that if a democratic regime follows God’s commandments, it can also be blessed.)

### The Notion of Power

We see that God gave His blessing to kingship as a visible symbol of power, but what exactly is this power? Here it is important to understand the biblical approach to the state and to the authorities. One of our Lord’s temptations in the desert was when the devil took him up to a high place and showed him all of the kingdoms of the world, saying, “All this power will I give thee....” The devil presents the idea that all of the power in all of the kingdoms of the world belongs to him, and he is willing to share it with Jesus. The Lord answers, “*Get behind me, Satan: for it is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God and Him only shalt thou serve.*” He didn’t even notice the words about power, because they aren’t true. The devil is a liar when he says that he has this power. After His resurrection, Jesus says to his disciples, “*All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth... observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you, and lo, I am with you always even unto the end of the world.*” Here, the Lord says that all power in heaven and earth belongs to him, so when power is used to satisfy the commandments of God, it fulfills its function. When it serves Satan, then he does have power. It is not that power is from the devil, but that it can be used by the devil if man allows.

Even in the life of the Church, the notion of power is important, and power is strongly connected with will. If our personal will doesn’t have power, we can’t do anything. This principle is important in our personal and community

life, and it is in this light that we understand the words of St. Paul in Romans 13, “For there is no power but of God: the powers that be are ordained of God.” Here, we see a theology of power that is connected to biblical tradition of God’s dealing with Israel, and spoken of by the Apostle Paul – that power is from God, and it is God-pleasing when it follows His commandments.

Some Christians say that the message of the New Testament is completely apolitical because there is no interaction with the government, nor does St. Paul revolt against the authorities. They say that Christianity is the formation of another life with other values. But in saying this, Christianity becomes political. Jesus always contrasts how Christians should behave with the behavior of the pagans or non-Christians, and this new way of life is emphasized by the apostles. We cannot say that Christianity was, or ever is, apolitical. Idolatry was the official ideology of the Roman Empire, yet the apostles give us prohibitions against idolatry and paganism. This means that there was very strong opposition on the part of Christians, not only to the beliefs of other people, but to the official ideology of the state.

So, we see in the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles, that this new kind of community life – the Church – is not only different from what people had before, it is a kind of restoration of theocracy, when God rules among His people. The Church is not only an inter-personal entity, it is also the Body of Christ, God’s human organism with Christ as its head. It is something new from God.

Even the name that this organization adopts is the Greek word “ecclesia”. In the ancient cities and towns of the Roman-Greek world, this term referred to the gathering together of a city’s entire population to adopt decisions about the life of the city. The *ecclesia* was the organ of community life. When Christians adopted this term, they meant that now they had the true ecclesia, true community life. It was similar to the old forms, but its spirit was something quite new, and completely different from the pagan world.

So what was the difference between the Church and the non-Christian political movements that tried to oppose Roman power? The Christians never had political power as their aim. They wanted to live by the teachings of Christ and nothing more. They wanted the Church to be free to grow, and the idea was that the Church should attract (but not force) people to become members. Although they were sure that theirs was the true way of life and of communion with God, they also called on Christians to be obedient to civil authorities in those things which could be abided by.

We know that the conversion of the Emperor Constantine was effected by his long experience of watching how the Christians of his time maintained a high level of morality and conduct. The Roman Empire at that time was in crisis, and many contemporary writers spoke of the degradation of morals – not just bad behavior, but extremely serious corruption in society and in the state bureaucracy. Constantine put Christians into key posts, because he knew their virtue.

### The State Church

This conception of a Christian Byzantine Empire was first shaped by Emperor Justinian, who in the 6th century formulated the famous principle of *symphonia* – that the state and the Church should work together in harmony. Each have different functions, but they work for the same community. The idea here is that in a Christian nation, there is only one community: the boundaries of the Church coincide with the boundaries of the state, and the state is embraced by the Church. This was a logical arrangement that came out of the early Christian vision of the nature of the Church. The Church embraces everything. It not only serves spiritual needs, but it embraces the entire life of a person, from sacramental communication with God to interpersonal relations with other people. Because the state's political-social-economic relations concern human activity, these are also embraced by the Church. In the 9th century, this idea was developed in the *Epanagoge*, a document prepared during the reign of Emperor Basil I (867-886) by Patriarch Photius, in which it was understood that the Byzantine church and state were not two communities co-existing for one people; there was only one community, but within that community were two autonomous powers. This grew into the idea of the *litia ecclesia*, the state church.

Theoretically, there was no problem as to which power submitted to which, as there was in western monarchies. In Byzantium it was understood that the two powers worked with different methods for the same goal, and that spiritual values always took the first place. For the state it was also important to promote spiritual values – this wasn't only the business of the Church – but the Church and state promoted it by different methods proper to each. In Byzantium, you wouldn't have talked about the separation of Christian values and state action, but about powers.

Photo: Haghia Sophia, Constantinople.



RTE: Ever since Gibbons published his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, recording its excesses and corruption, there has grown up in the West a general disdain against the whole concept of Byzantium, and “Byzantine” has even become a perjorative adjective. How would you answer this one-sided view?

FR. GEORGE: In our fallen world, the more possibilities we have, the more temptations there are. People of every age and society will find ways to abuse their society’s unique possibilities. The people of Byzantium also understood the danger of tyranny very well, and they tried to balance this power with the Church, with advisors and governors from all levels of society, and with norms of social life. An emperor couldn’t just act on his whims. Critics of Byzantium often characterize the power of the emperor as a dangerous tyranny, but that isn’t the whole story; there were also unique and attractive elements of this system.

RTE: For instance, many people aren’t aware that the western theory and practice of philanthropic social work has its roots directly in Byzantine soil.

FR. GEORGE: Yes, art, architecture, literature, law, and as you say, institutions of philanthropy absolutely flourished there. Of course, these good things also existed in other forms before Christianity, but it was through Byzantium and other Christian kingdoms such as Georgia and Armenia that these forms developed in a Christian context. Our most illustrious Church fathers and philosophers were from Byzantium (and Rome before the schism), as well as from lands of the Antiochian and Alexandrian patriarchates.

In looking at the fruits of Byzantium, we have to refer to this very good image that St. John the Theologian gives us in the beginning of His Gospel. He says, “That was the true light which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.” (John 1:9). The Church and its true members are like lights for the world, and these theories or norms of Byzantine government are also lights, but they are not the fullness of light, which will manifest only in the other world.

The question is then, why do we need these Christian ideals in an earthly state? Because these norms are like light: you can follow this way or not, but the light itself is the judgment. Life according to these norms is difficult but possible, and we know that many people have fulfilled them, not only monastics and clergy, but kings, queens, fathers and mothers, children. With

these Christian norms in place, people cannot say they “didn’t know,” or that they are impossible to fulfill. If people don’t want to follow this way, this is their choice, but the presence of these norms is vitally important.

On the other hand, we cannot say that just because it is Christian, an Orthodox empire must be strong and successful until the end of time. Just as youthful strength and energy diminish with age in individuals, Christians now face the problem of diminishing energy and declining faith in the Second Coming.

RTE: What voice did ordinary people have in these Orthodox Christian monarchies?

FR. GEORGE: The cornerstone of every conception of democracy is the rule of the people. This idea is not strange to Christianity, and we also had this in a unique form in old Russia, when Church councils became “All-Land” councils. In Russia, the experience of Byzantine church councils was transferred to state life. This experiment was unique for the Orthodox world. The tsar called a council to make decisions of state-wide importance about the life of society.

RTE: Who participated in them?

FR. GEORGE: All levels of society: nobles, clergy, merchants, small farmers. In his famous letter, Patriarch Photios also instructed Prince Boris-Michael of Bulgaria to make decisions only with advice, to think things over thoroughly, not to punish quickly, and to be attentive to the tenor and needs of society. This idea was deeply rooted in Christian tradition. This letter to the prince spread throughout all of the Slavonic-speaking states, and St. Maximus the Greek also advised Tsar Ivan the Terrible to read it. So, for me, this democratic idea is not something completely foreign to Christianity. It is present in Christianity, but it is not the whole picture – it is part of the truth.

Byzantine and Russian governments realized the importance of paying attention to the needs and feelings of the general population, but the question was how to get information and input, and how to involve people in resolving problems. This was answered in different ways. To return to our *Zemskiye Sobory* – the All-Land councils – under the first Romanovs tsars, these councils were convoked very often, and no important decision about internal or external affairs in Russia was made without these councils. So, even a tsar with unlimited power was advised by a rather democratic system of councils.



In Imperial Russia, after Peter the Great, we had the *zemstva*, organizations of self-government for peasant communities, which sent representatives to the regional and national governments.

RTE: Although I imagine that participation was limited. For instance, a peasant would have never become emperor?

FR. GEORGE: Actually, that's not true. In the first millennium, the Byzantine monarchy was very different from the monarchies of western Europe. Western Europe had a feudal society with a very rigorous hierarchy. You stayed in the level of society in which you were born, and kings came from the nobility, you didn't move out of your class. But in Byzantium, it was possible to become emperor even if you were born a peasant, as was Emperor Justinian. Byzantium in the first millennium was a very dynamic society, and one's origins were not a limitation. Farmers, traders, and craftsmen could and often did take positions next to the emperor. People, moreover, saw that if a person was elevated to such a position, it was God's providence. And, of course, this dynamism was attractive because if you are a very gifted person and born as a peasant, you could raise yourself by your own efforts. Later, Byzantium became more like western Europe, with a fixed aristocracy – the Palaiologi, the Cantacuzeni – but in the first millennium, it was the emperor who helped balance this free dynamic of society.

### Norms of Christian Practice

RTE: Fr. George, while you've clearly laid out some fascinating details of Byzantine and Russian Christian society and details of rulers and saints such as Patriarch Photios, who emphasized Christian values, we know that other Orthodox rulers came to the throne through violence and bloodshed. In Western Christian monarchies also, there was war, invasion, power-struggles, and we all know that horrific wars were fought in the 20th century among secularized European countries with largely Christian populations. How do we reconcile this moral and spiritual gap?

FR. GEORGE: This is the gap between ideals and behavior, and of course we can't deny that this was a problem, not only in Byzantium, but in every nation that has ever existed. As individuals and nations, we try to orient our

*Photo: Byzantine Land Walls, Constantinople.*

lives to these ideals, but this doesn't mean that there is ever a complete correspondence. Because of this, it is crucial that representatives of the Christian Church support the norms of legal accession to power, and humane, philanthropic government. Of course, in every historical period there has been the danger of the "cult of power," of sheer physical force, and we must always reaffirm that there is another more Christian approach to life. Even on the level of norms, it is very important to support what is right, even if reality doesn't conform to these norms. It is the mission of the Church to continually point out this lack of correspondence.

Throughout history, the number of active, deeply Christian believers has been a minority in every society, Russia, Byzantium, or Western Christendom. Although almost everyone may have been baptized, those who really practiced were much smaller in number. As another example of this, when we say that we live in a liberal democratic state, this doesn't mean that every person in this country lives as a very pure democrat in all of his actions, and in his personal life. Many wouldn't even call themselves by this label. They see themselves as socialists or nationalists, but nonetheless, each person lives within this liberal democratic society, and under its laws.

Moreover, it is very difficult to measure religious substance and feelings. Although you can attempt to quantify them on the basis of how often people attend church or take the sacraments, these are only indicators, and you leave out the people who do not manifest their religious beliefs like this, but who are willing to orient their lives by Christian values. For example, many devout people in the past centuries, and even now in some Orthodox countries, only receive Communion once or twice a year. And how do we count those who went to the desert, to pray and fast? They didn't confess or take communion every week, but they prayed and fought their passions. On a more mundane level, there is the problem of believers who simply don't have an Orthodox church within reach, which is still widespread in Russia, and often in the West, as well.

And what about those who aren't perhaps so active in their spiritual life and prayers? Values and norms are orientations for a person's life, and if a person tries to live according to values that are supported by Orthodox Christianity, even if they don't manifest an outward church-going spiritual practice, I think this person can be called Orthodox by culture. Of course, this is not a statement about salvation – only God judges each soul – but if we are speaking about whether a culture is Orthodox or not, I think we can

judge by the values that are adopted in society and that people willingly follow. If these values are linked to the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, or Protestant faiths, we can say that a country or a people has a Christian tradition.

When a Christian person commits a serious sin, is he Christian or not? Of course, on the one hand, he has broken a Commandment; he has acted against his faith, but he has not stopped being Christian. If he repents he has a chance to be reunited to Christ and the Church. He is a Christian, but a Christian that hasn't followed his calling.

RTE: Which applies to all of us. How would you extend this thought to societies in general?

FR. GEORGE: People sometimes claim that when there are injustices and inequalities, this is not a Christian society. Why? If society has these Christian values, and it is from these values that we evaluate whether an action is good or bad, then it is a Christian society. People understand that what they may be doing is wrong *because* they have Christian values. This is why the Orthodox Church maintains such a strong public position against such things as abortion, euthanasia, and homosexuality. If society adopts as a norm that abortion, euthanasia, or homosexuality is not wrong (and in some countries now, you are no longer allowed to disagree publicly with this), this is not a Christian value. At the same time, these behaviours do have a right to exist because God gave us free will to choose between good and bad. According to this understanding of freedom, the Orthodox Church insists that such choices can only be allowed in one's private life, because every person will be judged by God, but in public, they should not be propagated.

I don't believe that Christian values are restrictive or limiting. They give a positive foundation to society and they orient people to the good. In a country where a majority of people are either practicing or culturally Christian, and where it is possible for religious or moral minorities to live out their differing beliefs in the private sphere, Christian society can legitimately promote these positive norms – a spiritually-oriented life, creativity, family, constructive work, and useful civic and social activities.

*Part II of The Orthodox Church and Society, focusing on the contemporary relations between the Russian Orthodox Church and the Russian state, will be featured in the next Road to Emmaus.*