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The Orthodox Are Coming!

Nicolai N. Petro

“The Russians Are Coming! The Russians Are Coming!” was a 1966 Hollywood spoof of Cold War attitudes. It portrays a Soviet submarine crew stranded on the coast of Maine. The Soviet sailors end up winning over the local townspeople, who even help the sub to escape before U.S. Air Force planes arrive to sink it. The movie made light of the differences between Russians and Americans by suggesting that they had much more in common than they realized.

As improbable as that story seemed back in 1966, an even more momentous encounter is currently taking place in Europe. Thanks to the expansion of the European Union, millions of Orthodox Christians now have a seat at the table of European decision-making bodies. The admission of Romania, Bulgaria, and Cyprus has quadrupled the number of Orthodox Christians in the EU, from ten million to more than forty million, but this is just the tip of a very large iceberg. Should the EU continue to expand eastward, it could someday encompass as many as 200 million Orthodox believers, transforming Orthodox Christianity from a quaint minority into the largest denomination in Europe, with the Russian Orthodox Church as its pre-eminent political voice. This will be true regardless of whether Russia itself joins the EU, since more than half of its parishes are located outside Russia.

For the first time since before the fall of Constantinople, Orthodox polities are part of the decision making structures of Europe, yet little thought has been given to the impact this is likely to have on the political complexion of Europe.

There are some potentially worrisome aspects to this encounter. For one thing, the political weight of the Church within those countries is not declining, as it is in Western Europe, but growing. Orthodox faithful expect to have their voice heard within the European political institutions of which they are now a part, and this poses a direct challenge to the secular framework of the EU. Moreover, with the fall of communism, the various branches of Christianity are once again in direct competition for members. Religious proselytism has already emerged as a source of tensions in several Orthodox countries. Finally, while most take it for granted that people in Eastern Europe will follow the Western path of modernization, it is certainly worth pondering what impact the values of Orthodox Eastern Europe will have on the West, and the potential danger of an intra-European clash of cultures, if a common ground is not found.

There are many who believe that there is, in fact, no common ground to be found. Following in the footsteps of historians Oswald Spengler and Arnold Toynbee, Samuel Huntington has warned of the coming clash between "Slavic-Orthodox" civilization and the Catholic-Protestant West. He claims that basic Western cultural values ("individualism, liberalism, constitutionalism, human rights, equality, liberty, the rule of law, democracy, free markets, the separation of church and state") have little currency within Orthodox cultures. In his view there is a slim chance that Orthodox countries can join the West, but only if they recast their self-identity in clearly secular terms.

Huntington portrays the Eastern and Western halves of Europe as profoundly alien, and “the eastern boundary of Western Christianity [as] . . . the most significant dividing line in Europe.”

Recently, however, a much more hopeful assessment has begun to gain ground in both Western and Eastern Europe. It advocates a broader view of the process of European integration, by suggesting that the Western and Eastern branches of Christianity focus less on what has divided them, and more on re-acquiring the common cultural heritage that once united them. Most people realize that the common cultural legacy begins with Roman law and Greek philosophy, and that both contributed to the stability of the Byzantine Empire. Few, however, stop to consider its contribution to the theology of the Christian Church and its doctrines on Church-State relations in particular. Of special importance is the evolving Orthodox view of democracy and civil society, which can be most clearly traced in the Russian Orthodox Church because of its size and its impact on the whole Orthodox world.

According to senior spokesman for the Patriarch Alexey II, Fr. Vsevolod (Chaplin), there is a renewed appreciation of democracy within the Russian Orthodox Church. Democratic institutions allow the Church to carry out its social mission more effectively, and to voice concern about the decay of moral standards in post-Soviet Russia. Still, he says, Orthodoxy’s endorsement of democracy can only be a qualified one. Democracy, particularly secular democracy, can never be considered a proper ideal, because the Church can never accept as ideal any form of government that consciously separates itself from the divine. However, there are two notable elements in Church life that directly contribute to the democratization of

society: 1) the locus of its authority; and 2) its stewardship of the community.

Unlike Roman Catholicism, Orthodoxy is highly decentralized and dispersed. There is no supreme papal authority overseeing the fifteen autocephalous Local Orthodox Churches. Ultimate authority rests with Church Councils that bring together the entire religious community—both laity and clergy. Within that context, bishops are expected to administer their diocese in harmony with the will of both these groups. Historically, such administration has taken a wide variety of forms in Russia — from thoroughly hierarchical control to extensive popular control, including consensual investiture of bishops. The form deemed most suitable depends on the needs of the particular Church, and the community's prevalent political culture. In the present context of expanding democracy, the Russian Orthodox Church has responded by expanding dialogue on ways in which Church life should democratize.

A new generation of Western scholars on religion (Zoe Knox, Christopher Marsh, Elizabeth Prodromou, Nikolas Gvosdev) have even applied Western literature on civil society to contemporary Orthodoxy. By looking at the Church's highly delegative, almost "confederative" system of administration, and focusing on its community-centered initiatives, they argue that the Russian Orthodox Church is playing an important role as the country's largest civic organization. In this capacity the ROC has also had to come to terms with *de facto* religious pluralism of modern Russia. Following the collapse of the atheistic communist regime, Orthodox laity was exposed to a wide variety of new political and economic doctrines, including some from Orthodox communities outside Russia. In the absence of a clear consensus, the leadership of the ROC decided to

give up the role of the institutional Church as a political competitor, and to establish it as a neutral arbiter. As a result, the Church itself has become a place of dialogue, a space existing outside the state, the government, or the family, devoted to the preservation of an autonomous sphere for the individual, and a protector of “the inherent foundations of human freedom from the arbitrary rule of outside forces.” Nikolas Gvosdev quite correctly sees this as a theological endorsement of civil society.

Indeed, Orthodox communities seem much more comfortable with the ideals of civil society than they do with those of liberal democracy. One reason is that they see the latter as rooted in competition and confrontation, while the Church strives for community and harmony, a tradition that Fr. Vsevolod calls “gathering the scattered” (literally, in Church Slavonic, *sobraty rastochennaya*)—bringing people of differing ethnic, political and social persuasion together for the common welfare. Avoiding confrontation with state authority is deeply ingrained in the theology of Orthodoxy, stemming from the Byzantine view that, pace St. Augustine, the gap between the “City of God” and the “City of Man” can and should be overcome. Societies on earth should strive to be a “reflection” of the heavenly realm, and to accomplish this Church and State must work together for the good of the whole community.

The Orthodox Church does not shun the world, or abstain from politics. Its politics, however, are non-partisan, a call to “calming of political passions, and concern for peace and harmony” and to civic dialogue. A typical example is the Russian Orthodox Church’s efforts to mediate the political crisis between Boris Yeltsin and the State Duma in 1993. Orthodox church leaders have played similar role in the political crises in Serbia, Bulgaria, Georgia and, most

recently, Ukraine.

The issue of the Orthodox Church's stewardship of the community also poses the question of whether Orthodoxy is compatible with capitalist economic development and a global market economy, which many consider as vital to democratic development. While Max Weber stressed the otherworldly aspects of Orthodox cultures (as he did with Islam, Hinduism and Catholicism), economic developments in Russia suggest that the notion of Orthodox Christian stewardship affords ample room for business and economic development. In fact, the rebirth of Russian Orthodoxy (from 7,000 parishes in the early 1990s to more than 26,000 today) has coincided with a no less impressive economic upsurge, particularly since 1999. Record-breaking productivity growth, rapid increases in domestic investment, and a tripling of wages nationwide since 2000 have been matched by a seven-fold increase in corporate philanthropy, which Patriarch Alexey II has highlighted as vital to the nation. Clearly, Orthodoxy has been good for business.

We, in Catholic-Protestant West, should prepare for the coming of the "Orthodox Century" by appreciating all that unites us. If the dividing line between East and West continues to exist in our hearts and minds, removing it from the political map of Europe will accomplish very little. In the long run Europeans must become much better educated about their common Byzantine and Eastern Christian heritage. Even in the short run, however, the essential elements of this common inheritance can be used to shore up pan-European democratic institutions. Recent scholarship by Silvia Ronchey, Helene Ahrweiler, and Antonio Carile, provide a conceptual link between Byzantine political thought and the modern age, and highlight how much current European aspirations to pluri-

culturalism and subsidiarity (the idea that matters should be handled by the lowest competent authority), have in common with the Byzantine political model.

The worst possible solution would be to cling to a “clash of cultures” view that regards Orthodoxy as anti-modern and anti-western. This can only result in Orthodox believers feeling like strangers in the “common European home” they have just joined. If that occurs, we will have succeeded only in pushing the dividing line through the heart of Europe a little further east of where it was before.

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