

RELIGION AND CULTURE: SERGIUS AND WHAT IS OLD AND WHAT IS NEW

Sermon preached by the Rev. Dr. Titus Presler,
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in the Chapel of the Good Shepherd of General Theological Seminary, New York City
on the Feast of St. Sergius of Moscow, 25 September 2007
Sergius: Ecclesiasticus 39.1-9; Psalm 34.1-8; Matthew 13.47-52

In a seminary whose mission is to educate and form leaders for the church in a changing world,

it is good for us to meditate on the nature of the church both as it relates to a changing world
and as it struggles in the anguish of its own changes.
Thus we have been enormously edified by two sermons on the church in the last few days:

on Friday Mark Collins found resonance between the strife among Anglicans and his growing-up tensions with his brother *and* the tensions between Matthew the tax collector and Simon the Zealot, both of whom Jesus invited into his inner circle;

and just yesterday Robyn Barnes found resonance between the pain being experienced in the church as the Body of Christ and the bodily pain she has experienced in successive surgeries –

both of them were saying that conflict and pain are inevitable and that the body of Christ can handle it, indeed learn and grow from it.

This evening I continue in this vein of theologizing about the church,
but focusing now on the relationship between church and culture in a changing world,

and I do so from the standpoint of our commemoration of Sergius, patron saint of Russia and a pivotal figure in the devotion of Russian Orthodox Christians.

It was startling to read in Sunday's *New York Times* about the turn that many teachers and administrators are taking in the public schools of Russia on the eve of the 20th anniversary of the collapse of the Soviet Union:

The other day in Kolomna, a city not far from Moscow "a teacher named Irina Donshina set aside her textbooks, strode before her second graders and, as if speaking from a pulpit, posed a simple question:

'Whom should we learn to do good from?'

'From God!' the children said.

“Right!’ Ms. Donshina said. ‘Because people he created crucified him. But did he accuse them or curse them or hate them? Of course not! He continued loving and feeling pity for them, though he could have eliminated all of us and the whole world in a fraction of a second.’”

Tough love for second graders!

"Nearly two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the return of religion to public life," the *Times* article went on, "localities in Russia are increasingly decreeing that to receive a proper public school education, children should be steeped in the ways of the Russian Orthodox Church, including its traditions, liturgy and historic figures.

"The lessons are typically introduced at the urging of church leaders, who say the enforced atheism of Communism left Russians out of touch with a faith that was once at the core of their identity.

"The new curriculum reflects the nation's continuing struggle to define what it means to be Russian in the post-Communist era and what role religion should play after being brutally suppressed under Soviet rule. Yet the drive by a revitalized church to weave its tenets into the education system has prompted a backlash, and not only from the remains of the Communist Party."*

Various individuals and groups are expressing concern that Russia may be compromising what they view as a desirable separation of church and state, and they naturally fear a renewal of the status that the Russian Orthodox Church had before the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 – a status as the official and state-established church.

Respect for Russia's religious pluralism is another concern, for about 8 percent of Russia's 146 million people are Muslim, there are close to a million Jews and about half a million Buddhists, these in Russia's Asiatic regions.

Yet Russian Orthodoxy is resurgent, and one knows it when Russian President Vladimir Putin, he of the former KGB, wears a cross and occasionally attends church.

This development is yet one more confirmation of the startling resurgence of religion in the 21st century.

I myself grew up in what many regard as the world's most religious country – India – the very epicenter of religious sentiment and thought, where, for instance, the once-a-decade Khumbh Mela, or festival, in Allahabad, at the confluence of the Jumna and Ganges Rivers, drew 70 million people at the last festival several years ago.

Nevertheless, having been born halfway through the 20th century I participated in a very 20th-century expectation that religion was destined to become more and more marginal with the onslaught of we may call the four horses of modernity –

Darwinian evolution, Freudian psychology, Marxist communism, and market capitalism –

all of which both individually and together seemed to undermine both the premises and the need for religion.

Instead, *religion lies at the heart of what Samuel Huntington called the clash of civilizations,*

and the confluence of religion with conflict in today's world is so prominent that it was central to the theme of the opening conference of the Desmond Tutu Center here at General.

It was the communist vision of the Soviet Union that we expected would be a great eraser of religion in the contemporary world,

and so it was for 70 years.

Yet even then many of us were startled by how quickly religion returned to Russian life, just as we were startled by the resurgence of religion in communist China after the ravages of the Maoist revolution of 1949 and the Cultural Revolution of the late 1960s.

One of the factors doubtless has been renewed contact with Christians from outside Russia.

For instance, when Prof. J. Robert Wright – our local custodian of *zee holee meesterees* in their eastern form – visited Russia for eleven days with a former bishop of New York in 1996 –

a visit during which they saw innumerable icons in innumerable churches – they shared the return flight on Delta Airlines from Moscow back home with no fewer than three mission groups:

one group of Salvation Army members from the Republic of Georgia on their way to do mission at the 1996 Olympic Games in Atlanta, Georgia;

then there was a group group of American Baptists;

and finally there was part of a large group of 320 USAmerican evangelists who had spent 10 days in Russia distributing gospel tracts in Russian, address lists of local Russian churches (including Orthodox churches), food, clothing and medical supplies!

"The goal [of the Orthodox influence in the schools]," says a local Russian Orthodox leader, "is that all the powers that be, the church and the government, make sure that people, children, know their history and their roots."

History and roots – standing behind that phrase, I sense, is the concept of culture.

As some international public health friends of ours have said, "Culture eats policy for lunch every time."

And so it is that religion – Russian Orthodoxy, in particular – is eating 70 years of secularist policy for lunch in Russia today.

Religion and culture.

We conceptualize the two as separate:

relationship with the supernatural on one side,

and the social, artistic, intellectual, economic and political environment of all human living on the other.

And so theologically we tend to place ourselves somewhere along a spectrum of relationship along the lines of H. Richard Niebuhr:

is Christ of culture, or against culture, or above culture, or transformative of culture, or what?

I myself tend toward interpreting the gospel as being counter-cultural in its force.

A major reality, though, is that whatever our theological preference may be,

all religion – and the Christian gospel as well – is shaped by culture even as it also shapes culture.
 Indeed and ironically, my own counter-cultural theological disposition may be just as much a reflection of 1960s counter-cultural movements in which I came of age,
 as it is an expression of my deepest convictions.
 There is religion and there is culture,
 but there is also religious culture
 as well as cultural religion.

It is the indelibility of a religious culture that is energizing the resurgence of Russian Orthodoxy in Russia's public schools today –

a conviction and a bedrock sensibility that reality cannot be fully ascertained without recognizing divine reality amid human reality,
 that the culture itself cannot be fully understood without some grasp of the religious convictions and symbols that have shaped it ever since Cyril and Methodius took the gospel to the Slavs in the 9th century.
 Yet although those two brothers from Thessalonika are honored as apostles to the southern Slavs and as the founders of Slavic literary culture,
it is Sergius of Moscow, an abbot of the 14th century, who is the patron saint of all Russians, and it is he whom we commemorate today.

He and his brother founded Holy Trinity Monastery near Moscow in 1372,
 and there he lived for the rest of his life in a setting that became a center for the revival of Russian Christianity,
 and he was responsible for the founding of over 40 monasteries altogether.
 He was not an author, nor apparently a great theologian, and he refused to follow Bishop Alexis as Metropolitan of the Russian Orthodox Church.
 Instead, two features seem to have made him compelling for Russians.
 First, he showed forth the presence of Christ in all of his interactions, including the honor with which he treated elders, children and animals, his refusal of high positions, and his humble lifestyle.
 Second, he supported Russian rulers in their struggle against the Tartar overlords and thus he helped lay the foundation for his people's independent national life – in practical terms, he behaved as a liberation theologian.

Thus Sergius became a compelling figure in both religion and culture:
 in religion, through his holiness of life and monastic influence,
 in culture, through his contribution to an autonomous national identity.
 In the last half century of USAmerican life I would point to Martin Luther King, Jr., and William Sloan Coffin, Jr., as two figures who similarly affected both religion and culture
 (notice, though, that I choose two *counter*-cultural figures; someone else, equally Christian, might cite Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell).

"Every scribe who has been trained for the kingdom of heaven," says Jesus, "is like a householder who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old."

This combination of the new and the old is essential to theology, ministry, and mission. It was vital to Jesus, so often accused of being a reckless innovator.

Sergius became a compelling witness in Russian Christian life because the new gospel-culture interaction he brought grew out of the ancient wellsprings of Christian spirituality;

conversely, he was not simply a custodian of a religious culture but someone who brought forth a synthesis new for his time.

So the relationship between Christ and culture is a mutual one:

an incarnational gospel cannot help but take cultural form, so we're naïve if we imagine we've got hold of a pure, non-cultural gospel, and likewise the gospel shapes culture and shapes it deeply, and it's naïve to suppose that cultural life can continue with no reference to religion.

In the current Anglican turmoil, each side accuses the other of caving to culture:

caving to USAmerican permissive relativism on one side, caving to African hidebound taboos on the other.

In reality we're all influenced by our cultures,

and we're all seeking to discern the presence of Christ which may be in our cultures

and the presence of Christ that may be prophesying against our cultures.

The householder taking out of her treasure what is new and what is old

is one of the most frequent gospel images on saints' days, and with good reason:

Discerning what is of Christ in both the old and the new,

and laying aside what is not of Christ in both the old and the new –

this is a crucial skill and gift in theology;

it is a crucial skill and gift in the ministry to which Christ calls us and the Church.

* Clifford J. Levy, "Welcome or Not, Orthodoxy is Back in Russia's Public Schools," *New York Times*, 23 September 2007, p. 1.