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Ralph Della Cava

Queens College, City University of New York

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JEWS AND CHRISTIANS OF RUSSIA AND UKRAINE

SPEAK ABOUT ANTI-SEMITISM:

NOTES FROM A TRAVEL JOURNAL, MAY-JUNE 1995

By **Ralph Della Cava**

The author is Professor of History at Queens College, City University of New York and Senior Research Associate of the Institute of Latin American and Iberian Studies at Columbia University. He gratefully acknowledges the grants from the Research Foundation of the City University of New York and the National Council for Soviet and East European Research that made his travels possible; neither institution is responsible for the views expressed in this essay. I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Dr. Herbert A. Strauss, Professor Emeritus of the City College of New York, CUNY, and renowned scholar of anti-Semitism, for bringing to my attention a recent study on the topic, but most of all, for posing the question that prompted this reply.

For all their differences, Jews and Christians of Russia and Ukraine agree that anti-Semitism remains as deeply rooted today in their homelands as ever before. Against considerable odds, one group of Russian Orthodox Christians is trying hard to reverse that legacy.

That, at least, is the conclusion I came to after speaking about anti-Semitism with a dozen religious leaders, Jewish and Christian, cleric and lay, during a six-week visit last May and June to several cities of the two newly independent republics of the former Soviet Union.

Of course, my findings do not rest on any rigorous survey, such as the many conducted since the late 1980's by well-known scholars and pollsters. Instead, they are the stuff of numerous conversations -- cordial, informal, stolen in the off-moments of a work day across desktops piled high with urgent business, in offices, hotel lobbies and private studies, or at an impromptu, late night supper in a typically cramped kitchen of a modest post-war Soviet apartment. It is a moot point too whether the opinions I penned out into five thick notebooks in a scrawl as swift-stroked as the excited flight of our words are even shared by my informants' coreligionists elsewhere around their countries.

But, the testimonies struck me at the time as cut from the cloth of truth. The contradictions and inconclusiveness that color them are no less real and reflect, in my opinion, everything from the very ambiguities of the historical moment in which they were recorded to the expected caution of a respondent before a stranger. Much of what I heard, however, was borne out by studies I came across after my return, expressed though they be in the bare bones of emotionless statistics or the measured deliberation of academic treatises.

That is why I have chosen to let my new found acquaintances speak for themselves, transcribing their opinions verbatim and resisting as best as I could the temptation to interpret and analyze, but owing up to the contrary wherever I in fact succumbed.

In Moscow I spoke at length with two Lubavitcher rabbis.

The first was foreign-born (as are almost all the Lubavitcher rabbis currently in the former Soviet Union and Central Europe) who described himself as an "emissary" (Christians would use the word, missionary) of the late Rabbi Schneerson's New York-based community. By the time of our meeting in June 1995 he had resided in Moscow for better than five years, directing one of the most energetic religious undertakings I had encountered in my six week journey.

"We [Lubavitchers] differ from all other Jewish organizations," he made it clear from the start, "because we believe Jews should be made to feel Jewish, ... have the opportunity to feel Jewish, live a Jewish life, whether they stay or emigrate. Everything from the cradle to the grave -- kosher restaurants, shabbat services, and so on." "Thank God, we are progressing," he mused, surveying in his mind the road thus far taken, while we both sat squeezed into one of the three small rooms of the Lubavitchers' Moscow headquarters, xerox copiers, computers, two telephones, fax machines, monitors and a samovar strewn atop the crowded desks and on the floor.

His remarks on anti-Semitism could not have been more disarming. Although their synagogue was burned to the ground in 1993, the new school set afire a year later, and then too a school bus just a month before our conversation, the rabbi insisted that much of what is said about "anti-Semitism was rumor, while facts were hard to come by." "If you asked an ordinary person on the street," he said, "few [would turn out to be] anti-Semites." Then he caught himself: "on the other hand, you do have a Zhironovsky, spewing anti-Semitism in the Duma. Can you ever imagine a Senator like that in the US?"

What then of the government and its attitude towards Jews?, I asked. Well, as far as the Moscow city government is concerned, the rabbi assured me, "it's pro-Jewish. They have helped us and are willing to fight anti-Semitism. But they don't want to take that stand in public, to make a fuss."

The rabbi implied that the government's attitude might have something to do with the changing status of Jews in Moscow, an appreciation seconded in several other conversations. "Today, three-quarters of the successful businessmen [in Moscow] are Jewish and many people in [local] government are Jewish," he said matter-of-factly. Then, as if on cue, an official from the city's education department, who was himself Jewish -- although not particularly observant, according to the rabbi -- arrived for his appointment. The rabbi turned to me, politely excused himself, and then went off with his

guest to discuss some problem or other or perhaps the future of the new million dollar school the Lubavitcher community is busy planning to build in the very heart of Moscow.

The second rabbi whom I met -- on the same day and in the same office, but with whom I must have spoken with for better than three hours -- was born and raised in Russia, a physicist by training and a self-taught computer expert by former profession. But from the 1970's on, shortly after he met his future wife who was observant, and as he himself was engaged in the high -- and at the time politically risky --adventure of rediscovering his faith, he told of being blocked from one position of employment after another, no matter how great his talent, no matter how needed his skill, because of the anti-Semitism of society and the anti-Zionism of the Soviet state. Thus, during the seventies, he became a dissident, "not ... a Jewish dissident, even though most of the dissidents were in fact Jewish," he noted. In the process, he immersed himself in Jewish history, studied Hebrew so intensely that he could teach it to others a year later, and ended up fully embracing the faith.

What about anti-Semitism today?, I asked. "It's changed; it's no longer government sponsored. Rather it's more 'common'" [Did he mean common-place, widespread, lower class? I couldn't tell]. "It's no longer so clear-cut since it's intertwined with many other processes and tendencies," he added without further specification. "I hear of Jewish students who suffer from anti-Semitism in school and in playgrounds." And then, of course, there was this one sure "source of envy," as his fellow rabbi had mentioned earlier, in that Jews could emigrate abroad, "while the rest have to sit locked up." There was too a Kafkian peculiarity: the Russia-wide organization of Jewish institutions, the VAAD, founded in May 1995 "makes no decisions" and is "headed by a non-Jew"! But, oddly, or so it seemed to me, there was no mention of such other public manifestations of animosity and hatred, such as Pamyat, [one of Russia's more virulent ultra-nationalist, anti-Semitic movements] or the occasional anti-Semitic reportage and cartoons in the press. Had anti-Semitism really abated?

"Well, I myself feel it less, perhaps because I have such a bright [positive?] image of being a Jew, because I walk through the city streets to shabbas [Sabbath religious service] with the talis [prayer shawl] over my shoulders and I don't remember [ever hearing] any anti-Semitic remarks. Instead, I sometimes hear questions like 'Are you Hassidic?,' or 'Are you going to shabbas?,' or 'Where's the synagogue?'"

The two rabbis -- independently of each other -- shared some further convictions that might be said to underlie the Lubavitchers' frankly optimistic outlook for Jewry in Russia and these are worth noting. For one, the great "religious boom" of the seventies and eighties -- when Jews and Christians alike embraced their respective credos en masse as an act of faith, but also as a declaration of outright political protest against a discriminatory and atheistic state -- is over. Now it's time to work -- hard, seriously and professionally -- if people's interest in their faith is to be sustained and strengthened.

For another, the great emigration to Israel and the West has slowed. In fact, many who left, the rabbis were convinced, are unhappy wherever they now are; their roots, their

friends and their language are "here in Russia." Some are returning; still more may do so as economic conditions improve and open up to Jews new opportunities in business and the professions. Finally, there is a shared conviction about recent political changes: that at last there really is "stability," that "democracy is here to stay," and that consequently "Judaism can be built on firm ground."

These new conditions are borne out everyday, the rabbis suggested, in the rise in the number of private schools, many of them Jewish (whether religious or not), in the slowly emerging awareness among a few well-to-do but largely secular Jews of their religious obligation to contribute to the community's welfare (even though they have to be badgered to do so, "like in America," the rabbi smiled), in the greater numbers of Jews who seek out a sound and modern education for their children that will enhance their chances whether they stay or emigrate, and most important of all, in the ever growing number of Jewish children who are receiving a religious education. It is in today's children rather than in their parents' or grandparents' generation that both rabbis "see [the] potential [for] Jewish leaders who will build the community within the next twenty or thirty years."

In sharp contrast, the two Jewish communities I visited in Ukraine, in Kyiyw and Lwiw respectively, indulge far less in the Lubavitcher enthusiasm for Jewry's future, and with good reason. Indeed, throughout Ukraine, the head of the Association of Jewish Communities and Organizations (VAAD) of Ukraine based in the capital told me, Jews continue to emigrate en masse: 300,000 to 400,000 have already done so since 1989 alone; at present, about 1,000 persons a month are leaving for Israel, the US and Germany[!]; as unemployment rises dramatically, as is the case throughout Ukraine, even more can be expected to do so. Most of those who go are young, well-educated and looking for a better future.

Over 40% of Ukraine's approximately half a million remaining Jews are old and/or retired; in the capital they make up just under a third of the better than 20,000 or so old-timers "who are lonely, and without relatives to care for them." Statistics speak grimly: for every Jewish birth, there are nine deaths. "Perhaps in the near future," the VAAD leader noted, "all that will be left for us to perform are the services of mercy (charitable works) -- and burial."

In Lwiw, the landscape is similar. There, I spoke with a very learned middle-aged man, a one-time telecommunications instructor whose expertise allowed him under Soviet rule to retain his employment, the covert observance of his faith, and a steadfast refusal to repeated overtures to join the Communist Party ("to be a Communist, you had to be a liar"). He confirmed that trends in Lwiw were similar to those in Kyiyw: an aging Jewish population, the continuing emigration of the young, and the deep-seated ambivalence of many whether to stay or leave.

But it would be wrong to paint the present entirely bleak. On many levels, there are signs of vitality and enthusiasm. According to Kyiyw's VAAD leader, twenty or thirty rabbis (none Ukrainian) serve some seventy synagogues and Jewish organizations around the

country. In Kyyyiw, there are now seven houses of worship for the capital's 100,000 Jews instead of the single house of worship permitted in Soviet times. In September 1994, a Theological Academy (yeshiva) was opened in the capital; thirteen public schools in the country were already catering with government approval to mostly Jewish student bodies; about seventy Sunday schools were effectively operating, while Jewish organizations could be found in as many cities. Moreover, the Jewish Girls School in Kyyyiw, established by the American rabbi from Brooklyn, Yaakov Bleich, is just as renowned as it is highly regarded as a measure of the possibility, reality and vitality of the "revival of Judaism" in Ukraine.

To non-Jews, that revival is owed to several factors: to the government's determined enforcement of religious freedom; to the absence of an official or state church (despite attempts by some Ukrainian nationalists and other political currents to promote a Ukrainian Orthodox Church independent of the Moscow Patriarchate); to the efforts of the current administration of President Leonid Kuchma "to go out of its way," as The New York Times noted, "to emphasize reconciliation with the Jews;" and lastly to the overall prevalence of a de facto climate of religious toleration and pluralism, made possible in part by the inability of any one of the several numerically significant confessions to dominate the political arena or state power.

But the VAAD official put this into sharper perspective. If Jews now live and let live, if they can now be "left alone to live like any other citizen," it is also attributable to the common struggles of Jewish and Ukrainian nationalists against the former Soviet regime. Both groups suffered arrest and incarceration and it is, according to another VAAD member who was present at the interview and was himself a militant Jewish nationalist, "thanks to our communications in prison -- between Ukrainians and Jews -- that we Jews can now live freely in Ukraine." He was quick to point out that contrary to current stereotypes of Jews "as strange people who wear things on their heads" and of Ukrainians who supposedly "were all anti-Semites intent on killing Jews, ... the reality is that none of the Ukrainian nationalists has ever joined anti-Semitic movements."

Indeed, in Ukraine, both men reported, "organizations like [Russia's] Pamyat do not exist - and in that sense we [Jews in Ukraine] are better off." Oddly, no mention was made of UNA-UNSO, a Ukrainian nationalist movement, inspired by fascism, that recently elected three deputies to the parliament. But incidents of hostility in the press are not uncommon and one recent article was pointedly mentioned. It spoke with pride that "among those who fought [sic] the Jews at Babi Yar, there were only thirty-three Germans, all the rest were Ukrainians." "Well, if they think that, let them write it," the VAAD leader remarked, "I'm not happy - but at least we're able to publish our reply."

In Lwiw, my interlocutor was a lot less sanguine. He recalled the oppressive system of the past, its desecration and dismissal of everything religious, one that led "many Jews [to] change their identity" and others to abandon their beliefs. He went on:

The whole society was officially anti-Semitic. Non-Jews would say "all Jews are terrible except this friend of mine [who] is a good guy; why, he's hardly Jewish."

Do you know what that system did? It made everyone process the information they got. Basically, people [assumed] everything was false -- except with regard to Jews, like that Israel started the [Six Day] war, not Arabs; that Israel killed its own Jews at [the Olympic Games in] Munich.

And it's still like this.

In that case, I asked, shouldn't the Jews of Lwiw simply pick up and flee? Now? For all of his single-mindedness, this passionate man of faith could agree with the Lubavitchers and conceded that "we would be better off teaching Jews here [to be observant]." But his motives may have been different: " ... in America, Jews are enthralled by material things; some have even joined the 'Mafiya' [presumably the "Russian" gangs in Brighton Beach] and we are made ashamed." Moreover, if Jews are educated here, it must be done by us, he emphatically added: "Conservative and Reform [Jews, both less strictly observant from the point of view of the Orthodox and Hassidic currents of contemporary Judaism] can't work here; they are too lazy. Here, you have to work twenty-four hours a day."

And then he abruptly returned to the question I had posed earlier and he asked rhetorically: "Why do we want Jews to leave? We don't hate this country; we have sympathy for it. But the whole society is a crowd [did he mean, mob?] and if something happened, the crowd would rise up against the Jews because they hate Jews. Doesn't the local paper keep publishing anti-Semitic articles?... If there were a civil war, Jews would be made the scapegoat. Fascism returns; it's a world-wide problem. Some want to dismiss Nazism, the Holocaust, as if they hadn't happened."

Is there nothing that could reverse this hatred of Jews?, I asked. Some efforts are being made with other confessions, he noted. Unfortunately, however, "the Communists still dominate key sectors of society" and in many people's minds this "continuism" underscores the abiding moral ambiguity of the state. Indeed, before the regime's collapse, "party elites used their power and influence to get more power... So they still rule. Americans and Westerners try to improve things here, but it doesn't work out as it should. Nothing will change soon...." What's more, economic and social conditions continue to worsen. "Pensioners get \$10.00 a month; \$5.00 go to pay rent; a kilo of meat costs a dollar and a kilo of cucumbers, fifty cents. Only God can prevent this society from getting worse."

Meanwhile, we have good relations with other religious denominations, and we are "silently working to 'spread Jews around' [thus allowing them to take part in various civic organizations] to provide civic approaches to issues -- and if life improves and if Jews want to stay," betraying by his tone of voice the profound doubts he harbored at such a prospect, "then let them stay."

What of Russia's Christians, above all its Orthodox believers who in 1992 were said to make up as much as forty percent of the country's 155 million inhabitants, and of its better than one million Roman Catholics?

What do they think of Jews?

In a score of additional interviews I conducted in Moscow and Saint Petersburg with bishops, priests and lay persons of both confessions, I did not personally hear an anti-Semitic remark. But several informants reported they had been privy to them, while a few, who are ethnic Jews and converts to both faiths, implied that they themselves had been the object of the same.

Before relating these accounts, it would be helpful to keep in mind that their bearers occupy a special niche within the many diverse currents of opinion and ideological tendencies that have so dramatically emerged within Orthodoxy since the collapse of the former Soviet Union four years ago, even though this niche as such has largely been neglected by Western scholarship (and regrettably cannot be discussed at any length here). Suffice to say, those who comprise it are mostly university educated, live in Moscow or Saint Petersburg, know foreign languages, have traveled abroad, enjoy ecumenical ties with people of other credos and stand diametrically opposed to the political extremism and religious intolerance that have come to characterize some other segments of the Orthodox Church and its congregants. Moreover, within the institution and society at large they see themselves as "reformers," whether or not they employ the term, or however minimal their numbers are, or regardless of their complete exclusion for now from the ranks of the Orthodox episcopacy.

A minority within this group, moreover, places itself "beyond confessionality" and refers to itself simply as "Christian." To some extent, it has come to this position of "pan-Christianity" (for want of a better term) out of a growing conviction that Christianity in Russia today can be better served by overcoming differences between Roman Catholics and Orthodox.

Both the "pan-Christians" and the by far more numerous "reformers" draw no small measure of inspiration from the late Fr. Alexander Men', a man of science, a convert from mixed Jewish and Christian parentage to Orthodoxy, and an ecumenist in thought and deed. His 1993 murder, allegedly at the hands of an ultra-nationalist and anti-Semite, is still unsolved. But it has further endowed his widely acknowledged reputation as an exemplary pastor, erudite scholar, engaging preacher and successful "popularizer" of the faith with that of martyr and saint.

Perhaps Men's most critical role resided in initiating -- and thus setting the paradigm for -- a far-reaching intellectual renewal of Russian Orthodoxy (an agenda within the Church which remains today one of the most urgent and --- controversial). In advocating such a prospect throughout the religiously fervent decades of the nineteen-seventies and -eighties, years of the so-called "religious boom," Fr. Men' also attracted innumerable intellectuals and scholars to the faith, many of whom became converts. His enduring

influence and its likely significance for Christianity's immediate future in Russia are worth exploring more fully.

In Moscow, the very first "disciple" of Fr. Men' to come to my attention was fittingly an intellectual. A translator, he is the author of recent works that are among the few existing in the Russian language, devoted to making Christianity, Orthodoxy and the Bible comprehensible to children and the average adult. Like Fr. Men', he too is a Jew and a convert to Orthodoxy from secularism and unbelief. On the question of anti-Semitism he did not mince his words:

Our Orthodox Church is terribly anti-Semitic. In the West there are two tendencies towards Jews. The first is to convert them with love and kindness. The second is to acknowledge that Jews are saved and that because of the Holocaust they should not be bothered; but we are free to despise them because they killed Christ.

In Russia, we have neither. At very best there are a few Orthodox who subscribe to the first tendency [sic]; a second group seeks to convert [Jews] at all costs; and a third [argues] that even if converted, Jews can never be trusted.

And that last approach is predominant among us.

For a moment, I felt transported, back to Brazil, to the seventeenth century and imagined myself before an *auto da fÃ©* of a *cristÃ£o novo*. But could it not be, I asked, that this view was a touch overdrawn? "Look," the writer retorted, "I'm off in search of just twenty reasonable priests. Yes, perhaps there are twenty in all, three in our parish [to which I shall return below], another three in the rest of Moscow, and another twenty [in the rest of the country] who at least believe that education [to offset prejudice and discrimination] is necessary."

He was not alone in his judgment. Two prominent priests, also of a secular Jewish background, confirmed it. The one, Orthodox, whom I did not meet personally, had recently recalled in an interview to the Russian press that his bishop had suggested he change his "Jewish surname" before ordination. The other, Roman Catholic, with whom I met on more than one occasion, bluntly reproached the anti-Semitism of some unnamed Orthodox hierarchs:

They, of course, hate Jews, above all [Jewish convert] priests. ... They still consider us 'Yids' and, even if you were ordained a priest, they don't accept it. ... The heart of the issue is that [they are simply] anti-Semites.

Did Roman Catholics hold the same opinion? "No," he insisted, "except for those occasional remarks about Jews--as [being] interested in money, turning a buck -- the kind that you'd expect [to hear] from Poles and Lithuanians."

Could this be a case of inter-confessional "one-upmanship"? I wondered.

In Saint Petersburg, where anti-Semitism is openly identified with its late Metropolitan and second highest ranking official of the Russian church hierarchy, two professional women, both devout Orthodox and of Russian ethnicity, assured me it wasn't. One of them admitted that the views of Metropolitan Ioann, whose death on 02 November 1995 opens up the chance to appoint a moderate to the vacant see, "have not sat well with believers. ... [In fact, several] clerics [have been] trying to argue with [him] about his anti-Semitism, but all feel frightened and fear retaliation as with Fr. Men'. So [before we can strike] we need to know 'when,' [and then] we must give a strong kick"

Meanwhile, others wound up and ran the Metropolitan. The truth, she insisted, is that Ioann, whom she knew and had met several times, was "deeply religious, imbued with the teachings of the church fathers, a good man, [but] old, sick, concerned with praying his way into Paradise, and in regard to the world around him - ignorant." It is "those who surround[ed] him [who do] the politics. ... Often he just sign[ed] whatever [was] put in front of him," intimating in her silence to my query whether she herself had ever seen that happen, that she had.

The other, a convert from atheism at the age of twenty and married to a Jew (who knows even less, she said, about his faith than she does), has no patience for the rank anti-Semitism of the Saint Petersburg church, the "deep-seated anti-Judaism of the Patristic tradition" in which Orthodoxy is so deeply rooted, and the abiding anti-Jewish prejudices of her compatriots. So intent is she in her convictions that in 1992 and 1993 this renowned historian had cast her lot with an openly anti-Fascist magazine, Bar'er (Challenge), dedicated in its maiden issue to denouncing and exposing the "xenophobia and anti-Semitism" that were then visibly and ubiquitously on the rise.

Today, she is no less willing to work diligently to reform both church and society through and through; unlike some "pan-Christians," however, she opposes the establishment of a "new" church, and even makes a case for the hierarchy's past collaboration with the KGB as the terrible price paid for the church's survival. While she puts great store in the younger generation, she holds out no great hope in immediately shaking Russians of their narrow-mindedness. Our people are simply unable "to admit that the troubles of our country are of our own making;" moreover, we must rid ourselves of such a hateful hypocrisy in morality, which avers that only "Christians have an ethical standard for all, while Jews only deal ethically with other Jews, [and therefore] can never be trusted."

Of course, I myself was struck by one recurrent characteristic of these terribly forthright conversations: almost all the Christians with whom I discussed anti-Semitism turned out to be either of Jewish ethnicity (rather than of religious belief or observance) and converts, or they were related to Jews through marriage. Equally striking was the significant presence in Moscow and Saint Petersburg of these "Jewish Christians" (the term employed approvingly by Fr. Men' himself, I later learned) who were active in several Orthodox and Catholic parishes, in church institutions, and in related, often private, educational and publishing enterprises. Were there any parallels here, I wondered as I rummaged mentally through the past, with fifteenth-century Spain or nineteenth-century Germany? (In the case of "mixed marriages" involving ethnic Jews, I discovered,

America had nothing over the former Soviet Union: the latter's percentages were said to have been even higher). But my question was about the present.

So I began listening for answers. In Saint Petersburg, I was told, better than ten percent of the city's Christians were Jews. And the reasons for their conversion are rather "obvious," my informant said, as she went ticking them off as if she were reading from a shopping list: "the majority of Russian Jews is non-religious; they knew nothing about their faith; the Holocaust was virtually unknown. Jews who are members of the intelligentsia have for the most part no religious beliefs at all and, if they should at all identify themselves as Jews -- you know, after the Six-Day War, the presence of Jews in Saint Petersburg suddenly dropped to zero -- it is because of anti-Semitism."

But my informant, it was clear to me, never really explained why ethnic Jews had converted to Christianity when they did. Others proffered clues. Without religious belief - - "I myself had none either," this ethnic Russian convert exclaimed -- Jews were simply Russians, Jewish Russians. And as is wont of intellectuals, they became just as imbued as their teachers with all that was Russia's, her history, literature, culture, and for some, even her historic religion. But the leap from knowledge to belief? A Jewish convert was at a loss to explain it: in the end, "it's a mystery," he sighed. Then, he drew a breath and resumed rational discourse: "before Perestroika, ... conversions were really genuine. Yes, politics counted too. But [converts] sought spiritual gains." In the end, both informants implied, as Fr. Men' himself contended, that "becoming a Christian [did] not mean renouncing [one's] nation [i.e., one's Jewish identity]."

In Moscow, the sociological context is nearly identical, except that a Roman Catholic missionary who knows the city well estimates that Jewish Christians make up as much as twenty percent of the parishioners of the capital's most active Orthodox parishes, an approximation others accepted. In contrast to Saint Petersburg, according to one Jewish Christian, tens or scores of ethnic Jewish conversions still occur each year, even though the totals have declined since the "religious boom." Intellectuals are embracing the faith less frequently, but university students continue to seek out the church almost as often as before. (Of course, many Russians find religion "fashionable" these days -- a church wedding, I was told, is almost as prestigious as a Mercedes, or perhaps a poor substitute for it. Some "historic" converts for whom religion was an expression of political dissent, moral necessity, an act of defiance against the state, expressed doubt about the motives of today's catechumens).

If there is any one parish, however, that gathers up reformers, converts and catechumens, draws heavily on Jewish Christian parishioners, and is an advocate of church reform, it is the Orthodox church of Saints Cosmo and Damien. A signal bulwark against anti-Semitism, it merits a detained appreciation.

Situated off the former Sovietskaya Square, about midway between the Kremlin and MacDonald's, the unimposing 18th-century exterior shields but the faintest traces of its

one-time inner beauty, surrendered decades ago to a two-storey printing plant, erected within by government decree. But the marks of neglect and misuse (frescos removed or whitewashed, marble floors and columns stripped away) are barely noticed by Sunday worshippers who through the three hour long liturgy conducted before a make-shift iconostasis by their celebrant, pastor and spiritual leader, Fr. Alexandr Borisov.

In a minuscule room hardly bigger than a closet, on an original second-floor landing now under repair, where electric wires and jerry-built handrails are set out like an obstacle course in boot camp, the sixtyish scientist-turned-priest received me. Today, he wears the mantle of reform, as if it had been personally bequeathed by his friend and confrere, Fr. Alexander Men', whose portrait in oils and in a photo the size of a poster adorn the freshly painted plaster walls.

Indeed, Fr. Borisov may now be the most important champion of church reform within Orthodoxy and surely one of the most outspoken critics of anti-Semitism. His 1994 book, the title of which can be roughly translated as The Ripened Fields, an allusion to the spiritual harvest that awaits Orthodoxy were it able to bring itself up to date, was not at all well received in certain church circles. In fact his parish, while in good standing with the diocese, was characterized, disparagingly by one high-ranking official as the "Church of Westerners and Westernizers." Mostly an obligatory stop-over for visiting ecumenists from abroad, my informant added; "its importance is greatly exaggerated."

There is more to such disdain than the historic struggle between Slavophiles and Westernizers revisited: Borisov's "reflections on the Russian Orthodox Church," his book's subtitle, are tantamount to that "urgent and -- controversial" agenda for reform that I had mentioned earlier. Drawn in part from Fr. Men's fecund thought but also from the "thinking" sectors of the Church, its five proposals are at first glance truly modest. But coming as they do after more than seven decades of Russian Orthodoxy's virtual immobility, some would say "stagnation," and directed at Church leaders who were part of the previous "system," they ring out like revolutionary proclamations.

Two of these, which he summed up for me at our meeting, deal with liturgical reform, such as substituting Russian for Church Slavonic which "no one understands anyway," and simplifying worship, like shortening the mass. Another calls for bringing the Gospels to bear on modern life and contemporary problems. "Alas," he lamented, "we are still locked up in the nineteenth-century; and it's no accident that the new saints the Church just canonized [whose views hardly speak to modern man] are locked up there, too."

Most controversial was his appeal for major changes in the education of clergy, both monastic and secular. Monks he accused of using the confessional to pry unscrupulously into people's lives and perhaps all too often into "the intimate details of the sexual life of women;" he spared his readers an attack against homosexuality among celibates, contrasting them unflatteringly to a Latvian friar, a Roman Catholic!, whom he pointedly described as "a wonderful man who served others in a camp where he himself was a prisoner." Secular priests fared no better. They are "uncultured, passive, lacking in missionary zeal, and simply wanting in ability. Of course you can't change them

overnight, but we must correct their [most grievous] errors." Which are those? "They are xenophobic and anti-Semitic."

Against the latter, Fr. Borisov has spoken out more than once. He did so most unequivocally at a major church conference convened in November 1994 (on the eve of the National Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church, the first held since 1970). His opponents, lay and cleric, turned the forum into something like a Soviet-era show trial, according to one observer, denouncing him as a "schismatic" and "perpetrator of divisions" within the church, demanding he recant his writings, while pressing church hierarchs to strip him of orders.

In his own defense, a rather eloquent appeal to both the conference and the Church, reminiscent of Pope John XXIII's invocation of Vatican Council II in its call for openness, change, and ecumenism, he singled out anti-Semitism as one of the most fundamental scourges Orthodoxy had to face up to and overcome. Once again, he made his own opposition plain:

The other matter I'd like to speak about is anti-Semitism, an infamous matter for our Church. Let us remember the pogrom that took place at Kishinev on Easter Sunday [1903] when there were hundreds of victims: Jewish women were raped, Jewish children had their eyes gouged out ... The guilty ones of Kishinev were orthodox [Christians].

The strange theory, and humiliating to our national consciousness, that the responsibility of the [October] Revolution and of all that came after during the next 74 years belongs to the Jews, flies in the face of history.

How can such a great people like the Russians so easily fool themselves.? Anti-Semitism is a shortcut to avoid repentance: by putting the blame on the Jews, those who really created Communism and Fascism remain unrepentant sinners, convinced even of their superiority over everybody else.

The Jews and Christians I spoke with in Russia and Ukraine agree, I repeat, that anti-Semitism remains as deeply rooted as ever. Before it, some Jews hold out hope for its containment, while some Christians go so far as to call for its extirpation.

On Christians falls the greater burden. To the extent the reform of Orthodoxy follows the course sketched out by Fr. Men' and pursued by his disciples, they may indeed succeed in helping to fashion a more tolerant land. But that will be no easy matter. The assessment of one Russian government agency which monitored the outcome of the 1994 National Synod pessimistically concluded, the "liberal current," as its report called the reformers:

... is not numerous and has little influence.

It is comprised mostly of the ecclesiastical intelligentsia, the younger and more educated part of the clergy, those that look toward expanding the social role of the Church.

The "liberals" are usually loyal to the Patriarch, while the "nationalists" [a "radical conservative" faction] often direct their attacks against "liberals" in order to discredit the Patriarch himself.

Do reformers at all stand a chance?

My attention is drawn to two small, but positive signs. Despite the juggernaut at the November conference to paint Fr. Borisov into the corner of "schism," he remains in the good graces of Aleksei II, Archbishop of Moscow, and Patriarch of Moscow and all the Russias, the supreme spiritual leader of Slavic Christianity. The Patriarch, moreover, invited Fr. Borisov to attend the annual convocation of Moscow's priests, confirming by that that he is a priest in good standing. Furthermore, unlike another outspoken cleric, he was not singled out at the National Synod in November 1994 for disciplinary action.

The second sign is that the resolutions passed at that Synod commended the Church to proceed with a number of reforms, to take on a work of mission among unchurched Orthodox and, with reservation, to continue to pursue ecumenical relations with other confessions. In a word, while the "liberals" are "few and without influence," thanks largely to them the "nationalists" failed to have their way. As in most collective bodies, "centrists" managed to muddle through, nudged and shoved by those on their flanks.

As to anti-Semitism, the Synod did not take up the issue.

The Patriarch of course met with Jewish leaders in New York during his 1991 visit and that must surely be seen as a step in the right direction.

He has yet to issue an official church declaration.

But neither has the Patriarch of the West, Pope John Paul II.

As the third Christian Millennium fast approaches, it may not be too late -- it is certainly not too soon -- for Orthodox and Catholics to seize the occasion to strike anti-Semitism from their hearts and souls, and together join in giving witness to the dawning of a truly new era.

NOTES