

UNIT 1C: CHURCH HISTORY

26: The Growth of Russian Orthodoxy and the Reformation in the West

The Conversion of Rus

The lands to the north of the Black Sea were called 'Scythia' in Greek texts, after the ancient inhabitants before the Christian era. The Eastern Churches cherished traditions of missionary work by St Andrew the Apostle across Scythia and maintained Christian missions in these regions. Byzantine missions invariably set out from Crimea and neighbouring ports (Klimata), still an integral part of the Empire. Constantinople sent missionaries, with varying success, to the tribal federations that occupied what we now call Ukraine and Russia. In succession these were to the Alans, Antae, Goths, Huns, Avars, Bulgars, Khazars, Varangians, Hungarians, Patzinaks, Cumans, and Ouzes. With the exception of the Alans and the Goths, it would appear that those communities that did embrace Orthodox Christianity were almost entirely resettled in Byzantine territories.

The creation of a series of states called 'Rus' –consisting of Swedish and Slav elements, and situated along the main trading routes from Scandinavia to Byzantium tipped the balance in favour of a lasting Christian presence. One 'Rus' state, established on the shores of the Black Sea (Tmutorokan in 825), was immediately drawn into the Byzantine orbit and was clearly majority Christian. By 860 the Rus were strong enough to drive Turkish tribes out of the Steppes, overpower the largely Jewish Khazar Empire and unite under Prince Oleg (880).

Byzantine sources speak of a Russian diocese established by the Patriarchate of Constantinople as early as 867. Patriarch Photios (c.810-895) declared this to be a momentous development and testified that the warlike Russians were now 'friends and allies' of the Byzantine Empire. By 874 an archbishop had been nominated to preside over missions in Russia.

Russian Christians acted as co-signatories for a treaty with Byzantium in 944. The strength of this growing community encouraged Princess Olga of Kiev to accept baptism in Constantinople (in 960). For Kiev this was a largely symbolic act that recognised trading links and tied the two states ever more closely together, nevertheless, it provoked a pagan revival amongst the Russians. A new pagan prince, Svyatoslav (d.972), mounted campaigns against Byzantium from Kiev.

By the end of the tenth century the Kievan elite was driven to accept that the economic, political, cultural and spiritual welfare of the north could no longer be assured unless a closer alliance were made with Byzantium. Therefore, Prince Vladimir accepted baptism (988) as part of a package deal with Byzantium, which involved urgent military support for the latter. According to the 'Russian Primary Chronicle' (completed around 1116) this was after a long process of investigating the religions of neighbouring countries and the impact of experiencing the Divine Liturgy in Hagia Sophia at Constantinople.

The newly established Russian Church received not only its hierarchy, but also its theology, liturgy, canon law, art and music from the Ecumenical Patriarchate. The new church was directly dependent on Constantinople for six centuries.

Both the new 'Cyrillic' alphabet and an imported corpus of translated work derived ultimately from the ninth century mission of Saints Cyril and Methodios to Greater Moravia. It is presumed that Greater Bulgaria was the intermediary and that Bulgarian clergy made some contribution to the Kievan conversion process. It is likely that Bulgarian missionaries worked amongst outlying peoples of Volga Bulgaria (the Chuvash) who were related to the Danube Bulgars.

A Greek Metropolitan of All Russia took his seat in Kiev no later than 1037. Initially, the metropolitans were invariably Greek but at a later date it appears that Greek and Russians

alternated according to some pattern. For as long as the Byzantine Empire lasted the metropolitan of Kiev enjoyed the full backing of Constantinople and was often able to adopt a stance independent of local rulers. There were seven dioceses under the supervision of Kiev in the early period, rising to fifteen by the mid-thirteenth century. Until the end of that century, Kiev was the seat of the northern Metropolitanate, and remained the titular seat even when displaced by the cities of Vladimir (1300) and then Moscow (1308). Only when Kiev fell under Polish-Lithuanian rule did the Metropolitan adopt the title 'of Moscow and all Russia' (1458). A separate Metropolitanate was established in Kiev in the same year under Roman auspices, later returning to Constantinople (1470). However, the coherence of the original Metropolitanate was not re-established in territories now corresponding to the modern Ukraine, Belarus, Poland and the Baltic states. These were again directly dependent upon the Ecumenical Patriarchate.

Important monastic foundations date back to the early eleventh century. The most influential, the Kiev Caves monastery, was founded in 1051. Generally, the monasteries adhered to the Studite rule, borrowed from Constantinople. By 1240 there were no fewer than sixty-eight monastic foundations. By contrast with foundations of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the early monasteries were almost invariably urban in location, well placed to contribute to the educational, cultural and welfare life of the secular environment.

Monastics also provided role models for the spiritual life, several of whom, like Saints Antony and Theodosy, abbots of the Kiev Caves monastery (1091), were later glorified as saints of the Orthodox churches. However, the first saints to gain national recognition (1072) were two young princes, Saints Boris and Gleb, the 'Passion Bearers'. This title indicated a new definition for an older category of saints, Christians who chose to die as followers of Christ rather than to resist violence. This was an ideal that caught the imagination of the Orthodox north, alongside that of the 'Fools for Christ' (inspired by the ninth century St Andrew the Scythian). Many Russian saints were glorified over the succeeding centuries –no fewer than thirty-nine were added to the Orthodox calendar at the local church councils of 1547 and

1549. The swift recognition of the early saints represented a clear form of endorsement from Constantinople and symbolised the spiritual maturity of the Russian Orthodox Church in the Byzantine Commonwealth.

The Mongol/Tatar hegemony

Population movements across Eurasia repeatedly disrupted the development of medieval Russian civilization. Although the Hungarians/Magyars had been expelled from the Steppes in 893, by the 1060s new incursions of Turkic tribes from Siberia (Uzes) had hastened the fragmentation of Russia. In 1068 the Turkic Cumans destroyed Tmutorokan, the wealthiest and most cosmopolitan Russian city (Tamatarcha, on the Black Sea).

The maturity of the northern churches was most severely tested by the Mongol/Tatar invasions of the 1220s. Vladimir was sacked in 1238 and Kiev in 1240. The only major Russian city that escaped unscathed was Novgorod (a prosperous republic from the 1170s, dominated by merchants). More than two centuries were to pass before Mongol/Tatar rule was repudiated and overthrown.

Having lost ports on the Black Sea, the Russians were increasingly isolated from the South Slavs and Byzantine successor states, (the Latins had sacked Constantinople in 1204). After the Fourth Crusade against Byzantium, Russia was also the target of a series of Crusading campaigns, launched from the Baltic Sea. During these confrontations the Russians lost both territory in the north and easy access to the Baltic Sea and also gained a new, hostile relationship with the West. St Alexander Nevsky saved Novgorod for Russia by defeating the Swedish Crusade in 1240 and the Teutonic Knights in 1242. Other Russian principalities sought the protection of an expanding Lithuania, largely pagan at the time. Occasional Orthodox Christian rulers heralded a larger Russian population and every indication that closer links with the Orthodox was only a matter of time.

During this period the Russian Orthodox Church was granted certain privileges, once the destructive hordes had moved on (generally towards the west). By 1257 it had become evident that the conquerors from East Asia intended to exempt the church from any form of taxation. This was an astonishing example of the Mongol/Tatar toleration for all religious institutions and allowed space for missionary work right across Asia. Thus, this period, paradoxically, witnessed a marked increase both in the status and prosperity of the Church. As elsewhere, Church hierarchs adopting the symbols and offices of temporal power to represent better the faithful of their community. It is known that Mongol/Tatar rule enabled both the Orthodox Christian Churches and Roman Catholics to connect with Christian communities across Asia and engage in missions in largely Muslim lands.

Connected both to the experience of repeated calamities and the niche of opportunity that was allowed to the Orthodox Church, there emerged a new revival of the spiritual life. Russian icon painting enjoyed a 'new wave', culminating in the work of St Andrey Rublev (1360-1430) and his contemporaries. The influence of new and ever larger monastic centres expanded outwards, linked to the monastic colonisation of the wild north, soon known as the 'Russian Thebaid' in honour of the first monastic communities of Christian Egypt. Equally important were the spiritual achievements of an entire 'school' of monastic elders, including St Sergey of Radonezh (1314-1392) and St Nil of Sora. This revival was given added vigour by the reception of Hesychast teachings from Athos, Sinai and the Holy Land.

A sense of crisis was occasioned both by the Tatar sack of Moscow (1382) and the campaigns of the Golden Horde against Lithuania (1399). Aggressive Polish expansion culminated in the conquest of Russian Smolensk (1404).

St Nil of Sora is best remembered for championing the 'Non-Possessors' through his firm opposition to monastic land-holdings of any kind and the accumulation of wealth by the Church. Monastic accumulation of tax-exempt properties and economic power was favoured by another and more prominent school, the 'Possessors'. Their most effective spokesman

was St Joseph of Volokolamsk (1439-1515). With the triumph of the 'Possessors' the Church promoted ambitious programmes of social work across Russia, not least in resettling refugees in outlying provinces.

A Russian Orthodox Church

In 1589 Constantinople elevated the Russian Metropolitanate to the dignity of a fifth and 'final' Orthodox Patriarchate. This confirmed and enhanced an existing aspiration towards 'autonomy' proclaimed in 1448. The measure also recognised the need for the Church to act independently after the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks (1453). At the turn of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the Russians were growing in confidence. In Moscow it was argued that two Romes, Old Rome and Constantinople, the New Rome, had already fallen, while Moscow, the Third Rome, had displaced them both, and forever.

The 1448 decision about autonomy had been taken in the aftermath of a crisis brought about by Isidore, Metropolitan of Moscow (1436-1441). The Moscow establishment, Church and State alike, had spurned his initiatives in furthering formal reunion of the Eastern and Western Churches at the Council of Ferrara/ Florence (1438-1489). Isidore had then been formally deposed and the reunion nullified. Therefore, the ecclesiastical independence of the Orthodox north is historically linked with a resolutely anti-Latin position. This was recognised and rewarded by Constantinople when Moscow was finally recognised as the fifth Orthodox patriarchate in 1589. Both Constantinople and Moscow were boldly declaring their faith in the destiny of the Orthodox north and the potential of Moscow to replace the now 'schismatic' patriarchate of Rome.

The Winding Path to Reform in the West

The impetus to Reform in the west in the 15th century was not primarily doctrinal nor did it touch upon popular spirituality. As Eamonn Duffy has made clear in his revisionist account

of the Reformation in the English Church, (“The Stripping of The Altars” Yale UP 1992), the people of England initially strongly resisted the “new church”; medieval Catholicism retaining a tenacious and loyal following amongst them. True, there were hot spots of religious revolt across Europe and the pre-Reformation period cannot fail to account for the rise of the Waldensians (after Peter Waldo, 12th century), the Lollards (after Wycliffe, 14th Century), and the Hussites (after Jan Hus 14th Century) amongst many others. These religious movements are interesting in so far as they anticipate to some extent the convulsions of a much later period in the late 16th century but as instruments of reform in their own day they were singularly ineffective and more or less easily suppressed. By the 15th Century many across the Latin Church agreed that reform was long overdue but it was a reform of morality (or lack of it) especially amongst the clergy, the financial and political corruptions of the Church and the administrative weaknesses of the same that occupied men’s minds.

Partisan versions of history have sometimes described a repressive papacy on the eve of the Reformation holding sway over the whole Christian western world but in many ways nothing could be further from the truth. Popes in this period were outpaced in power and influence by Christian monarchs who were beginning to win their long and hard fought battle against the interference of Rome in those parts of Europe that were beginning to see themselves as aspirational nations and not merely adjuncts of a defunct Holy Roman Empire, principally in France, Spain and Britain. For the time being these nations had common cause with Rome in not allowing the vast legal and proprietary rights of the Roman Church collapse as this might very well destabilise the whole Christian dependency of which they were part. Nonetheless, stresses and strains, later to prove catastrophic were beginning to show. In the end the rise of expansionist nationalism and commercial interests, in some ways presaging the dawn of the modern era, was to prove fatal to the medieval conception of the unity of the Catholic Church in the west.

When the dam did burst it was through the Christian monarch who asserted his prerogatives over Rome. The religious reformers, the inheritors of the long standing traditions of medieval

dissent, then merely moved into the vacuum created by the disappearance of Rome's temporal power. They sought and invariably obtained the protection of the Christian prince who may not have been from the beginning impressed by the religious arguments. Sometimes it was his successors who presided over the more radical reappraisals of the Church and her teachings.

This pattern is classically set forth for us in the history of the Reformation in England. Henry VIII broke with the papacy over his claimed right to have his local clergy decide on his divorce, the Pope being less easily bent to his will, particularly since the woman in question, Catherine of Aragon, was the aunt of Emperor Charles V who was keeping the Pope a prisoner at the time after his sack of Rome in 1527. In other words, "don't upset Aunt Kate!" This would be an understandable motive accounting for the Pope's reluctance to accommodate the King. Henry himself, if it is possible to be Catholic without the Pope, remained a man of the "old religion" and conceded little to the religious reformers who rallied around his revolt. After all, in 1521 Pope Leo X had rewarded Henry with the title "Defender of the Faith" after his publication of a work: "The Defence of the Seven Sacraments" in which he attacked the theological precepts of the reformer Martin Luther. Henry showed no subsequent enthusiasm for the Protestant religion. His battle was for supremacy in England (and later in his reign, Ireland) in matters temporal.

It was under the avowedly Protestant Edward VI (1547 – 1553) and his Lord Protectors that England truly became a Protestant nation under its Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Cranmer. Mary's subsequent bloody reign could do little to change that. It remained for Elizabeth I to forge a new Settlement characteristically setting the later Anglican precedent to avoid all extremes and combine the monarchy and moderate reform against the more radical and persisting Calvinist Puritans and Catholic recusants. But this is a long, long way distant from a Catholic monarch's alpha male battle against Rome to secure his own dynastic succession. In many ways and whatever the arguments for religious reform, the historical record shows the religious Reformation succeeding ONLY where a Christian monarch was

prepared to challenge Rome and protect religious dissent. This proved to be the case for Calvin, Zwingli, Luther and most of the Reformers ... except for such Anabaptist proponents of the Radical Reformation as Zwickau, Muntzer and Sattler whom few protected and, indeed whom Luther, Calvin and Zwingli themselves connived through new political allegiances to persecute as bitterly as any Roman Catholic ecclesiastical authority. Only in America would their descendants, the Hutterites, Mennonites and Amish, find relative peace and security.

Clearly there were remained practical limits to the Reformation and these were still being set by the local political establishment upon whose survival the new Protestant churches depended as ever before. Not for nothing did the 38th Article of the 39 Articles of Religion settled in Elizabeth's reign in 1563 set itself against this early religious form of communism in favour rather of charity alone; which of course, would not necessarily disturb any existing order if handled in the right way:-

“The riches and goods of Christians are not common, as touching the right, title, and possession of the same, as certain Anabaptists do falsely boast; notwithstanding every man ought of such things as he possesseth liberally to give alms to the poor, according to his ability.” (38th Article of Religion, Book of Common Prayer)

If the success of the Reformation depended on the defence and cooperation of the Christian prince, we should hardly be surprised since this was still a pre-modern age where it remained prudent for all but the hardiest of souls to follow the “King's Religion.” Many came unstuck who did not.

When Rome herself attempted Reformation in the so called Counter Reformation, new alliances were cultivated between those monarchs who stayed faithful to Rome and papacy reinvigorated by the Council of Trent (1545 – 1563). At their behest the newly minted soldiers of the Pope, the Jesuits, achieved notable success in colonial missions but they also depended on European Catholic Imperialism, albeit that this was often an uneasy alliance at

the best of times. This new imperialistic Christianity was matched of course by the parallel expansion of Protestant international domains and their own missions. These, therefore, were the religious synergisms of confident, expansionist European Empires opened up by the great explorers. The west was beginning to flex its muscles as the last vestiges of medievalism dissolved in the great seas of exploration facilitated by the rise of the natural sciences which made this expansion both possible intellectually and desirable commercially and politically. A new world, literally, was being born out of the old and new Christianities now started to undermine the hegemony of Rome.

So, was the Reformation therefore little more than this: a religious convenience for rulers inclined out of self-interest to challenge Rome? No, we cannot claim this from the evidence. Without the growing momentum for reform in matters spiritual the Reformation might have only and simply redrawn the political map of Europe and perhaps clipped the Pope's temporal wings. In fact it did much more than this. It created new expressions of Christianity whose rallying cries were "semper reformandum!", and "sola gratia, sola fide, sola Scriptura," [*always being reformed, only grace, only faith, only the Scriptures*].¹ The principles of continual reformation and a faith extracted simply and only from Scripture, focusing on salvation by grace and faith applied have remained largely intact to this day. Those who upheld them were called or self-designated "Protestants" for this, initially, was a revolt against the teaching authority of Rome. The Reformers insisted that salvation could be obtained straightforwardly by a honest man into whose hands had been placed the Scriptures in his own tongue. This democratisation of Christianity accelerated with the expansion of printing and it generated a revolution in education and openness to new ideas across the west, even in lands that remained largely if not exclusively Catholic. However Protestant Christians rarely agreed outside their own confessional groupings (precursors of the

¹ *In some places, notably England and parts of northern Europe the role of Tradition and later reason was acknowledged by the Protestant Reformers. However, Scripture was always to be the supreme and overarching point of reference. Disputes in the interpretation of Scripture at this time concerned mainly the respective roles played by grace and freewill in salvation. The classic conflict at this time was between the followers of John Calvin (for whom grace was everything) and Jacobus Arminius (who acknowledged a stronger role for free will and human faculties).*

denominations of 19th century definition) on how the Scriptures were to be understood and applied. The fracturing of western Christianity along these fault lines utterly destroyed any understanding of Christian unity and frequently in bloodier times led to mutual persecution, wars of religion and new antagonisms between Protestant and Catholic states. If the wiser councils of the humanist and great Christian scholar, Erasmus of Rotterdam, had prevailed the west might have been spared these brutalities but it was not to be. There was too much to contend for, empires even of both State and soul, and passions had already been kindled by centuries of despondency and anger and these demanded sacrifice. Some would say that this was when the Christian west died, but the “old lady” had been sick for some time, in fact well before the 16th century. Certainly out of this melee there arose a new phenomenon ... antagonism toward Christianity itself. Muted at first, these voices were to grow stronger through and beyond the Enlightenment. For now everyone knew in the west that there was no going back. The Christian Latin world had changed for ever.

Supplement – Orthodoxy and the West during the Reformation

(an extract of an article by the late Fr. Deacon John-Mark Titterington)

The Turkish victories in Asia Minor had two great effects on the Church, for which survival became the all-important aspect. First, as could be expected, it caused an upsurge of conservatism -- nothing could or indeed, should be changed. Secondly, it led eventually to almost the opposite of that attitude: some degree of westernisation. This came about on account of contacts the Church made in non-Muslim countries with members of other Christian traditions, e.g. the Jesuits and the Lutherans, and in Constantinople itself, with the chaplains of foreign embassies, who often played a religious as well as a political role. In comparison, the Orthodox recognised that their standards of education were often lacking and the tendency arose for forward-looking Orthodox to go to Europe for their schooling.

The first important meeting of Orthodox and Protestants began in 1573 when a delegation of Lutheran scholars from Tübingen, visited Constantinople and gave the Patriarch a copy of the Augsburg Confession translated into Greek. Obviously they hoped to start some sort of

reformation among the Greeks. As one of their leaders said "If they wish to take thought for the eternal salvation of their souls, they must join us and embrace our teaching, or else perish eternally". The Patriarch wrote three letters to them and eventually declared the correspondence closed, but the exchange shows the interest felt by the Reformers for the Orthodox. More important, the Patriarch's replies are the first clear response of Orthodoxy to the new doctrines of the Reformation. The chief matters discussed were free will and grace; Scripture and Tradition, the sacraments, prayers for the dead and to the saints.

That exchange ended amicably but not so the first major contact with Rome. This happened in the Ukraine which at the time was part of Lithuania and Poland because of the union of their rulers, and the Jesuits were keen to make the people of "Little Russia" as the Ukraine was called, into Roman Catholics. Eventually in 1596, a council was called at Brest-Litovsk to proclaim union with Rome but two bishops and a large delegation from the monasteries and the parishes voted to remain Orthodox and in the end both sides just excommunicated each other. This council in 1596 has tended to embitter Roman-Orthodox relations to modern times.

One of the representatives of the Patriarch at Brest-Litovsk was a young Greek priest called Cyril Lukaris. He was appalled by the treatment of the people of Little Russia by the Poles and when he became Patriarch, he devoted much of his great energy to combating all Roman Catholic influence in the Turkish Empire. This meant that he became deeply immersed in both politics and also in the natural opposition to Rome, Lutheranism. No less than five times was Cyril displaced from the Patriarchial throne and five times restored. Eventually he was strangled by Turkish soldiers and his body thrown into the Bosphorus -- a tragic end, for he was an able man. But he is sometimes dubbed as "the Calvinist Patriarch" for a book he wrote called his "Confessions" which was condemned by no less than six local councils between 1638 and 1691. This was written after his contact with a Dutch Calvinist, Cornelius van Haag who significantly influenced him in a reformed direction but he was really alone in taking this road.