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The challenge and relevance of theology to the social  
revolutions of our time

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I hesitated a long time before committing myself to write this address. When I learnt that I was to speak after the addresses of such expert and well-known specialists as Professor Richard Shaull, and Professor H. D. Wendland I realized that I would be in a very difficult position. On the one hand I clearly saw what a great impression these addresses would produce on everyone both by their profound analyses and by the bold presentation of new problems. On the other hand I recognized all my own weakness, after a long and severe illness. Still, I am used to doing my duty, and so when the leadership of the conference instructed me to give a short address on this theme I considered myself obliged, even in unfavourable circumstances, to witness to that Living Truth, which is characteristic of my Church, firmly believing and hoping that the Truth will speak for itself. However, apart from belief in Truth, which of course I know is characteristic of us all as Christians, I have a personal reason for being so bold as to speak to this expert Christian gathering after these expert addresses.

I was convinced that each of these first two addresses would have its own distinctive characteristics, its individual peculiarities, its own specific character, clearly differentiating it from the other. This is a sign both of their strength and great value but also of their weakness and inadequacy, for Christian truth is by its very nature one and entire, though diverse and pluralistic in its expressions in the life and consciousness of men. That means that there is a place for my address also, with its specific character and peculiarities. In this specific and particular field, I dare to say that I do feel competent, for I am going to treat our main theme "The challenge and relevance of theology to the social revolution of our time" from the point of view of an Orthodox theologian, a member of the Russian Orthodox Church which has lived for almost half a century in the conditions of the social revolution which lies at the root of almost all the social revolutions of our time. Here our competence is clear and indisputable. It is one thing to describe theoretically or to consider in a series of academic discussions, in an armchair, by a comfortable fireside, in the quiet atmosphere of library or study, the "challenge and relevance of theology in an age of social revolution"; it is quite another thing to live under those conditions, to experience their consequences for oneself, to do theology and to live a life of witness to Christ in a socialist and secularized society.

I think that the impartial judgement of history gives us the right to say that our Church has stood the test, which has lasted almost half a century, of her competence in the realm of our main theme; and that in the life and witness of her faithful members she has exhibited the challenge and relevance of theology to the social revolutions of our time.

My colleague at the Leningrad Theological Academy, Professor Archpriest Voronov, has given you his paper on "The bases of social ethics in the conditions of Soviet reality from the Orthodox point of view", as a contribution to our general discussion on this conference. Here he shows our Soviet reality as it is reflected in the life and consciousness of our soviet, taken as a single moral and political unit.

This paper is available to all in an English translation, prepared by the Department of Foreign Affairs of the Moscow Patriarchate, which gives me the right to pass directly to the immediate theme of my address on "The challenge and relevance of theology to the social revolutions of our time".

First we must explain the meaning of our basic terms in the formulation of the theme - the sense in which we speak here of revolution and of a theology of revolutions.

For a long time past a dense atmosphere of dangerous ambiguity has surrounded the word "revolution". It has been used too often in different senses; it has been misused too often for completely different and sometimes even contradictory ends. Some Christians fear it, and prefer either not to use it at all, or to use it only to characterize phenomena of which they disapprove. But that is unrealistic. This word has become too popular and too commonplace; it has become too much a part and parcel of contemporary man for it to be possible to abolish it or to give it a single and anti-Christian and negative sense with one stroke of the pen. On the other hand many Christians gladly use this term in the sense of the simple but gradual creation of a new society without any radical breaking with the past. Let us take revolution in the broadest sociological sense of the word. Revolution is a radical break, the overturning of relationships, the restructuring of life, reconstruction. In a more organic sense, it is renewal, regeneration, new life. We speak of the technical revolution, the language revolution, the moral revolution, the revolution of daily life in the recent centuries of our history. But we also speak of the revolution which Christianity brought into the world. In this use of the word you can sense already a wide variety of nuances. Under "revolution" we include the mechanical, organic and spiritual meanings.

On the other hand all these "revolutionary" processes differ one from another in degree of sharpness, of tempo of development and of violence of their break with the past.

The essential thing is the radical renewal, - the new life which does not intend to continue the old life, but rather to finish with it in order to press on into the future.

First let us take revolution in this, its broadest sense, apply it to all spheres of cultural, social and political life, and ask ourselves what is the relationship of Christianity to revolution.

The answer, it seems to me, admits of no doubt. Renewal, new life - these are fundamentally Christian concepts. The ancient world lived with the idea of the perfect circle, the eternal return and the subordination of being to natural laws. Christianity, having declared war on natural life as contaminated by sin, summons man to a completely new, supernatural order of being - the Kingdom of Heaven. And on the threshold of this Kingdom it confronts him with the demand for repentance. "Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand". "Repent"- "metanoete" - means change your mind, be born again spiritually. The "birth by the Spirit", of which St. John's Gospel speaks, is a stronger ontological expression of this fact. The conversion of the great saints - of Paul and Augustin, and of many ascetics who renounced the world - these are evidence of a spiritual revolution brought about for the sake of a higher and nobler type of man in Christianity. Christian life begins in crisis; it also continues in crisis. Repentance is not a single act, but a permanent state. The power of sin is not overcome at one go; it keeps on demanding new efforts, new renunciations. There arises the continual need for new breaks with the power of sin - new spiritual revolutions and changes of direction. This is the Christian direction - forwards and upwards - as expressed by Paul in the well-known words, "Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead" (Phil. 3:13).

All this is gladly accepted at the individual level. The strange thing is that as soon as we start to talk about social renewal, Christians begin to hedge, shunning responsibility and struggle, sometimes openly defending a social sin, simply because an evil which has existed for centuries or even millenia acquires the charm of a tradition.

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Of all Christian cultures Byzantium is the one which contributed most of all to the mere sanctification of social evil. It took over without objection the entire social inheritance of the pagan world and gave it a sacral anointing. The Civil Law of the pagan Roman Empire was preserved in the guise of ecclesiastical tradition for thousands of years in Byzantium and medieval Europe, and for centuries in Russia from the time (16th century) when our country began to regard itself as the heir of Byzantium.

But that is radically opposed to the social tradition of early Christianity and the Greek fathers, the messianic preaching of our Saviour and the whole content of the teaching of the Old Testament prophets, which never grows old. No! Revealed religion in Israel and the early Church was social and revolutionary first; it became individualist and static later. The Kingdom of God was the Kingdom of the people of God before it became a Kingdom in the soul of each individual man. Our age is called to establish a balance between the personal and social effects of Christianity. It is sinful to pander to one's own psychosomatic nature. But it is equally sinful to bow down to evil and sinful social nature. Repentance - that is to say a radical change of mind, a radical break with the former way of life, a radical repudiation of the old, sinful ways, and equally a radical acceptance and engagement of one's whole self in the new and perfect life, i.e. all that we mean by revolution - this kind of repentance, this kind of revolution applies not only to the individual but also to the whole of society, to the nation, to the class, to every social group.

Repentance is a call to renewal, to revolution, to new life - for every separate individual and for society as a whole. Thus Christianity is by its very nature revolutionary; and the new life required by Christian social ethics is more radical, more profoundly revolutionary, more novel than any other social system or doctrine, which has grown up outside Christianity.

The traditional nature of Christianity and its respect for tradition should mean fidelity to good tradition, not to bad. The Christian re-evaluation of values always applies to relative values and does not encroach on absolute principles. Idolatry of the new as such, even if it is worse than the old, is foreign to Christianity. We are for the new, if it is better than the old. But it would be truer to put it like this. Christians are neither for the new nor for the old but for the eternal. However, the eternal cannot be incarnate in the temporal other than by the eternal creation of new forms which pass over into new qualities, by the eternal renewal of new forms, by revolution.

Yet if Christianity is by its very nature revolutionary, and if the early Christian communities were social in their life, structure and teaching, still the situation is quite different, as soon as we look at theology as a system and the Church as an historical institution. Systematic theology and the historic churches have never been on the side of revolution for the simple reason that they have been prisoners of a cosmocentric view of reality, prisoners of a static view of social order, as established once and for all on earth.

It is only in the last few decades, during which the most profound changes have occurred in philosophical, scientific and theological thinking - a kind of revolution - as a result of the anthropocentric view of the world, the evolutionary view of the universe and the re-evaluation of the whole history of mankind - only after all this, has it become possible to work out a theology of development and of revolution.

Although these efforts are new, they imply a return to the Bible, and to the early Christian Gospel. In this context the new theology of revolution and development has overthrown earlier concepts of the sacral nature of any status quo, as being fundamentally opposed to the biblical message about God, who revolutionizes history through the incarnation of the Logos, through the Easter joy of triumph over evil, through the Church of the incarnate word, through the sanctification by the Holy Spirit of everyone and of everything, leading mankind to the realization of the Kingdom of God. How, after all this, can Christians consider it right to stand aside from the revolutionary processes in the history of mankind? Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox theology have already done much work on this question - among Catholics, especially E. Mounier, among Protestants, Lehmann and Shaull, among Orthodox, Exemplarsky, Titlinov and others. The ecumenical movement as a whole, especially the World Council of Churches and the Second Vatican Council, is the best witness to the recognition of the necessity, of the demands and of the relevance of theology to the social revolutions of our time.

However, these attempts should be qualified as being only a start, indeed a tentative and uncertain start.

The experience of life of our Russian Orthodox Church, in the circumstances of the completely secularized and socialist society which is the fruit of the greatest social revolution in the history of man, - this experience of our Church can be not only an enrichment of the total Christian experience but also a challenge to our Western Christian brethren. It challenges all Christians to heed the experience of our Church in their relationship to the social revolutions of our time. Our Church, in the persons of part of its hierarchy and part of its clergy, went through all the stages of rejection, opposition and even direct action against the revolution and the changes it brought to the life of the Church. This was no mere theoretical rejection or passive non-participation. It was a bitter and open struggle. As a result, the Church lost millions of believers. Already well before the revolution, as well as during the revolution itself, large numbers of the revolutionary intelligentsia, workers and youth, left the Church and broke with Christianity. But the victorious revolution went its difficult way of consolidation and development without the Church. At the same time the overwhelming majority of the masses of believers, who remained true to Christianity and the Church, - what we call the "people of God" - became a constructive element in the building of the new society on the new revolutionary bases, and thus an example to the clergy and hierarchy, who had not welcomed the revolution. This helped our entire clergy and hierarchy to unite their fate and life with the life of the people and to come to terms with what had happened. Our Western Christian brethren may and should draw from this a lesson for themselves.

Christians should boldly, honourably and actively join in the building of the new life, based on social justice; they should bring a Christian social fervour to the social revolutions of our time and thus avert the de-Christianisation of the contemporary world. This in its turn cannot fail to have an effect on the very nature of the social revolutions. New in its form, but biblical in its content, the theology of development and revolution will have a positive influence on the course of history and on the thinking of the new revolutionary and socialist societies. This theology can and should raise a whole series of questions about the ultimate meaning of the world process, manifesting by word and deed what is good, genuine, eternal and absolute in biblical Christianity as revealed by God. It should help the social revolutions of our time to lead man to his ultimate fulfilment and significance.

This kind of challenge and relevance of theology to the social revolutions of our time is not just a distant possibility; the experience of our Church shows that it can be a real fact.

The very existence of our Church with its millions of believers who are active builders of socialism, sets secular society the task of rethinking the role and significance of Christianity in the future, for God has said "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life ... Without me you can do nothing". In this lies our hope and confidence for the future of the Church in this age of social revolutions.

