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Date: Fri, 29 Apr 2005

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Subject: Truly Orthodox

To the Editor:

In "An Unorthodox Orthodoxy," Zeyno Baran and Emmet Tuohy suggest that a distinction ought to be made between the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC), which represents "the authoritarian status quo" and "the other Orthodox traditions representing freedom and democracy." They accuse the ROC of being nationalistic, having ties to the Russian state, trying to reassert control over former dominions, and supporting repressive regimes and separatism in the former USSR. By contrast, they tout the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Bartholemew I, as a supporter of "independent" churches, and that equate such independence with political democracy.

This is, to put it mildly, a bit of an oversimplification. In fact, the Ecumenical Patriarch's support for the independence of local churches is part of a concerted effort to extend his jurisdiction throughout all of Western Europe, the Americas and Australia, under an interpretation of Canon 28 of the Fourth Ecumenical Council to the effect that every province not belonging to another patriarchal see must be subject to the Patriarchate of Constantinople because Christianity there derives from the "barbarian" provinces of Pontus, Asia and Thrace, which were once part of the Eastern Roman Empire and hence subject to Constantinople (see his letter of 11 April 2002 to Alexis II, Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia). Not surprisingly, this rather antiquated interpretation of canon law has been rejected by all established Orthodox Churches. It seems strange that Baran and Tuohy, who point out the autonomy of local Orthodox churches, are unaware of the widespread opposition to Bartholemew's expansionist policies.

Seen in this light, the Orthodox churches of Estonia, Ukraine and Georgia are little more than targets of opportunity in a grander design. In 2002, for example, Bartholemew accepted into the Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of America six parishes in California previously affiliated with the

Antiochian Archdiocese of America, an act that spawned a crisis in Standing Conference of Canonical Orthodox Bishops in America. In April 2004 he broke Eucharistic communion with Archbishop Christodoulos of Athens, Primate of the Church of Greece.

Political discontent in Ukraine offers another such opportunity, despite the fact that, since 2001 the Moscow Patriarchate has granted the Ukrainian Orthodox church autocephaly in all but name, and has repeatedly stated its willingness to support full autocephaly whenever local bishops decide it is appropriate.

Yet, while relations among Orthodox Ukrainians indeed seem to be stuck, it is worth noting how quickly divisions can be overcome when politics is removed from the equation. The long delayed recognition by Estonian authorities of the Estonian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate in April 2003 led shortly thereafter to a very fruitful five day visit by Patriarch Alexis II to Estonia, the country where he was born and raised and where he served for nearly thirty years as bishop of Tallinn.

There is, however, a more fundamental problem with Baran and Tuohy's approach that goes beyond their unfamiliarity with the intricacies of church politics or Russian history (e.g., their statement that the "influence of the Russian Patriarchate grew in keeping with the expansion of Tsarist and later Soviet power" when it is common historical knowledge that Peter the Great abolished the Patriarchate in 1721. It was revived briefly on the eve of the collapse of Tsarism, but abolished again by Stalin until 1943 when he used it to appeal to the populace's patriotic sentiment). It is the assumption that Orthodox Churches ought to take a stand in favor of democratic politics. While this conflation of politics and religion seems quite natural to some strands of Western Christianity, it is quite alien to the Orthodox tradition.

One could cite innumerable authorities on this point, but for simplicity's sake, I will cite a very ecumenical Western contemporary, Archbishop Anastasios (Yannoulatos), from his recent book, *Facing the World: Orthodox Christian Essays on Global Concerns* (Crestwood, N.Y., St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 2003. Page reference are to this edition).

Citing numerous classical texts, including a wide range of Russian authors, Archbishop Anastasios suggests that the common Western view that people are essentially political beings whose actions should be evaluated through the lens of relations between individuals and the state, clearly does not suffice for Orthodoxy, which "has never made natural institutions absolute." Rather, it seeks to place them in the context of the greater

obligations of building a community of love, or *koinonia*, that transcends all political identities [p. 52].

There are so few Orthodox political texts, so little in the way of systematic doctrine regarding either law or politics, because when we limit ourselves to a purely political discourse "something of the universal and ultimate truth" is always lost. [p. 57]. Put another way, "Religion has an obligation . . . to transform the perceptible world by keeping our gaze firmly fixed upon the transcendental [p. 19]."

The divisive political discourse proposed by Baran and Tuohy is profoundly alien to the Orthodox tradition. That tradition has no set preference for one form of politics over another because that which is needful, right, and proper (Archbishop Anastasios refers to it as the Orthodox *deon* [p. 74]) simply lies beyond the ken of politics, both in power and in scope.