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THE ORTHODOX CHURCH AND SOCIETY: CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS IN CONTEMPORARY RUSSIA

Part II

In the second of a two-part interview, Archpriest George Ryabykh, Deputy Chairman of the Moscow Patriarchal Department of External Church Relations, explores the complex coexistence of Russia's Orthodox Church and its post-Soviet democratic government – an insider's view of a unique and often misunderstood relationship.

Majority Beliefs and Public Values

RTE: Father George, in the first part of our interview, you spoke of these two types of lives – according to Christ or according to the passions – as the testing ground in both public and private life for every Christian since the time of the apostles. Before we begin discussing contemporary Russia, what do you see as the difference between today's democracies in traditionally Christian countries and Christian governments of the past?

Opposite: Danilov Monastery Church, Moscow Patriarchate.

FR. GEORGE: We have to admit that in Christian countries of the past, the spirit of this world was also present. People sought the worldly values of wealth and power, but they also preserved the general conception of what was right and good, and at least tried to appear to follow it. Our era, however, is shaping its own political, social, and personal life, and there is a breakdown in the very ideals that have always been held by Christian societies. In saying this, I would also add that the Christian mind can find a way to live within different political systems.

RTE: As we always have, whether under pagan Roman emperors, atheistic societies, or in the modern secular West.

FR. GEORGE: Yes, but if we are speaking of a holistic view of life, there is a corollary to your question: “Is it possible for Christians today to have a Christian state, or should we just leave this to history and say, “We don’t pretend or strive to have a Christian state in which everything is organized according to a life in Christ.” In the 19th and 20th centuries, in almost every Christian country, there was definitely a kind of break with the idea of an anointed monarch, except perhaps as a figurehead.



Fr. George Ryabykh.

and say, “We don’t pretend or strive to have a Christian state in which everything is organized according to a life in Christ.” In the 19th and 20th centuries, in almost every Christian country, there was definitely a kind of break with the idea of an anointed monarch, except perhaps as a figurehead.

The major difference between a traditional Christian approach to politics and society and a secular approach is that Christians believe that God really exists and that He participates in human life and history. We must seek His will not

only in our private lives, but in our public life, to discover whether He blesses our intentions, purposes, and designs.

Christian monarchies had an obvious advantage in that this acknowledgement of God as the Supreme Ruler and the necessity to seek His blessing was built into a form of government that attempted to submit human life to the will of God. The title of every anointed Russian emperor included the words, “Emperor by God’s Mercy,” and these were not just empty words, but an understanding that power cannot be supported by human effort alone. We have almost completely lost this idea that past Christians held unanimously, and have forgotten our long historical experience, which shows that the Christian vision could be a solid foundation from which to govern.

RTE: Regarding that modern break with tradition, here is a quote from G. K. Chesterton, the English Catholic writer, that I thought you and our readers might find interesting:

I have never been able to understand where people got the idea that democracy was in some way opposed to tradition. It is obvious that tradition is only democracy extended through time. It is trusting to a consensus of common human voices rather than to some isolated or arbitrary record... Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors... Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. All democrats object to men being disqualified by the accident of birth; tradition objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death. Democracy tells us not to neglect a good man’s opinion, even if he is our groom... even if he is our father.

FR. GEORGE: Yes, that’s very interesting. Chesterton’s idea here is what the Russians call *sobornost*, although I would say that again, a traditional Christian world view would not limit itself to a human consensus, but would also try to discern the will of God, to have a divine-human accord.

RTE: The most common objection to the idea of traditional Christian monarchies, though, is that they “didn’t work,” that they were never completely successful.

FR. GEORGE: Completely, no; this is a fallen world, but Christian states existed for almost two thousand years, and if you look at the Church calendar, these states produced many saintly, self-sacrificing rulers, not only rulers who gave in to their passions. If an anointed ruler left the path of seeking God’s will, his reign was almost never stable or lasting. Should Christians try to repeat the experience of the Christian state in a modern context? I think this is a real question. Many people say, “No, we shouldn’t even speak about this — history has shown that such states have been cruel and hostile,” but we see that every state has such dangers, and that these dangers are not unique to Christian states.

Traditional Christian states had this acknowledgement of God’s sovereignty (whether or not they followed it) built into their world-view. I believe that a democracy founded on Christian values and a desire to fulfill the will of God is also possible.

Every country is, first of all, dedicated to the common organization of life; how different peoples in this group agree to govern themselves and the values they support and promote. The Christian vision embraces the whole life of its people and since the coming of Christ people have believed that an entire state could be built on these principles. For a traditionally Christian state, faith preceded all other values, and salvation was at the center of social and personal life.

Today many people reply, “No way, the only permissible system is liberal democracy, which includes every possible view.” But this approach is both right and wrong. I think all Christians agree that people should be equally protected as to their rights and their dignity as human beings, and that there should not be any force or violence. In their community and personal life, people should have the opportunity to follow their chosen religion. But there is still a problem in this approach — the tendency to relativize religion, to say, “Everyone’s way is right, it doesn’t matter what religion they are.” This grows into a sort of indifference, a belief that religious values themselves are only relative. And now in many places in Europe, and perhaps this is true in America as well, I’ve seen for myself that it is frowned upon for people to publicly state that there is religious truth.

What I also don’t like in modern secular democracies is that for the state, religious truth simply doesn’t exist. Each person chooses whatever he likes, what “fits” him, and the state becomes indifferent to religion. Some people say that this is not the state’s function, but a state can’t exist without values, so if you become indifferent to traditional religious values, you replace them with something else, and these secular values can be unacceptable for Christians, such as using public money to pay for abortion, fetal stem-cell genetic research, and promoting homosexuality through schools and the media. This spirit of relativity is spreading throughout all of society.

RTE: Do you see any workable alternatives to this state of indifference?

FR. GEORGE: I think we must begin by thinking outside of the secular boundaries we’ve set for ourselves. For instance, modern Malaysia has an interesting form of government. They have a general constitution, which includes both the 60% Muslim majority and the 40% of the population that are non-Muslim: mostly Christians, Chinese, and Indians. The constitution applies to everyone, but they also have separate social or family norms for Muslims

and non-Muslims. This is one example of an alternative to a secular framework’s indifference to religion.

When the majority of a country belongs to one religion, it is common sense that that religion has the right to have a special status in the public sphere. In Christian countries it would be Christianity, in Muslim countries it would be Islam. Religion in these countries would not be hidden away as an untouchable subject in the public sphere, and these societies would continue to promote ideals that all religions value, such as the sanctity of the family and the sanctity of life. The rights of members of other religions would be protected, but the heritage of the country would be preserved.

RTE: How would minority freedoms be protected in a state embracing Christian values?

FR. GEORGE: In each state there is a sphere of personal life and a sphere of public life. In this sphere of personal life, a person should be free to live as he chooses. This corresponds to the Christian spirit because each person has their own free will: even when we commit sin, God allows us the choice. But if public life is what we promote as a society, what we spend our money and public effort on, there can’t be as much freedom in this public sphere as in private life. Even in countries that define themselves as secular, liberal, and democratic, there are restrictions. In the public sphere it is impossible to have absolute freedom, because each society protects its own values.

For me the question is why, if the majority of the population is Christian (while safeguarding the personal values of everyone) these societal values can’t be Christian. For example, it is one thing if a person chooses to live with a same-sex partner in his private life. This is the freedom that God gives us, and we are responsible to Him for the use of this freedom. Until this personal life impinges on one’s neighbor, it is this person’s choice. But to promote and to advertise homosexual relations in the public sphere, in schools, on television, and to say that this is somehow a normal alternative to natural relations? Why should such things be promoted or advertised in public?

I believe that in many traditionally Christian countries, people have stopped thinking about what it means to be Christian. Or they agree with the policy that religion is something private, but in the public sphere “we have other values”. They support the values of the public sphere without reflecting on whether they correspond to Christianity, and there is often a split

between their private Christian views and those of the society in which they live. Why can't a nation, as the representative of its own people, the majority of whom are Christian, state that Christianity is the main religion on which we base society's values, while allowing for the personal freedom of minorities and those of different views?

RTE: I wonder if, at this point, this could happen anywhere except in Russia or Greece? According to 2001 census polls, 71% of the population of Great Britain, 72% of Canadians, 76% of Americans, 64% of Germans, and approximately 55% of the French identify themselves as Christian, but to what degree do they practice their Christianity? Increasingly, Christians have allowed themselves to be marginalized in public and many who consider themselves Christian are adopting nontraditional values that society and the media have made seem acceptable. Also, immigration from non-Christian countries and the rise of vocal minorities in favor of nontraditional lifestyles have made a drastic change in the values of Western Christian countries.

Theoretically, in a democracy, if a majority really does hold to a particular religious view, their belief would have a major impact on the life of that society — as in California, where last fall, the state court-ordered legality of same-sex marriage was overturned by popular vote, and in Arizona and Florida, where same-sex marriage referendums were defeated.

FR. GEORGE: Yes, in a society that is assuming non-traditional values, you must understand your Christian beliefs and tradition, be able to explain your position, and argue for what you believe is right.

Balancing Freedom

RTE: Could we move on now to contemporary church-state relations in Russia? The last twenty years in Russia have been both invigorating and intense, and I don't believe that Russia has been given the credit it deserves for courageously dismantling its entire governmental system to rebuild anew. What do you see about democracy in Russia today?

FR. GEORGE: Politicians today, both in western countries and in Russia, speak of democracy as a mechanism of society, as a kind of a machine, but to what purpose? For most contemporary people, its main value is freedom. That's all. Freedom is important, it is a God-given gift, but we also need cross-bear-

ings to use it properly. When you don't have other values to balance freedom, it becomes a tyrant, justifying sin for the sake of freedom. When individuals try to enforce their own ways of life in public, when minorities become the rulers of society, we lose both freedom and democracy. Many countries in Europe and North America now have democratic systems that continue to develop on their own, following this road to its end. It's sometimes difficult to understand what's wrong, and even more difficult to change it.

To my mind, we have an advantage in Russia now, where, as we reconstruct our government after the Soviet era, we can look at the experience of the West in building their democracies. We see the dangers they face from over-development in certain directions, and we can avoid promoting these trends ourselves. For example, we understand that freedom can be very dangerous if it is not balanced. It cannot be promoted without limits, and in most of the West, such limits are continually broken.

Orthodox Russians now believe that moral values based on Christian values should be established as the balance to freedom. Freedom should exist in the private sphere, but be limited in the public sphere. For most Russians, this morality is Christian morality. For now, Russia proclaims itself a secular state, as do many liberal democracies, but in the future I believe that people will understand that neutrality is ephemeral. It doesn't exist. Neutrality masks real attitudes and positions, and I often wonder why people believe that these so-called neutral attitudes are better than a Christian position. Democracy is now religiously neutral almost everywhere — perhaps only Greece still proclaims itself as a Christian democracy — but I think it is possible that Russia might one day become not just a democracy but a Christian democracy with a clear vision of Christianity as the foundation of people's lives, while being open to people of other beliefs.

Church-State Relations

RTE: I hope this can come about. What is the reality of church-state relations now in Russia?

FR. GEORGE: On a legal level, Russia has a constitution in which it is written that no single religion can be declared the state religion. Other clauses state that a person's rights cannot be violated because of his religion, nationality, or ethnicity, that religion cannot be compulsory, and that Russia is a secular

state. These three main clauses define the relationship between the state and religion. But this is a very broad framework and terms like “secular state” need to be interpreted. For instance, can the state declare preferences in the religious sphere, based on the beliefs of the majority of its citizens?

We also have a law on religious conscience and religious organizations. It was first adopted in 1990 at the fall of the Soviet Union, three years before the new Russian constitution was ratified. The current law replaced this in 1997. The preamble of this law, which doesn't have any judicial force, but helps us interpret the constitution, states that four religions in Russia play a special role: Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Judaism. Among these four religions, Orthodoxy is singled out for recognition of its particular role in the history of Russia, in the formation and development of its spirituality and culture. After this preamble, the clauses of the religious law concern every religion.

There is no other differentiation; all of these traditional religions have equal rights and status, and the concept of religious freedom is developed here in a very detailed way. It gives the freedom not only to choose one religion over another, but to proclaim this religion, and to give information to others. There is also a clause about education and social work.

Another important clause says that if the state adopts any legislation that affects the religious sphere, it should consult with these major religious groups. Nongovernmental councils to advise the government on religious issues are already in place. The state has a presidential council that includes these four major groups, as well as Catholics and Protestants. The Duma, which is the legislative branch of the Russian government, has its own advisory council, and there are also regional religious councils which act locally. Religious legislation is still very broad, and there are many areas that need to be defined, but this is the framework in which the Russian Orthodox Church now acts.

On a practical level, we have had many difficulties because the Duma has not defined its constitutional position as a secular state. The government seems to want to maintain a neutral position, to say, “We are not connected to any religion,” but at the same time, the state understands that the Russian Orthodox Church plays a very important role in society that can't be ignored. Moreover, they see the positive role of the Church in society. The Church unites society in a way that no government organization can, and there is no state organization that has as many affiliates as the dioceses or parishes

Opposite: Side chapel. Church of the Apostle Philip, Novgorod.



of the Church. The government understands that the Church is a factor of solidarity in society.

Our current framework is also used by those who want to push an agenda — such as people who don't want any religious education at all in school. They say, "Our constitution says that Russia is a secular state, so if education is state-sponsored, religion can't be present." But the Russian Orthodox Church has officially proposed its own interpretation of a secular state, which comes from the statement on Church and Society, adopted in 2000 by the Russian Synod.¹ This interpretation is that while a secular state would not have an institutionalized state church, this doesn't mean that the Church and state can't cooperate in some spheres. The state represents society, and the Church embraces a huge part of society, which is why both Church and state need this cooperation.

Of course, we do have some recognition of Orthodoxy in Russian society, which is only right. Christmas is a national holiday, celebrated according to the Old Calendar, as is the feast-day of Sts. Kyril and Methodius in May, and the Feast of the Icon of the Mother of God of Kazan on the 4th of November.² Pascha is not an official holiday because it always falls on Sunday, which is not a government working day.

RTE: When people in the West saw former President Putin present at a feast-day celebration, funeral or state occasion with Patriarch Alexy II — now President Medvedev and Patriarch Kyrill — it was often assumed that they are working hand-in-glove.

FR. GEORGE: Yes, although our governmental structure is a matter of public record, people in the West continue to claim that the Russian Orthodox Church is very tightly linked to the state. This isn't so. When we see on TV that the president goes to church, prays, and tries to help in the process of the renaissance of church life, and that former President Putin also participated in the unification of the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Church Abroad, this only shows that the president himself is a believer, and that he tried to do something as an individual. This does not mean that the Church and state have close structural links. We do not have a legislative or adminis-

trative channel by which the state can influence internal Church policy, or by which the Church can influence state policy or the direction of politics.

The Church can only influence society by taking a public position. If the Church's position is well-argued, and government officials and educated members of society find it workable, they may try to use our suggestions in their work. They will invite religious representatives for consultations and discussion. This is a good process, and I don't see why the Church should be forcibly excluded or isolated from the political process. Neither the Church nor the state has administrative influence over one another. In some western countries, such influence exists, such as England, Greece, Cyprus, Finland, Iceland and Norway (as well as some French and Swiss regions) where state churches have administrative channels to influence the government. With an official administrative link, a state official is obliged to respond whether he agrees or not, he just receives instructions to do this or that. We don't have such a system in Russia.

It is clear that we do not have this administrative link because we do have problems in church-state relations — for instance, when the state does not want to listen to the Church on matters like religious education in the public schools. This is a very important question in Russia today, and our argument is that the state must satisfy the right of religious freedom of conscience for its citizens by giving them religious education.

RTE: This is an interesting concept for Americans that the state should provide religious education, although, as you mentioned, Finland and Greece still do, and most of Europe did until a few decades ago. Why do you think this should happen?

FR. GEORGE: If the state guarantees religious freedom, this doesn't just mean that I am simply free to choose this or that religion. This is a passive understanding of religious freedom. An active understanding would be that the state not only permits you to choose a religion, but gives you the means to develop your religious identity and your religious life. The Orthodox Church's proposal for religious education in state schools is that children would go to voluntary classes. If parents don't want their children to go to religious classes, they don't have to. These would also be confessional classes: Muslims going to Muslim classes, Buddhists to Buddhist classes, and Orthodox Christians to Orthodox classes. If there are not enough children of one denomination in a school to make up a class, there could be an

¹ *The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, Russian Synod of Bishops, August, 2000.

² The Feast of the Kazan Mother of God is a Russian national holiday commemorating the liberation of Moscow from a 17th-century Polish invasion, by a spontaneous uprising of Russian peasants from Nizhni-Novgorod carrying the Kazan Mother of God icon.

alternative class of secular ethics. Or if a person doesn't want a religious approach at all, he can go instead to a class on secular ethics. These details can all be discussed, but we feel that the state should help with religious education because this is the elementary basis of religious freedom. Education is something solid that helps acquaint you with your own religion.

RTE: But isn't this more the role of the Church than the state? Why should the state be involved at all?

FR. GEORGE: As we mentioned before, about 80% of the Russian population polled declare themselves Orthodox, but only about 10% really lead an active church life. For the rest, church life is something passive, but not because they are not interested. We have found that these people often react very positively to learning more and becoming involved in church life. However, this is 70% of the population, and the Church simply doesn't have the resources to satisfy this need and desire.

RTE: Yes. With tens of thousands of village churches destroyed and hundreds of thousands of clergy and monastics killed during the Soviet period, there are still millions of people, particularly in rural areas, without access to a church or the sacraments. Even if they have the means to travel to a larger village or town, this can be done easily only in summer.

FR. GEORGE: It was not only churches that were destroyed, but the whole educational system, and many social service institutions. Very many buildings belonging to the Church before the Revolution — not only church buildings, but schools, colleges, universities, hospitals, orphanages, homes for the elderly, and so on, have still not been given back, and when they are given back, they almost always need either major repair or complete reconstruction. So, if the Church cannot use the facilities it had before the Soviet period, and in fact, has had to use all of its resources just to make the buildings it has been given back usable, it is only fair that the government should help. They took away the infrastructure that made religious education and ministry possible. Either these properties should be completely returned or, if this is too difficult, alternatives should be organized to assist us. This is also a question of justice.

This is a secondary argument, however, because the most important question here is the democratic state and its attitude towards religion. As a priest

with parish duties, I also ask myself, how do we bring up this new generation in the Orthodox faith? It is obviously not enough to give formal information in school classes. These young people must also feel the reality of the Church and why they need it. The best means of teaching is in an informal setting within church communities, but this is not yet possible in many places.

RTE: In Europe and North America, many people not only believe that there should not be a state church, but that there should be a complete separation between religion and the state. Your idea that the state has responsibility for the spiritual well-being of its people harkens back to Byzantium and Imperial Russia, where, in his coronation oath, the emperor accepted responsibility for the spiritual well-being of his subjects, and for the conditions by which they could freely practice their religion. For many North Americans, for example, religious belief is often where one's sense of individuality is most deeply rooted, and to have the government involved would seem like a form of coercion. Most of us wouldn't want the government involved in every aspect of our lives.

FR. GEORGE: You've brought up a very sensitive question about the personal and collective character of religion. I think religion has both sides, and they cannot be separated. Of course, you are right in saying that for Christianity especially, the relationship of the individual to God is understood first of all as a personal relationship, but it's also important for every person who has this personal relationship with God to have a community experience of these relations. The government is responsible for organizing our collective life, so it is quite understandable that government also has a relationship to this public side of religion.

RTE: Your sense of the government's responsibility in this sphere strengthens the impression that Russians have traditionally had a more collective view of their society than other parts of the West.

FR. GEORGE: But that takes us to the next question. What kind of relationship does the government have with public religion? This is a crucial point. As I said in the first part of our interview, if this is only an administrative relationship, where the government passes some laws about religious life, or tries to somehow regulate it by formal administrative means, this won't work. I believe that a major mistake of the past was when Christian practice was forced on people. For example, in Russia before the 1917 revolution,

each civil servant was obliged to confess once a year, and to have an affidavit that he had confessed. This, of course, is nonsense from a spiritual point of view. The methods of maintaining a Christian state had become overly bureaucratic and administrative. Of course, a Christian state always has to do some missionary work among its own population, because Christianity always needs to be renewed, but overly formal rules destroy the system from within. It is the failure of these unwieldy pre-revolutionary rules, such as compulsory confession, that shows us how to proceed now.

The state's relations with religion can be built on other forms, and even when I said that I hope that Russia may one day become a Christian democracy, this does not mean that all of the people who govern would have to be Christian or realize Christian values. Even today, there aren't any laws that establish membership in the Orthodox Church as criteria for this or that position, yet at the same time, there is real freedom in the choice of religion. Russian officials — including the president — publicly appear in church, pray, visit monasteries, and if they are believers, they can demonstrate this openly. They don't have to hide their belief.

I think this is a good example of the presence of Orthodoxy in Russian public life. There is no pressure for people in public life to be Orthodox, but at the same time, Orthodox people in public life are not embarrassed to talk about their religious beliefs, to have icons in their offices. I think it is a healthy situation, when you don't formally legislate this, but neither is it taboo — people still have their freedom to worship, and it isn't prohibited for them to express this in their public service.

RTE: In the West this is becoming less and less acceptable, and religious symbols are becoming rarer in public life and government offices. Nativity crèches and crosses are often banned in public places.

FR. GEORGE: Yes, I know from my work in Europe that if you have an icon in a public place you will be heavily criticized, but how can my religion offend someone else? This is not my problem, but the problem of the person who is offended. This person is not tolerant. Why do I have to hide my religious views and beliefs?

People in the West often criticize us for being open about our faith, but these are not structural links between the state and Orthodox Church, but the right of individuals in public office to express their religious views. It is their right to do so. In parts of Europe, and perhaps North America as well,

why can a homosexual proclaim his practice openly, but if I'm a Christian and I do so, I will be criticized?

RTE: I think that many people simply want to live with values other than Christianity, but some of this reaction may have come about as a backlash against aggressive Protestant evangelization.

FR. GEORGE: Yes, of course you must be careful about how you state your views, but just because some people are aggressive, does that mean that no one can express their belief?

RTE: Usually, in the U.S., they try to make the government and public sector neutral to religion so that no one feels put upon. You might be able to have a small icon on your desk, but, you could never have one, for instance, next to a picture of the American president on the wall of a government or city office.

Fr. George: Or above the picture of the president?

RTE: Right, never.

Minority Religious Rights

RTE: Fr. George, you've mentioned the recognition of traditional religions in Russia before the 1917 Revolution: Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim, Buddhist, Jewish, and the recognition of some Protestant denominations who have been here for centuries, such as the Anglicans, Baptists, and Lutherans, but there are often complaints from sectarian religious groups from the West that they can't be easily registered, that they should be "free" to do as they like in Russia, that they can't proselytize, etc. On the other hand, some people feel that Russia should be able to keep sectarian groups out of the country if they choose to do so.

FR. GEORGE: All of these questions concern the values of the state. A state defines the values of its people, and decides what values they want to protect. They do so by means that can be strict or lenient. Even a modern state that is neutral to religion, or one that is very free and open to different religions, still has unspoken or hidden values that you can't touch or oppose, such as democracy, liberty, free trade. If you criticize these values, you are very



strongly censured — in the media, for instance, or in the school in which you are a student or teacher. The system reacts immediately to protect those values by which it defines itself. If you look at the special measures for security in the U.S., you can see how they present these measures to the public as necessary, although they curtail some liberties.

It is not a problem for the majority of Americans when their government puts sanctions or restrictions on countries such as Cuba, Korea, or South Africa because this favors your own values, your views on life. It is also natural to not allow free and open access to your society by anyone who wants to come in from abroad and act as he likes. You don't know how a person from another society will behave in your country, or what the result of his teaching will be. So, you are not so quick to give them all the freedoms that they would like to have until you are sure of them. This is your home and you have a right to allow people in or not.

I believe that Russian people are beginning to realize once again that religious values are at the center of our life, and that it is necessary to defend them as firmly as we defend our earthly values of democracy, of a free market, and of other things. This worldview can exist, and religious values can be defended against those who are enemies of these values. When westerners see this, they may say, "Why, it's terrible, it's so undemocratic." But for people for whom religion is in the first place, in a country where you can put your icon above the picture of the president in your office, this is normal and natural. We want to protect these values as nonreligious countries protect their earthly values. They protect their secular worldview in the same measure that religious societies protect their religion. But it is up to each individual state to decide what to protect.

But returning to the question of registering these sectarian churches in Russia, there are clauses in our 1997 *Law on Freedom of Conscience and Religious Organization* defining the conditions under which a religious organization can operate. The conditions are very liberal: a newly-appeared organization can exist in Russia for fifteen years without registration. During this period of time, the state acquaints itself with the group, and they can practice their religion freely. If, during these fifteen years, this religion does not violate any of the clauses about how a religious group should act they can be legally registered, after which they can acquire property, receive tax exemptions, and fully exercise their legal rights as a religious organization.

Opposite: Cathedral of Saint Sophia (Holy Wisdom), Kiev.

These clauses include such things as that their activities should not contradict the constitution. They cannot incite people to revolution, for example, or encourage people to disregard the civil law. This is the logic of the system we have now, that all religions are equal, and that the state has no interest in especially protecting Orthodoxy. Nor are there any special clauses against proselytizing. This is a religious term, and the state does not have such a term as a legal concept. These other criteria of evaluation do not depend on whether their beliefs are true or not, or whether they proselytize.

RTE: So, when a small Russian Orthodox village sees a heterodox group coming in, such as the Mormons or Jehovah's Witnesses, they have no recourse by law to defend themselves? All they can do is find problems with the group's registration, or with the plumbing or wiring in their buildings?

FR. GEORGE: That's right. Because there is not yet any legislation to give local communities a voice as to whether they want these groups or not.

Recently, there was a very big scandal in Moscow, because the Moscow City Planning Commission allowed the Krishnaites to buy land in an historic part of Moscow where the tsars were crowned. This is now a very populated district, and, of course, the Krishnaites are an extremely tiny minority in this Orthodox district. The people in these big blocks of apartments did not want this huge pagan temple complex outside their windows, which was to be only a little smaller than Christ the Saviour Cathedral. It was evident that there was no need for such a huge temple. The membership of the Hare Krishna group is minute and it was obvious that they were constructing this foreign-funded complex in order to attract and convert people. When local residents learned of the plan they were furious. They hadn't been asked, and they began a campaign against the construction. The campaign worked, and permission was revoked. Instead, the Krishnaites were allowed to buy a smaller parcel of land somewhere outside of Moscow. The Indian government tried to influence Russia in this case, which seemed very strange because Krishnaites are a Hindu heresy — but I heard recently that they had a follower in the Indian Embassy.

Our Constitution was written in 1993, when the legislature was preoccupied in creating a constitutional framework that would insure that the Soviet past would never be able to return; they were not yet thinking deeply about religious values. Now, we are thinking about the role of religion in our society and this may result in a clearer interpretation of church-state relations. The

time has come, and I think that all of these experiences with different religions in Russia will help us to develop a model that is appropriate and viable. Of course, there is often a gap between the legislative sphere and what happens in practice, but step-by-step, we hope to come to a workable relationship.

The Russian Orthodox Church also works in this secular sphere with other religions — for example, there is a consensus among the main religions in Russia that clergy of any faith should not participate as elected representatives in legislative work. In the 1990's, when some clergymen became legislators, it wasn't a good experience — they had to take sides in voting, and their personal votes reflected on the Church. A clergyman is to be for the whole society.

RTE: Would the Russian Orthodox Church stand up for the rights of other minority religions when there are problems in the Russian Federation, such as border areas that are predominantly Muslim or Buddhist?

FR. GEORGE: In these regions, local bishops of dioceses are often very supportive of the religious needs of Russia's other traditional religions, and have assisted their applications to local administrations. We have said many times that the Russian Church supports the construction of religious buildings for other religions when there is a need for this, but there must be a real need. A huge foreign-funded Hare Krishna temple was not needed in the center of Moscow, and today, for example, there are rich sponsors from Saudi Arabia who are very ready to build hundreds of mosques in places that have a rich Orthodox heritage and very few Muslims. We also have the problem of Protestant denominations who receive money from rich Protestant countries and want to build large church centers in small towns while there are as yet very few members of their church. In these cases, construction is done with the aim of large-scale proselytizing and displacing the local Orthodox tradition. This is why we believe that the rights of the minorities should be balanced with the rights of the majority as well. Human rights defenders are very vocal about minority rights, which are important, but the majority also have rights, and many small Russian towns do not want a huge protestant church in their midst.

When there is a question about the construction of a religious building, we always say that approval should not come primarily from the government authorities or the Russian Orthodox Church, but that it is necessary to ask society. Do people want to have a mosque, a synagogue, or a protestant church in a primarily Orthodox neighborhood?

RTE: Would you also ask that question about an Orthodox church being built in a predominantly Muslim, Jewish, or Buddhist area?

FR. GEORGE: Yes. We don't build churches where there is no pastoral need for them. There has to be a large enough local Orthodox community to build and sustain a church, and it wouldn't be built, for example, in an historically Muslim neighborhood in one of the Muslim republics.

RTE: Earlier you spoke about upholding majority values in Christian countries. Do you feel the same about Islamic countries, for example, that allow Christians very little freedom? They may be allowed to hold services for their own co-religionists, but they can't do missionary work.

FR. GEORGE: Yes, the Russian Orthodox Church has never criticized restrictions against Christian mission in Islamic countries because we think that every people has a right to protect their own religious heritage. But, to my mind, more important than these restrictive laws against missions is the real lack of individual freedom. For example, in some countries, if a Muslim becomes acquainted with Christians who are quietly living their civic and church life in a Muslim country and decides that he wants to convert to Christianity, this freedom is necessary. In many Muslim countries conversion from Islam is severely punished by law, often with death.

RTE: Would you support the right of an Orthodox Christian in Russia to convert to Islam, Buddhism, Judaism, Catholicism, or Protestantism?

FR. GEORGE: Yes, but it should not be the result of a wholesale missionary strategy by these religions. It should be that individual's personal decision.

Freedom *Versus* Public Blasphemy

RTE: Can we move now to some other specific questions about life in Russia? It is often repeated in America and Europe that the Russian media is heavily censored. Here, however, is an editorial from *The Moscow Times*, an English-language newspaper that often seems to go out of its way to openly denigrate the Orthodox values and heritage of Russia. In this editorial, they defended the Moscow Sakharov Art Gallery's right to an extremely blasphemous anti-Christian exhibit where, among other even more offensive items,

an artist had Christ indicating a Coca-Cola bottle and saying, "This is my blood." I believe things like this should be censored.

FR. GEORGE: The first exhibit like this in the early 90's was at the Manege Gallery, near the Kremlin, when a so-called artist chopped icons into pieces in public. The Church was furious about this, but many people said, "Why? This is freedom of art, freedom of expression!" We said to them, "Can you imagine a public exhibit in the center of a German city praising Nazi ideals? Or an exhibit in America, publicly praising the ideals of the Ku Klux Klan? Such a thing could not exist, the state would prohibit it, because they know very well what the historical role of these groups were. In Russia we know very well what the effect of an atheist state was. For us this is the same kind of desecration that occurred in atheist times. Why should society have to tolerate this?"

RTE: At the Sakharov gallery, Orthodox believers finally went in and destroyed the blasphemous exhibits.

FR. GEORGE: The exhibit was a deliberate provocation. In a society where Orthodoxy is the majority religion this is absolutely unacceptable. People sometimes call this a limitation of freedom, but I think that these *limitations* are an expression of our freedom. We are free to place limits, and we placed these limits by our free will. Because of our freedom we are able to protect ourselves and conserve what we see as valuable. This is not neglecting our free choice, but using it to ban such things as immoral television shows, blasphemous exhibits, pornographic advertisements on the streets, or advertising casinos.

In some places, such as Moscow, gambling restrictions have been lifted and you can see these slot machines on the street. They were unknown before and are very alluring, and now we have huge problems when fathers of families or young people become addicted to gambling. They just can't stop, and end by needing special treatment for these addictions. Society should not tolerate such things.

Those who are against all limits call this freedom of choice, claiming that any limitation is dictatorship, but here they are playing with people's passions. They are enslaving people. Former President Putin was very serious about this. He wanted to make three small areas in the country where casinos would be concentrated and people would have to travel to get to them,

not spread throughout cities and towns. But, then, because of money, the legislators relaxed some of his conditions.

RTE: In the West, majority values and limitations of freedom play out in other ways. Over the past ten years, almost the entire U.S. has curtailed smoking in public places. This is a majority value that quite dramatically limits the rights of the large minority who still smoke.

FR. GEORGE: It is one of the responsibilities of the state, and particularly when that state is mostly Christian, to have some censorship in the public sphere, but of course, the public should be involved in the decision and the issue should be clearly discussed. The U.S. and European bans on smoking came after many years of educating the public to its dangers, and this needs to happen for many issues.

Now in Russia, many people come to Church and say, “My child is addicted to drugs or to his computer. I can’t pull him away from his computer games. He doesn’t want to study or to communicate with me.” In these cases I’m always a little surprised. You can’t just come to church and pray for a miracle. Human nature doesn’t change quickly and if a soul has already acquired some passions, you have to deal with this. It is always a question of choice and of setting limits. But if we set limits, this also means that we need to propose alternatives.

The community and the Church should contribute with healthy alternatives. Certainly, it’s not up to the state to feed people spiritually, but they do need to support culture, religion, and education — to provide access to more than just basic physical needs. It is the state’s responsibility to create a direction. For instance, in order to pray properly you need a church — there are tens of thousands of villages without churches, and no way to raise the money to build them. The government needs to help with this for the same reason that it needs to help with education. The infrastructure was destroyed in the name of the people. Now it needs to be rebuilt, also in the name of the people.

Church Cooperation and Response to the Russian State

RTE: Last summer, when conflict began between South Ossetia and Georgia, Patriarch Alexy II made a strong Christian appeal to both sides to cease fire and return to the path of dialog. Although it was in English on your website,

his statement went almost unnoticed in the West, certainly by the popular media. I know that this raised some shackles among Russians who thought that, as a Russian, he should favor South Ossetia. Does the Russian Orthodox Patriarchate regularly speak out on social issues?

FR. GEORGE: The aim of that statement was not about conquering or gaining a victory, but we wanted the Georgians to understand the suffering and aspirations of the Ossetian and Abkhazian peoples who live within their borders, and for the Ossetian people to understand the suffering of Georgians.

The Church speaks quite openly to the political authorities about social and economic conditions in Russia that have left many people extremely poor and about economic programs that are not in people’s real interests. During this period of reform and the present economic crisis, the Church is addressing situations dealing with pensions and transportation for the elderly, the homeless, assistance for the elderly, orphans, the handicapped... and as you mentioned, international problems such as the conflict in South Ossetia.

RTE: Over the past decade, are there any projects in which the Church has worked successfully in cooperation with the government?

FR. GEORGE: There have been some projects, but never with ideal results. In every sphere, things could have been improved. The problem of cooperation with the state is that religion is still not considered important as a public factor in society. This is still a rather Soviet approach. Politicians demonstrate their belief in or respect toward the Church, but the state does not have legislative or administrative channels of cooperation with the Orthodox Church or other religious groups to cooperate on projects such as the improvement of orphanages, education, hospitals, and programs for the handicapped and the elderly. Cooperation is incidental and it depends on personal relationships and the inclination of individual politicians. We need a more clear-cut legislative and administrative process for real church-state cooperation.

At present, almost all good projects are private initiatives of individual politicians — a governor of a region, or the mayor of a city — but we have neither the legislative framework nor a government policy for religious communities to cooperate with the government in nationwide initiatives. At the same time the state does have a legislative framework for such cooperation with NGO’s [non-governmental organizations], and if they have

social projects in which the state is interested, the state can support these projects with budgeted money. We need the same mechanism for religious-governmental cooperation.

Also, we aren't saying that the state should cooperate only with the Orthodox Church, we believe that the state should cooperate with different religions, in proportion as those religions are present in society. If there are a majority of Muslims in Muslim republics, or Buddhists in Buddhist republics of Russia, the state needs to cooperate with these communities.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn

RTE: Alexander Solzhenitsyn reposed last August. How do you feel about him and his impact on society?

FR. GEORGE: Many of his opinions and evaluations are very precious and close to the vision of Orthodox believers, of which he was one. He understood the Soviet period and our own period of reform deeply; without denying the national dignity of Russia, he was able to express his opinion about 20th-century Russian history without humiliating Russia. He tried to be fair, sincere, and open, and in his later years, I saw that he had even reevaluated some of his earlier opinions.

RTE: He did have fifty years as a writer.

FR. GEORGE: Yes, and in the 1970's he was very critical of the Church and its position in the Soviet state. He couldn't understand how hierarchs could be reconciled with the Soviet regime, but later in the 80's and 90's he understood more profoundly what had happened in the Soviet Union, and he spoke of the Church's position based on this fuller understanding. Rewriting his opinions of the early 70's was not back-peddling, it was the fruit of reflection and experience, and I think he came to understand that the Church can preserve its identity and faithfulness to its values, while not acting outwardly as a social body. The Church has its own way of working in society, and moreover for Church people, the liturgy, spiritual life, is a more real factor of change than any social protest or activity. If you pray, if you try to stay Christian under any circumstance, what can influence you? In the Soviet society, church people were real individuals; nevertheless, ordinary church people remained loyal to their country.

RTE: But how far could that loyalty go when their beliefs had such different foundations?

FR. GEORGE: Yes, Christians do have boundaries of loyalties, and if life and society is changing around them, of course a Christian can suffer and be anxious about this, and they can try to do something to change it by convincing people, by arguing, by witnessing by their own lives. But if the society in which they live tries to force them to act against Christian values, they have to stand up and oppose this. During the Soviet period, this was very difficult because people were weak, they were afraid.

RTE: Prison or worse awaited them for speaking out, and state orphanages for their children. Few of us can judge this period from experience, which is why Alexander Solzhenitsyn and every Russian who survived the era with integrity are lessons for us all.

FR. GEORGE: Yes, the Russian people came through a terrible period of state atheism and the denial of our historical heritage, but I don't believe that this experience completely changed the Russian character or spirit. It was a critical spiritual illness, and such illnesses end either in death or recovery. Russia is returning to life, and I see its spiritual tradition penetrating more and more into the lives of people. We pray that this will lead to a healthy and God-fearing society. ✦