Conversation with Archimandrite Professor Cyril Hovorun

The first monthly Conversation Series event opened with Prof. Archimandrite Cyril Hovorun's lecture on Wednesday, 31 March 2021. The event sought to address three major questions in reflection on the three wars of the 21st century: Georgia 2008, Ukraine since 2014, and Armenia 2020. What were the possible religious underpinnings of these wars? How were these wars perceived and explained by other churches? Moreover, how can religion contribute to peace?

The discussion moderated by Dr. Tornike Metreveli, Postdoctoral Research Fellow in Christianity, Nationalism, and Populism at CTR, kicked off with a question about the concept of political Orthodoxy, its significance, and, if any, conceptual ontology in Orthodox theology. Professor Hovorun examined how political theology intertwined with realpolitik and how it led to the military action in the Russian invasion of Georgia and Ukraine. Political Orthodoxy is, to a great extent, a causal factor to military action, Hovorun argued. Political Orthodoxy re-emerged in a new form in the Orthodox world, and the idea of the Russian world produced by the Russian Orthodox Church was a vital ideological framework under which the Russian state operated militarily in its neighborhood.

Professor Hovorun's reference to the re-emergence of political Orthodoxy led to the discussion about the origin of political Orthodoxy and its viable distinction from the Russian world as an idea, as a project, as an ideology, or a cultural mechanism. What does re-emergence mean? Is there any relationship with how the concept of war is understood in Orthodox theology? Dr. Hovorun argued political Orthodoxy is a reincarnation of old ideologies. Most people are ignorant of what existed in the past, he reasserted, which keeps those ideologies re-emerging. It is important to know previous versions of these ideologies behind many historical developments in the Orthodox countries during the 20th century. It is essential to distinguish between historical contexts, causal factors of wars, and involvement of actors. For example, the nature of the conflict in Karabakh is different from the Georgian and Ukrainian wars. Despite the different historical contexts of the war, there is a similarity. We need to go back to the history of the Armenian genocide to understand how Turkey plays down and punishes those who raise the issue. This crime that happened against the Armenian people and the church one hundred years ago needs to be critically analyzed and studied to prevent future crimes.

The references to the Byzantine pasts, for example, and attempts to reincarnate Byzantium under the present circumstances, were the driving force behind Romanian nationalism, behind Greek dictatorships; even now in Russia, we have is a kind of reincarnation of Byzantinism. Nationalistic ideologies of Greece and Romania were already there, and they were predecessors of the ideology of the Russian world. The Russian world is just an iteration. It is one of many forms of the same ideology, which he refers to as Byzantinism or Orthodoxies or Easternism. These ideologies have to do with geopolitics, and they usually evolve in the rejection of others, in this case of the West. They are based on conspiracy theories; they employ their Orthodox identity, they are usually anti-ecumenical.

Yet another theme the discussion focused on was the fusion of nationalism and Orthodoxy and the relationship of this fusion to the concept of war. Hovorun identified two kinds of nationalisms that inspire Orthodox people. He referred to it as a Balkan style of nationalism with a particular and homogenous nation at the core of the ideology; another is supranational nationalism, which is imperial or civilizational. This is what the Russian world is about. The Russian world is not a nationalistic ideology; to a great extent, it is an anti-nationalistic ideology. Russian ethnic nationalism is not favored, but a different sort of exceptionalism is. It is an idea of civilization that is behind it and the idea of neo-imperial ideology. Conflicts and wars in the Orthodox world are motivated by either ethnic nationalism as it was in Balkan wars or civilizational nationalism as it were in the case of Russia's wars against Georgia and Ukraine. The legacy that Orthodox churches inherited from Byzantium is essential for understanding the present context: constant wars, no long periods of peace, the weaker the Byzantine state became, the more militarized it would turn. The same tendencies continue now in Russia.

On the moderator's question of which elements of Orthodox theology bear significance for motivation for war or conduct of warfare, Professor Hovorun replied that the idea of Orthodoxy per se. The idea that we, the Orthodox, hold the truth, and we need to protect this truth from others, not by arguments but by weapons. Another critical element is a transformation of the idea of the spiritual battle. The idea that we fight against evil forces. At some point, one stops considering these evil forces as supernatural and begins considering them as political, as the West. This is a transformation of the idea of a spiritual battle against global evil to particular political devices. This is how the West becomes evil. This is another explanation of Orthodox motivation to fight and kill. If one projects these ideas to the political scene, then one gets wars in Georgia and Ukraine.

How were these three wars perceived and explained by other Orthodox churches? Was there inter-Orthodox solidarity with the people suffering in these wars? According to Professor Hovorun, the only statement from the Greek church regarding the war in Ukraine was the request to lift an embargo on olives. People tend to ignore actual violence and aggression for the sake of ideas that they have which is based on the symphony between the state and the church. Many Orthodox churches have phantom pain when they lose the state as their supporter in this symphonic relationship. For many, this pain is more important than the actual pain Orthodox people feel when they suffer. This is one of the explanations of how inter-Orthodox solidarity ultimately failed. Not a single church spoke up about war in Georgia, argued Mr. Hovorun. The church of Georgia seems to be ignoring what is going on in Ukraine with its autocephaly.

"Despite all the abuses, I still believe that the church has a huge potential to be a peacemaker and a positive contributor to social development," asserted Mr. Hovorun. In the wake of the Revolution of Dignity in Ukraine in 2014, he developed an idea that the church needs to have a relationship, a symphony not just with the state but also with civil society. If the church aligns itself more with society than the state, I believe this can positively contribute to the social developments in modern societies. "We should not reuse old narratives. I am personally trying to construct a new narrative around the triangle between the church, the society, and the state.", stated Mr. Hovorun, in response to the question from the audience about the unifying narrative for the Orthodox church beyond nationalism. "Old symphony should be substituted with this model. The church should admit civil society as an important player. I think this is the basis of a new narrative" – reaffirmed the speaker.

Professor Hovorun addressed a few questions from the Zoom audience. One question was about the relations of the Russian Orthodox Church and society - the future of the Russian Orthodox Church and Russian society, how it can evolve. Archimandrite Hovorun responded that it is clear the symphony between the church and the state in Russia failed and does not have any future. Old symphony does not work in modern Russia. Sociological studies indicate that people lose their trust in the church. The church loses popular support, and the state gets frustrated with the church. The old symphony has failed, and a new one has not been born yet. A more interesting case is Belarus. The clerical elites support the regime, and the lower-level clergy stand with the people.

Another question from the Zoom audience was about churches' role as the second violin in this symphony. Is there any protest against this idea of the symphony? Does everyone suffer from phantom pain? – the question was. The church is very diverse. There is a growing dissatisfaction with the existing model of church-state relations in Russia, argued Mr. Hovorun. This dissatisfaction is not appropriately expressed. There are some voices, but they are weak or get silenced immediately. However, the dissatisfaction is undoubtedly there. The second fiddle is an excellent way to put it, but it is more nuanced in Russia. During the first terms of Putin, he did not articulate any ideology. He is a very uncharismatic person. He is not a visionary. The vision came to him later, and it came to him from the church to a great extent. Hovorun remembered the time when Kremlin adopted the language produced by the church. Many people in the Kremlin were inspired by religious figures in Russia, particularly patriarch Kirill, a very charismatic figure and a visionary. At that moment, Mr. Hovorun believes that the church did not play the second violin. It played the first one. The church created momentum for ideological revolution within Kremlin that led it to where it is now.

The next addressed the knowledge production and sociology of knowledge in the Orthodox world, how do alternative notions develop in Orthodoxy, and how do they evolve? Orthodoxy picks up the lost fight of western churches with modernism, asserted Prof. Hovorun. The churches discovered a one-century old fight against modernism for themselves, and this is how anti-modernist campaigns started. Another framework to understand inter-orthodox ideological development is the idea of the culture war, which emerged in Kaiser's Germany and became important in the US. The cultural war was replanted and reproduced in the Orthodox world. Same kind of polarising rhetoric liberal vs. conservatives and cultural divides which Catholic or Anglican churches face with polarized positions on numerous topics.

Our Conversation Series speaker's and discussants' contributions showed why it is critical to understand Orthodox Christianity's political theology for having a more comprehensive perspective on church-state relations and societal change in the spaces culturally dominated by this denomination of Christianity. The next Conversation Series meeting on 22 April will host a renowned sociologist of religion, Professor Jose Casanova.