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Response to Filatov and Stepina on Lutheranism in Russia*

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I have been reading the book *Religiya i obshchestvo: ocherki religioznoi zhizni sovremennoi Rossii* recently published by Letny Sad. If my understanding is correct, the publication of this book was financed by Keston Institute and it claims to be an 'Encyclopedia of religious life in Russia today'.² Most of the chapters are by the editor of the book, the Moscow sociologist Sergei Filatov. I was particularly interested in the chapter 'Katoliki i katolitsizm v Rossii', having a longstanding concern with Catholic-Protestant relations, and also of course the chapter 'Rossiiskoye lyuteranstvo'.

For the last 25 years I have been closely involved in church life in Latvia and, through the will of Providence, with the regeneration of the Lutheran Church in Russia. Any information about Lutheranism, including scholarly work on the subject, is of course extremely important for me, especially when it deals not just with practical aspects of the revival of a traditional confession in the Russian Federation, but also with individual personalities and their involvement in bringing this revival about.³

The chapter 'Rossiiskoye lyuteranstvo' describes the complex process of the revival of Lutheranism in Russia, but also deals with the *identity* of Lutheranism in the difficult and troubled conditions in Russia today. It is true that there are three, five, perhaps more types of Lutheranism involved, including the Finno-Scandinavian type (supported by some of the American Lutherans), the very liberal West German type, and the 'new Russian' ('*novorossiiskoye*') Lutheranism (as I call it), which is asserting its independence both from narrow nationalism and from western super-liberalism, while at the same time working out a new synthesis of the Reformation heritage in the difficult conditions in our country. Here I agree with the sociologists who wrote this chapter: for Russian Lutheranism to achieve theological independence it will need more trained theologians from amongst the Russian Lutherans themselves.

*This article is an edited version of a letter from Bishop Emeritus Joseph Baron to Yevgeni Revnichenko at the Moscow publishing company 'Letny Sad', with copies to Keston Institute and to Sergei Filatov and Aleksandra Stepina, the authors of the article 'Rossiiskoye lyuteranstvo' published in Sergei Filatov (ed.), *Religiya i obshchestvo: ocherki religioznoi zhizni sovremennoi Rossii* (Moscow, Letny Sad, 2002), pp.315-35. An updated translation of the article 'Rossiiskoye lyuteranstvo' appears in this issue of RSS.

The authors correctly note that 'Russian Lutheranism is developing into a serious spiritual and intellectual challenge to Russian Orthodoxy'. I am convinced, however, that this *new* Russian Lutheranism is also going to have to adopt a good deal from its 'elder sister in the faith', the Catholic Church, and perhaps also from the Russian Orthodox Church. This is important because, as the authors of the chapter correctly note, the Scandinavian churches 'are not in fact essentially much different from the German churches as far as the degree of their liberalism is concerned'. In the West today Lutheranism (and even Catholicism to some extent) are in the midst of a big crisis, which is in fact a *crisis of Christian identity as such*.

I want to express my thanks to the authors for giving the reader a historical, contextual and contemporary orientation and a chance, albeit in general terms, to think about the sociological role of religion and the *potential* for Lutheranism in Russia in the near future to function as a 'synthesiser' between Catholicism and Orthodoxy.

Let me now move on to my second topic, however. This is something I consider to be my pastoral duty, arising from the dignity of my office, and all the more so because the chapter 'Rossiiskoye lyuteranstvo' discusses various named individuals, myself included.

The authors correctly note in Russia unhappiness 'about German cultural hegemony in the church and about the fact that the norms of German [i.e. western – JB] Lutheranism were obligatory'; they also note that there is conflict and rivalry. The whole article in fact presents us with a picture of a web of individuals involved in conflict.

I would argue that conflict and rivalry have never just been a consequence of western missionaries coming up against so-called 'backward' and 'isolated' fraternal communities (*bratskiye obshchiny*) in Siberia and eastern Russia. I am convinced that the roots of this unavoidable conflict lie deeper. It is not simply a consequence of the superior 'education' or 'theological expertise' of the German burghers. What is still at the root of the conflict is an estrangement between western Christianity and Russia as a whole,³ in this case the concealed unwillingness (or inability) of western Lutheranism to understand the local leaders, and the struggle for prestigious mission locations in St Petersburg, Moscow and other Russian cities. What is more, western missionaries are often not inclined to work at the Lord's harvest with people who are perfectly capable but who have a Soviet past and prefer to approach problems in their own way.

As is clear from the article, the authors did not manage to meet me personally, perhaps because I was temporarily away in St Petersburg, and so did not have the chance to discuss the whole complex issue with one of the top leaders of the Lutheran Church in Russia. I hope that there will nevertheless be the opportunity for such a meeting and for a serious discussion. The subject-matter of the chapter does after all have a bearing on the turbulent developments in Russia generally over the last 15 years, and these affect not only religious life, where my involvement continues to lie, but problematic developments in the future.

Even the personal details about me seem to be second- or third-hand. Finns, Germans, Americans are cited (like Gerd Stricker); but they are all *western* authors, and neither I nor any members of the church I lead are quoted. It is clear that the version given in this text of the events of my time in office, which has not been an easy one, comes from some of my former students and people who attended theology lecture courses in the early 1990s: Sergei Preiman, fon Ditlov, Inessa Tirbakh, Dmitri Lotov and others. These are all people who for pragmatic reasons or because of their

links with the West went on to join the 'historical' churches of Germany or Ingria, as the authors point out.

Virtually all the other people you mention in this article are people I never knew personally. They studied or attended services in the mid- or late 1990s. I am not therefore in a position to say anything about them.

There are quite clearly two reasons why the regeneration of Lutheranism in Russia in the second half of the 1980s and the first half of the 1990s was such a troubled and stormy business. First, there was a shortage of competent theologians in the Russian Federation whose faith had been tested in the Soviet atheist environment. Second, it was all tied up with the question of the *essential nature of Protestantism*.⁴

I am quite prepared to admit that I may have made some mistakes as leader of the first registered Lutheran church in the Russian Federation: the only person who does not make mistakes is the person who does not do anything. At the same time I would still maintain that it was not just in my circles that interesting individuals involved in the regeneration process were to be found. There were certainly some among the Finns in the Soviet Union, and as you correctly point out, the most prominent of these was Arvo Survo, pastor of the Church of Ingria. I know him personally and I still remember him in my prayers.

I do not think that after he finished his theological studies in Estonia he did any more intensive theological work. However, it was thanks to him that the Church of Ingria came into existence. It is true that in the 1980s there were already some churches, including a Russian one, under pastor Arvo Survo in Pushkin, Leningrad *oblast'* and Karelia. Before I had my own church, I once came from Riga to visit these churches, as well as Arvo Survo in his own home and the Finnish church in Tsarskoye Selo. However, it was only three years later, after the first Synod of the Church of Ingria (20 March 1993), when the deanery (*probstvo*) had been renamed a church and had gained canonical independence from Estonia, that it achieved *the status of an independent church*.⁵

Here I have to touch on another personal matter. After reading this chapter I was left with the impression that I was permanently under the influence of the 'ideologist' pastor Arvo Survo. Excuse me, but what right have you to make this kind of judgment about religious personalities? Right from the start there was no issue either of 'rivalry' or of collaboration between me and Arvo Survo, because of the very fact that the local Finns were aiming at purely *national* revival, which was of course tied up with their faith.

Even in the late 1980s and early 1990s the Finns were not thinking about founding a united church for all nationalities, which would be united on the basis of a single confession rather than on the basis of Finnish (or German) nationality. For multi-national Russia, you must surely agree, that would however have been the logical and fair Christian course to take. No, the Finns' preoccupation was with their *own* regeneration. An important impulse was the fact that up to the time of Peter the Great the territory of today's Leningrad *oblast'* and some other north-western *oblasti* belonged to the Finns, who were members of the Church of Ingria. But what kind of 'rivalry' could have arisen between me and the Finns – between people who until just recently were being crushed by an atheist ideology? Any 'rivalry' has not been among local people, but between local people and western missionaries.

Turning now to the recent past and a more precise chronology, I can say that the situation changed after I was made superintendent bishop at Easter 1991. The very fact of the founding of a United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Russia (*Yedinaya yevangelicheskoye-lyuteranskaya tserkov' Rossii* (YeYeLTsR)) by representatives of

the faithful from 15 regions of the Russian Federation at the Synod in June, and its registration by the Ministry of Justice in September of the same year, was definitely a stimulus both for the local Finns and for the German missionaries from the West who arrived in St Petersburg a little later (at the end of 1993 – Kretschmar and others).

In this context I should point out that it was only in 1994 that the Germans started calling their ‘German Evangelical Lutheran Church in the (Former) Soviet Union’ (*‘Nemetskaya yevangelicheskoye-lyuteranskaya tserkov’ v (byvshem) SSSR’*) the ‘Evangelical Lutheran Church in Russia, Ukraine, Kazakhstan and Central Asia’ (*‘Yevangelicheskoye-lyuteranskaya tserkov’ v Rossii, na Ukraine, v Kazakhstane i Srednei Azii’*). What is more, the question of the canonicity of this church as a ‘historical’ church is still very much open, because it has lost its historical apostolic succession.⁶ Like the Church of Ingria, the YeLTs was registered with the Ministry of Justice only in 1994.

I must point out that until the mid-1980s there was virtually no work being done with believers in the *European* part of Russia except by pastor Arvo Survo and later by me. The very elderly bishop Haralds Kalniņš (1911–97) lived permanently in Latvia; he was under the jurisdiction of the archbishop of Latvia, Eriks Mesters, and paid occasional visits only to the German ‘fraternal communities’ in Siberia and the Central Asian republics, which were isolated from the *European* part of Russia. This was of course in line with Soviet policy on relations with national minorities.

On the other hand, it is true that the German Church had to wait for the departure of Bishop Kalniņš, a well-known Pietist, before it could start offering more effective assistance in the regeneration of Lutheranism; but the economic difficulties of local communities meant that the Germans came to run them completely through their own representatives, and this is still going on today.

The problem of direct German administrative influence and control within the Russian Federation through western agencies has unfortunately not been resolved yet. Disinterested western ‘Christian aid’ has come to involve manipulating the outlook of former Soviet citizens who mostly have no previous experience of church life and know about the faith only through old family stories. At the same time it was impossible for any serious theological study to be done under Soviet conditions (an exception, for Lutheranism, was to some extent the Baltic states). It is hardly surprising that people quite quickly moved from one church ‘structure’ to another church, which the chapter calls ‘historical’, but which is still being run by foreigners. And is it really conceivable that ‘in exchange’ some Russian might become a bishop in Germany?

To this day neither I nor my parishioners are allowed into St Catherine’s Church (1 Bol’shoi prospekt, Vasil’yesky ostrov, St Petersburg) by western missionaries who are using material aid to manipulate my former students and pastors. But it was in that very church that I was ordained as leader of the YeYeLTsR in 1991 at a service celebrated by the archbishop of Latvia, Eriks Mesters, and in that very church that the first Synod of the Russian Lutherans was held.⁷

I would also like to make it clear that my pastoral activity is not as closely tied up with ‘rock-and-roll’ parishes as you imply. Your chapter gives the impression, albeit through the words of others, that I am not a serious pastor. It is true that I knew various young people in rock groups, but this was in connection with their interest in the Gospel, and it does not mean that my work was bound up with music in a ‘super-contemporary’ way.

The issues facing Russian Lutheranism today are going to be sorted out only if there can be a meeting of all the groups, movements and churches involved, including

the YeYeLTsR, the Church of Ingria and the YeLTs. In my view such a meeting could take the form of another Synod of Russian Lutherans like the one which met in 1991. The main business of this Synod would be to *define the identity of Lutheranism itself* in the world and in Russia today and to *share out the missionary tasks in the Russian Federation amongst the bishops of the various churches in a fraternal and non-competitive manner*. One important condition for a Synod of this kind would however in my view have to be a proper respect on the part of western missionaries for our Soviet past and for those who preserved their faith under atheism. This would rule out any 'war for souls', any use of material inducements by western citizens, and any resort to old methods like 'church neocolonialism', even under different names. Competition may be important in industry and business, but any Christian activity, and especially church leadership, regardless of its outward historical or cultural form, gains nothing from this kind of competitive atmosphere amongst confessions, groups and movements. Christianity is humanity's exalted calling not just to belief but to good works, and it includes Christ's parable about the labourers in the vineyard, where we are told that the first shall be last and the last shall be first (Matt. 20:16). These words of our Lord are a warning to the clergy and faithful of any denomination, confession, church, group or community that in serving Christ and the Gospel the inner disposition and humility of the human being are much more important than the outward size or successes of this or that structure.

I would like to ask 'Letny Sad' publishers and the authors of the chapter 'Rossiiskoye lyuteranstvo' to take account of my comments in any future editions of this book or any encyclopedia of religious life in Russia today. I believe that dialogue is the best way of arriving at an objective assessment of issues of faith and conscience in all their complexity.

Notes

- ¹ In its Russian form his name is transliterated Iozef Baron; in its Latvian form his surname is Baronas. (Note by Philip Walters)
- ² The book *Religiya i obshchestvo ...* was indeed financed by Keston Institute, but it is not a part of the actual 'Encyclopedia' itself. The Encyclopedia exists in the form of a collection of reports on religious life in 78 administrative regions of the Russian Federation and on over 100 religious denominations. It is now being published in Russia. Volume 2, which mainly comprises the denominational reports on Protestantism, was published on 20 May 2003 and Volume 1, which contains the denominational reports on Orthodoxy, Old Belief and Catholicism, is in the course of preparation. The bibliographical details of Volume 2 are: Michael Bourdeaux and Sergei Filatov (eds), *Sovremennaya religioznaya zhizn' Rossii: opyt sistematicheskogo opisaniya*, tom II (Moscow, Logos, 2003), 480 pp., selling price between 140 and 180 roubles. The essays in the book *Religiya i obshchestvo ...* are based on a selection of the material collected for the Encyclopedia. (Note by Philip Walters)
- ³ Various articles in recent issues of *RSS* have dealt with aspects of Lutheranism in Russia: Sergei Filatov, 'Protestantism in postsoviet Russia: an unacknowledged triumph', *Religion State & Society*, 28, 1, March 2000, pp. 93–103; Gerd Stricker, 'Lutherans in Russia since 1990', *Religion State & Society*, 29, 2, June 2001, pp. 101–13; Joachim Willems, 'Russian German Lutheran "brotherhoods" in the Soviet Union and in the CIS: comments on their confessional identity and on their position in ELCROS', *Religion State & Society*, 30, 3, September 2002, pp. 219–28. (Note by Philip Walters)
- ⁴ Even 'sister-churches' like the Roman Catholic and Orthodox Churches, which are close to each other in doctrine, are not able to overcome this estrangement. A simple but profound comment by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn is relevant here: 'the West is no teacher for us because

the West hasn't been through what we've been through ...' (Interview on RTR television, 9 June 2001).

- ⁵ In the early twentieth century the famous Danish philosopher Harald Høffding (1843–1931), referring to various Kantians, wrote: 'unlike Catholicism, Protestantism emphasises the *principle of the individual*. This is both its strength and its weakness. It is its weakness because it cannot make confident authoritative pronouncements like the Catholic Church. It is its strength because the future belongs to freedom and to individual truth' Protestantism is also a *method*. And this method has to be based exclusively on a recognition of the individual as the centre of the experience and perception of values. The sixteenth-century reformers did not yet understand this. They shattered the community of the ancient Church, but they did not succeed in realising the principle on which their new type of society was to be built. As Høffding notes, 'This was the cause of trouble, strife and turbulence in the Protestant world'. (Harald Høffding, *Religionsphilosophie* (Leipzig, 1901), pp. 280–81).
- ⁶ See 'Yubileinye daty tserkvi Ingrii', *Tserkov' Ingrii*, 37, March 2001, p. 20.
- ⁷ This is partly in connection with the practice of ordaining so-called 'women pastors' in the churches of Germany and Sweden and other churches that are members of the Lutheran World Federation. This practice means that the Evangelical Lutheran Church can hardly be called 'historical', as you call it in your chapter. The practice was forced onto the fraternal communities in Siberia and the eastern part of the former Soviet Union by Dr Kretschmar in the early 1990s. I personally protested against it. This certainly has nothing to do with low regard for women or their role in Christianity. It is in the postchristian West that Lutheranism is no longer capable of seeing the difference between the pulpit and the political podium, between the Spirit of Christ and the spirit of so-called 'parliamentarianism' in the church.
- ⁸ See *Nevskoye vremya*, 39, 2, April 1991, p. 2; *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, 11 April 1991, p. 6; the Moscow newspaper *Kuranty*, 7 May 1991, p. 2; 'Ravnyye sredi ravnykh', *Golos rodiny*, 28, 1991, p. 6; 'Po sledam Lyutera', *Rossiiskaya gazeta*, 29 November 1991; and the chapter 'Protestantizm' by A.A. Alov and N.G. Vladimirov in *Mirovyye religii* (Moscow, Ministerstvo kul'tury RF i Rossiisky nauchno-issledovatel'skiy institut kul'turnogo i prirodnoogo naslediya, 1998), p. 181. You say in your chapter 'Rossiiskoye lyuteranstvo' that 'after the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 Baron tried to set up his own United Evangelical Lutheran Church of Russia'. This is incorrect. At my ordination at Easter 1991 Archbishop Mesters handed over to me full spiritual authority to lead the YeYeLTsR, including apostolic succession, on his own initiative and at the request of the local communities. The handing over of spiritual authority does not mean, however, that the YeYeLTsR, which consists basically of citizens of the Russian Federation, was administratively dependent on the church of Latvia.

(Translated from the Russian by Philip Walters)