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SUFFERING THE DIFFERENCE: REFLECTIONS ON RUSSIAN ANTI-SEMITISM

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The encounter occurred in the ancient monastery at Zagorsk where the largest Russian Orthodox seminary in the Soviet Union is garrisoned. On top of the hillside, forty-four miles northeast of Moscow, surrounded by impregnable walls, through a maze of courtyards, towers and tombs, a small procession of visitors was marched into the depths of the monastic enclosure. There, behind closed doors, honored guests are customarily greeted. At the head of the conference table sat Archbishop Alexander, the rector of the theological academy, a large commanding presence wrapped in a cassock of battleship grey. Dark, penetrating eyes, stern and unblinking, two bushy tangles above and a massive prickly beard below gave me the feeling of being watched from the depths of an impassable thicket.

We were ten American seminary and university educators selected from around the country to participate in the 1990 Emerging Leaders Summit, an event coordinated by the American Center for International Leadership and the Soviet Committee of Youth Organizations. Our assignment was to meet our religious counterparts, explore the theological landscape of our respective countries, and determine the fault lines of religious upheaval. Though the commission landed with poorly marked maps of an unknown land, it was the question about Soviet Jewry that got us lost, a question shaped at home, impossible to leave behind. The question moved us in unexpected directions and finally pushed us over the border into unstable territory. From all that we Americans had seen and heard about the disillusionment of Communist ideology, the hopes of many people appeared to be shifting toward the Russian Orthodox Church. "With the prospects of greater recognition, openness, and freedom, what will church leaders say on behalf of those who are still vulnerable, those

who live outside the sanctuary of the official ecclesia? Does the church have an obligation to stand up on behalf of those who remain marginalized? In particular, will Russian Orthodox Christians accept responsibility for the survival of the Jews?" I asked.

On the outskirts of Moscow, the climate is thick with suspicion. In such an atmosphere, questions must be stripped and searched; they often harbor formulations of clandestine problems and destabilizing uncertainties. Unless disarmed, a question can explode, exposing crucial vulnerabilities. So the scent of a hidden accusation provoked a flurry of gestures from the rector. In retaliation for probing regarded as intrusive, he shot back:

> Do you think that we have not also suffered? Twenty-seven million lost in the Great Patriotic War. As many as forty million murdered in Stalin's purges. Why single out the Jews for special treatment, as though their suffering counts for more? There are other ethnic groups that continue to endure horrendous oppression. The danger is that we will cling to our separate ways and fail to overcome our differences. We must journey beyond our particularities, transcend divisive national affiliations, and find unity in our spiritual journey to God.

Over the course of two weeks, "the Jewish question" surfaced repeatedly, pushing our group to the edges of civility with several prominent leaders in the Russian Orthodox Church. Invariably the glare of anger displaced the flush of embarrassment. Repeatedly awkward silence would blister and break, an uproar of incriminations filling the void. One of the Americans clamored:

> In our country massive efforts to evacuate Jews from the Soviet Union are underway. A resurgence of anti-Semitism coupled with rumors of new pogroms mandate the condemnation of prejudice. Moral passivity will once again prove damning.

These warnings were sounded on a bell renowned for its crack. Without diplomatic tuning, the cautions arrived as dissonance, noise in a pitch which tripped alarms. The Americans drummed their responses on an ideal of theological inquiry that champions diversity. Trained in institutions where interreligious dialogue animates the lunchroom and frequently spills into the classroom, these Americans noted the creative tensions which can emerge when the distinctiveness of our respective communities is recognized and explored. For most of the American participants, the Christian-Jewish encounter has been central to this process, for it has taught us to mourn the irrecoverable old assurances and has encouraged us to distinguish the command to repair the world from the impulse to wiggle out of it. The Jewish-Christian conversation has challenged the practice of pouring religious truth into static doctrinal formulations which promise life everlasting to the credulous consumer. However disruptive, the confrontation has enlarged our memory, compelling a more generous recollection and a more modest hope in the things to come.

The officials from the Russian Orthodox Church were agitated by the zeal of these proclamations and the apparent self-righteousness of our assessments. The promises of pluralism seemed empty, even false, incompatible with pressing organizational challenges,

a move which would further fragment the Church and compromise its mission in the Soviet Union. With a desperate shortage of priests, a platoon of novices who have yet to master the liturgy much less biblical exegesis, a theological faculty straining to harness its students to the traditions of the Church Fathers and struggling to provide a working knowledge of homiletics and Orthodox spirituality, Jewish-Christian dialogue registers as an extracurricular pastime, a bourgeois indulgence, a vacuous distraction. When a generation stumbles out of the wilderness after seventy years of privation, one cannot load them up with hot apple pie. They need a simple diet that will settle the stomach and fortify the spirit. Before turning to the outsider for cooperative nourishment, the Church has the duty to reestablish itself, the imperative to reclaim its own historic calling, and the obligation to reconcile those divergent factions which are ripping the social fabric. Is not the Church entitled to ensure its own survival by leaving aside disruptive ethnic divisions and resuscitating that ancient vision of the peaceable Kingdom?

With staggering consistency, we Americans were informed that anti-Semitism was not a problem within the Russian Orthodox Church. The obstacle was portrayed as a problem of misplaced allegiances, a peculiar ethnic alignment. After all, if Jews can leave aside their Zionist idiosyncrasies, they are welcome to pitch their tents in the Church's camp. Resolution can always be earned the old-fashioned way, through conversion and cultural assimilation. This rationale failed to prick any religious scruples because Jewishness was reduced to a sociological category. Ignorant of the cultural content of the Jewish tradition, as well as the ethical and spiritual vitality of its people, Jewish faith did not register in the Russian Orthodox imagination. The spokesmen for the official church insisted that the withholding of the saving truth of the Gospel on the basis of ethnicity would signal the worse kind of Jew hatred. Are not Jews good enough to receive what we believe the very best?

This evangelical "outreach" was intensified by a romantic longing which would have all of us transcend our ethnic differences, bury our peculiarities, and forget our tribal resentments. In an era of glasnost and perestroika, this call for oneness was tantamount to unity with a Russian accent. Having boiled in one melting pot, the feast which our Russian Orthodox hosts were preparing set the Americans on edge. The corporate ideal of the Church universal overshadowed ethnic and religious distinctions. I noticed something omnivorous in the way these officials deployed that all-inclusive pronoun "we." In one conversation after another, this pronoun rumbled like an empty stomach. The "we" who are seizing the country's future seemed content to swallow "them," the outsiders, the resident aliens, the others. "They" were seldom mentioned; apparently they lived in exile or were kept under lock and key, safe in amnesia's dungeon.

So it was the expansive ambitions and the unqualified enthusiasm in the church's age-old answers that stood out. The ardor and the confidence of our Russian hosts might have

suggested an inspired response to destiny's demands. Yet, inspiration, being fragile and fleeting, was maintained by means of a highly selective memory, the gift of historical revisionism. The hope and the glory of religious restoration which dazzled these official strategists was built on a foundation of quicksand. Out of extravagant promises the builders have chiselled "forgetful monuments" to an ascendent Church.

As the American commission issued its concerns, the Russian hierarchs were stunned by an audacity which cast shadows upon their own authenticity. How seriously should one regard visitors who sputter down the postmodern strip, intoxicated with their diversity, crashing into conventions and calling it "necessity," swerving into dangerous pitfalls, blithely ignoring oncoming traffic? What can "we" learn from individualists who have canonized personal preference, iconoclasts who know how to multiply choices, not how to make them; mavericks who ironically touch everything, but grab hold of nothing? When a people coddled in modernity's lap, sheltered from persecution, young and untested, start hurling accusations, need "we" listen?

At the end of two weeks, my colleagues and I limped onto the plane and headed for home. After skidding into the walls of mutual suspicion, I was bruised in the discovery that ancient hostilities can take on many hard-hitting guises. There are commitments that reach for the skies, and between their allegiances and ours stretches a chasm difficult, perhaps impossible to traverse. How does one cross over? How does one reckon with the militaristic impulses within their ranks and ours? How does one disarm distrust? Slowly. Laboring under a common weight. Feeling a common strain. Lifting up the buried memories around which suspicions have hardened.

This is no simple task for it draws the inquirer into the murky depths of the other's pain. Yet this much was clear: there is an anguish among the Russian Orthodox that lies beneath the glittering hopes of the Church triumphant. This ache gets into the bones, and the throbbing does not stop. Every time I now try to get a fix on this distress, I am drawn to the memory of another encounter on the outskirts of Moscow the night before returning home.

In the cramped quarters of an eviscerated apartment complex, we sat huddled around a coffee table: four Americans and three representatives of the "catacomb" Church. These three expressed tremendous confidence in Russian Orthodoxy, but maintained that the "True Orthodox" reside outside the walls of the officially recognized establishment. When Metropolitan Sergii issued the 1927 Declaration of Loyalty, a movement was launched which has refused to associate administratively or sacramentally with the Moscow Patriarchate. According to the witness of these three, this underground movement has preserved the faith from extinction.

Branded as disruptive renegades by the state and largely ignored by the official ecclesiastical powers, the dissidents who make up the "catacomb" movement has long claimed that an aphasic church can only regain its voice after it has identified the administrative compromises that have corrupted both church and state. They insisted that only when the ideological deformities and bureaucratic malignancies are cleaned up can the church provide moral and spiritual direction. To recover from its subservience to the Soviet regime, the Church must fill in memory's gaps and then repent in word and deed.

This idea crystallized around two in the morning when the nagging business reemerged. "Why is there no word in Russian for the Holocaust, the Shoah? Why has the particularity of the Jewish plight been uniformly denied? Why the refusal to acknowledge anti-Semitic attitudes within the Church or even the society at large?"

A long pause followed before Father Alexei, a leading intellectual and spiritual force within the "catacomb" community who earns his daily bread as an electrician in a local hospital, finally spoke:

> Our inability to confront the legacy of anti-Judaism reflects a failure to work through the agony in which the church has been caught. We have not yet found adequate ways to bring our own suffering to consciousness. We are still emerging from the cataclysm of the last war and the trauma of the purges. But you must understand that more was lost than lives. Our sense of values died. Our tradition broke down. We found ourselves living among former Christians, folks who had become barbarians. When we looked in the mirror, we were terrified by the beasts that stared back. How does one come to terms with such a monumental collapse? A living faith was reduced to a religious artifice. We drifted into an ideology with a set of self-serving allegiances. In the process, our church found itself in a passionate rivalry with Armenians, Protestants, Roman Catholics, Muslims, and of course Jews. We live in an unacknowledged fear. Were we to acknowledge the suffering of others we would diminish the claims of our own community.

The way in which a community derives meaning from suffering, the way a people encounters, interprets, and responds to affliction at home and abroad reveals its ethical and theological core. The inability which Father Alexei was attempting to name reflects a theological impairment which extends beyond the boundaries of the Soviet Union and the Russian Orthodox Church.

The prevailing view is that the corporate heart has its limits, for it can pump only so much pity into the bloodstream before giving out. The supply of human kindness is drawn from a shallow reserve, easily exhausted. So whatever group can establish itself as the most oppressed can transmute pain into political clout. Suffering becomes the ticket which wins the victim a seat in an exclusive club, and membership has its privileges. If the fellowship extends an invitation to every group who has paid its pound of flesh, the value of one's victimization declines and thereby prevents a decent rate of exchange. Since scarcity determines worth, each group has a stake in minimizing the other's suffering, or denying it

altogether. So suffering is wedged within an ideological framework. Pain is politicized. Society is polarized.

This Zero-Sum logic is compounded by current theological formulations that highlight "God's preferential option for the poor." A group that can demonstrate the severity of its oppression not only can trade on public assistance, but can also derive comfort in the knowledge that God is on its side. The open wound becomes the distinctive badge of authenticity.

Obviously there are many victims in the USSR and the USA who are unable or unwilling to trade off of their suffering. There are victims who need and deserve redress, and these reflections are not intended to devalue their affliction. The point is that suffering is frequently filtered through the lens of politics and economics, producing a dark image of competitiveness which promotes callous indifference in the face of deadly rivalries. This mind set reinforces a disposition which blinds the Russian Orthodox to the beleaguered minorities in their midst. Closer to home, it highlights one of the difficulties in putting together a Rainbow coalition. No wonder a segment of Christian feminism simply reframes the legacy of anti-Judaic polemics, portraying Jesus as the one who saves the marginalized from the yoke of Jewish patriarchy. No surprise many Jews agonize within their own ranks about the plight of the Palestinians, but uniformly minimize the struggle in public. When suffering is measured by the rules of the marketplace, the reason that many Afro-Americans do not want to hear about anti-Semitism and the Holocaust becomes more comprehensible. Why pour millions of dollars into a museum when widespread unemployment, teenage pregnancy, drugs, crime, and a failing educational system are leaving inner cities devastated? When the anguish of the oppressed is translated into the language of public relations, minorities are apt to wrap themselves tightly in their own misfortune and elbow each other in the scramble to ensure their own survival.

Many of us at home and abroad have settled for flattened renditions of our generative stories. Our accounts of struggle lack theological gravity and ethical direction. Unless affliction is transformed into a metaphor, a memory which extends the boundaries of the imagination, the other remains invisible, an anonymous outsider, an outcast, an untouchable. As Cynthia Ozick notes:

> By turning the concrete memory of slavery into a universalizing metaphor of reciprocity, the ex-slaves discover a way to convert imagination into a serious moral instrument... 'And a stranger you shall not oppress,' says Exodus 23, verse 8, 'for you know the heart of the stranger, seeing you were strangers in the land of Egypt.' Without the metaphor of memory and history, we cannot imagine the life of the Other.[1]

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[1]Metaphor and Memory, (New York: Knopf, 1989), 278f.

Memory is shaped by a vision of the future. The Russian ideologues who constitute *Pamyat* (memory) also want to stake their claims on the past. So the pressing questions return to haunt the Russians no less than us. Will our religious communities maintain memories with open doors? Can Jews remember the cruelty of the Egyptian oppressor so that they understand and respond to the tribulation of the stranger? Can Christians recollect the crucifixion in ways that leave no one hanging? Can they reclaim the redemptive power of their focal metaphors? Can they recover those founding stories which might push them beyond the familiar into the company of the Other?

Lines are being drawn, sides chosen, even though the enemy remains elusive and largely unknown. Already battles are underway at home and abroad. Whose rendition of good and evil will prevail? This much is certain: the metaphors deployed and the memories enlisted will determine the terms of engagement. From my encounters with various religious leaders in the USSR, it appears that a protracted struggle is in the making. The long march is still ahead. In this sense, Americans and Soviets labor under a common strain. The future will depend upon the story which gets told, the depth of metaphor, the reach of memory, the grip of hope. Where are the sages, prophets, and raconteurs to be found who can redeem suffering by clearing space for the stranger? Until religious communities learn to articulate their stories in ways that extend the imagination and redefine the boundaries of duty, the walls of indifference and hostility will remain intact; and we will tense ourselves for warfare where no prisoners are taken.