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## The Russian Orthodox Church and Economic Ethics

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## THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH AND ECONOMIC ETHICS. EFFORTS AT THE TURN OF THE MILLENNIUM

*Pavel Shashkin, Russia*

In the 1990s and 2000s, the state of the economy and the social sphere in the post-Soviet states have become objects of close attention by the Russian Orthodox Church in the persons of her Supreme Authority, clergy and laity, including those united in church public organisations. It is small wonder, considering the stormy economic and social changes that have affected literally every citizen in Russia and in other countries of the Commonwealth of the Independent States in the post-totalitarian period. Called to be concerned with the spiritual and material welfare of every person, the Church has responded to these developments by seeking to answer numerous questions asked by her spiritual children. While in the early 1990s the Church's response in the economic and social sphere focused primarily on particular pressing problems, by the end of this decade and especially in the beginning of the 21st century, the Orthodox socio-economic thought has addressed the profound ethical issues involved in this field.

### **1. The Shock of the Early 1990s. Economic Transformations and Moral Crisis**

The collapse of the Soviet economy at the end of the 1980s, followed by the disintegration of the political system, forced the state authority and society to undertake the difficult task of reforming the economy of this vast superpower as it was focused on heavy industry, mainly armaments. This task had no precedent in world history. Most of the Orthodox Christians were enthusiastic about the end of the Soviet political regime not only because of the state atheism it implanted but also because of the extremely ideologically-oriented economic policy that had been imposed on society against its will and that had destroyed by force of repression the Russian traditional order of economic life. At the beginning of the 20th century's last decade, the post-Soviet societies came to a consensus that the unsustainable Soviet economy should be reformed according to the market patterns adopted in other countries.

Such were the patterns adopted as the basis of the radical changes introduced at the beginning of the 1990s: the Soviet economic control structures were abolished; market mechanisms were activated; the state property was privatised *en masse*. The reformers sincerely believed in the power and truth of Western neoliberal economic doctrines. Their favourite term was ‘shock therapy,’ that was to bring Russia to prosperity in a matter of a few years. They relied on ‘the invisible hand of the market’ (Adam Smith).

The Russian liberal reformers are comparable to their chronological predecessors (the communists) in that they view economy as determining the entire life of a society, including its spirituality, morality and policy. Both accorded little value to non-economic factors in the life of a country or a state. As a result, the reliance on market as ‘putting everything in order’ led to a disastrous crisis of public morality both in politics and in the economy. In the first half of the 1990s, the slogan of enrichment by all means prevailed in Russia and other post-Soviet states. The vast opportunities opened up for private initiative were not seized first of all by honest workers, who found it difficult to adjust in no time to the rapidly and repeatedly changing ‘rules of the game,’ but by people not overburdened with conscience or any principles whatsoever. The privatisation carried out by dubious methods enriched those who were only recently the Soviet economic bureaucrats as well as apt manipulators and criminals. Multi-million fortunes were built thanks to one’s closeness to high state leaders or to the illegal use of force. The ‘rules’ adopted in the criminal world sometimes proved to be the only regulators of local economic relations.

The economic transformations were accompanied by a tremendous social tragedy. While a handful achieved a rapid and blatant enrichment, dozens of millions were slipping into poverty. Most people’s pensions and salaries were only enough to buy food and even these means were paid out casually or not at all. The savings accumulated under the Soviet rule depreciated completely. Those who worked at gigantic defence plants became legally or practically jobless. The system of free education and medical care began to weaken and rapidly disintegrated.

The rapid departure from a stable social state, to which the people of the Soviet Union were accustomed, generated mass disillusionment in the reform policy and utter demoralisation of society. It cannot be denied that the architects of the economic reforms have managed to accomplish the impossible as the radical reconstruction they carried out has laid a legal and political foundation for market economy in a country that lacked the proper adjustments. In doing so, they managed to avoid a disintegration of the country, civil war and mass social outbreak. The changes however proved to be not as easy as the liberal politicians of the early 1990s imagined them to be.

However, it is the moral decay of society that appears to be the most negative result of the early post-perestroika decade. The ruin of the social justice ideal, personal tragedies of most citizens, spite and social apathy, helplessness in face of tycoons and criminals – all this, like a heavy burden, lay on the people's conscience and therefore could not but trouble the Church.

## **2. A Russian 'Code of Moral Principles'**

A certain tension between the ideal of 'poverty in Christ' as radical contempt for earthly blessings, on the one hand, and desire for Christian influence upon the pragmatic order of the earthly world, on the other, continues and will probably continue to prevail in the Russian-speaking Orthodox discussion on socio-economic themes. This tension, which appeared in the Russian Orthodox thinking as far back as the dispute between 'the Non-Seekers' and 'the Josephites' in the 16th century, needed and still needs to be harmonised.

The 7th World Russian People's Council, a public forum chaired by His Holiness Patriarch Alexy II, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, and uniting clergy, politicians, leaders of public organisations, representatives of the scientific community and world of arts, took place in December 2002 in Moscow. This time the Council was devoted to the theme 'Faith and Labour: Religious and Cultural Traditions and Russia's Economic Future.'

Among the speakers at the Council were representatives of various political forces and adherents to various views on the ways in which Russian economy should develop. Among them were also representatives of the economic committees of the Russian Federal Assembly and leaders of major trade unions and business associations.

The Council's Word, the final document of the forum, stated in particular, 'Today the governmental authorities, scientists, businessmen, public organisations are seeking for ways to overcome the negative developments in the economy. This search cannot be limited only to the field of figures and market laws. National economic problems cannot be solved without taking notice of the moral and spiritual state of society. Indeed, many reasons for the present difficulties are concealed in the human hearts and minds. Scientific recipes and governmental decisions will not make people happy unless the moral foundation of human activity is restored and the rules of behaviour for the businessman, worker, public servant and any other participant in economic processes are established and really observed.'

'We have to learn to resolutely reject criminal amorality in economy and refuse to cooperate with dishonest and unscrupulous people. Those who do not pay wages in good time, humiliate the worker and

stifle business through red tape deserve persistent and staunch public condemnation. ... Economy should be not only effective, but also equitable and merciful, addressed to the human being, not only money and goods. We should realize that the goal of economic activity is first of all the welfare of people, young and old, strong and weak, those living now and those who will come to replace them...

'The determination of the fate of national economy however should not become an 'apanage' of officials, businessmen and economists. We all, the people, state, Church, trade unions, business associations, scientific community and civil society should see in Russia's economy a field for our care and creative efforts. The country needs an open and comprehensive dialogue on economic and social problems that will influence important decision-making.'<sup>1</sup>

The Council decided to develop a code of economic activity. The document with the title a 'Code of Moral Principles and Rules in Economic Activity'<sup>2</sup> was published in 2004. It deals with a diversity of aspects of economic and social life. It was formulated on the basis of the ten commandments of the Mosaic Law (the structure of the Code represents a kind of Decalogue) and the experience of their assimilation by Christianity and other religions traditionally confessed in Russia.

### **3. Prospects for Orthodox Moral Influence on Economic Ethics**

It can be hoped that economic thought only begins to develop in the Russian Orthodox Church and will flourish in a way unprecedented in the history of our Church even in the pre-revolutionary time, particularly, during 'the Solver Age' of Russian religious philosophy in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This development is expected to go in several directions.

Firstly, the voice of church hierarchy will continue to be heard both on the level of the Church's profound documents reflecting her world outlook and on the level of responses to various developments in economic and social life. Thus, the 2005 and 2006 actions in Russia in protest against replacing social benefits with monetary payments have prompted His Holiness Patriarch Alexy II to make the following statement: 'The Church does not intend to point out to the state what economic mechanisms it should use in pursuing its social policy. What is important for us is that this policy should be fair and effective and understandable to the people. The recent developments have shown that these principles have not been realised in proper measure... Changes by no means should deprive people of a real opportunity to use transportation and communication, to keep their housing, to have access to medical aid and medicines. Otherwise a tragedy will become

inevitable for millions of our fellow-citizens – those who worked for the good of the Motherland all their lives and today need care and protection.<sup>3</sup>

This statement was widely covered in the mass media, arousing a largely positive reaction, though some politicians and journalists hastened to appeal against the participation of the Church in the discussion on urgent economic and social problems. Vladimir Zhirinovskiy's fellow-fighter, State Duma deputy Alexey Mitrofanov, who said that 'the Church's interference in real politics is a dangerous process,' made the most conspicuous statement.<sup>4</sup> Not only representatives of the Church and some journalists, but also Mr. Mitrofanov's colleagues in the Russian Parliament, challenged this attitude. The State Duma Vice-Speaker Sergey Baburin stated during the same session: 'I would like only to welcome the fact that church ministers identify with their parishioners, with the people, and it is immoral and anti-state to prohibit them from stating their own point of view.'<sup>5</sup>

Secondly, various church research centres and Orthodox lay public organisations will continue producing scientific works and public statements concerning socio-economic issues. New studies, papers, analytical reviews and proposals devoted to the Orthodox economic ethics and analysis of economic problems from the Orthodox perspective are expected to appear. Orthodox public lay organisations will apparently give special attention to the economic globalisation and international economic relations in general. Already now these themes are actively discussed at religious public conferences, where participants call for a greater justice in the world economic order and protest against the growing control of the 'gold billion' countries and their financial elites over the global market and the economic order in other countries. Criticism levelled against international economic organisations will certainly have an effect on the attitude of Orthodox public organisations towards the economic policy pursued by governments in Russia and other post-Soviet countries. This criticism has not always been and will not always be competent and professional. It has been dominated by protective emotions. However, it cannot be disregarded by either church hierarchy or the state.

The thinking on economic subjects will develop in other religious communities as well. For instance, the leaders of Protestant churches, the Old Believers and the Jews have expressed their views on economy. In case of the Protestants and Muslims, conceptual documents are also being discussed now to be addressed to public at large.

Thirdly and finally, the state of the economy will be influenced by the gradual growth in faith of a considerable number of businessmen and workers. If in the early 1990s the outburst of religion as a fashion was still accompanied with crying religious ignorance, and old women made up an overwhelming majority in churches of all reli-

gions and confessions, at the turn of the century the situation has radically changed. Most parishioners now, at least in cities, are families with children and middle-aged individuals. Many of them are well versed in doctrine, take an active part in church life and observe religious rites practically forgotten in the Soviet period even by many believers. Thus, various sociological polls showed that about 20 % of the Russians observed Lent in the early 2000s.<sup>6</sup>

A fasting menu has become a usual diet in the canteens of state institutions and large corporations. There are more and more icons in offices of businessmen and at working places of ordinary workers. Finally, many companies give considerable aid to the Church, declaring Christian morality as their motivation for charity. A considerable number of enterprises have based their entire corporate culture on Orthodoxy. It should be noted that there are also companies in Russia who observe Protestant and Muslim ethics.

In short, the influence of Orthodoxy and religion in general on the economic and political life of post-Soviet countries is growing, contrary to allegations by Communists and liberals about 'a near end of the religious renaissance.' We hope that this tendency will continue, helping those patriots who are still experiencing a moral crisis to fulfil moral values and standards and to build a free, fair and effective economy aimed at people's welfare – something unthinkable without a solid moral foundation.

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> <http://www.russian-orthodox-church.org.ru/nr212173.htm>. English version: <http://www.russian-orthodox-church.org.ru/ne212173.htm>. The text is also published in Stückelberger, Christoph/Mugambi, J.N.K. (eds), *Responsible Leadership. Global Perspectives*, Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2005, pp. 141-153. See also Chapter 28 in this volume.
- <sup>2</sup> <http://www.mospat.ru/text/news/id/6353.html>;  
English version: [http://www.mospat.ru/text/e\\_messages/id/6682.html](http://www.mospat.ru/text/e_messages/id/6682.html).
- <sup>3</sup> <http://www.mospat.ru/text/news/id/8397.html>.
- <sup>4</sup> <http://www.religare.ru/news13579.htm>.
- <sup>5</sup> <http://www.religare.ru/news13579.htm>.
- <sup>6</sup> According to ROMIR Monitoring, they made up 22 % in 2004; see the Blagovest-Info report of 11 March, 2004.