



Konstantin Kostjuk (2013). *The History of Social-Ethical Thought in the Russian Orthodox Church. (Istoriia sotsial'no-eticheskoi mysli v Russkoi pravoslavnoi tserkvi)*. Saint Petersburg: Aleteia (in Russian). – 448 pages.

It was already the close of the 1990s when Konstantin Kostjuk began writing about social and political thought in Russian Orthodoxy as well as the social teachings of other Christian confessions, and he was one of the few authors who vigorously responded to the appearance of the document “The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church” in 2000. In 2002, at the Catholic University of Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, he defended his lengthy German-language dissertation, “The Concept of the Political in the Russian Orthodox Tradition: The Relationship between Church, State, and Society in Russia” (subsequently published as a monograph — Kostjuk 2005). Now, finally, Russian readers have the opportunity to familiarize themselves with the results of Kostjuk’s masterful research, which has no real equal among other contemporary works.

After reading Kostjuk’s book, the first thing that comes to mind in terms of a comparison is, naturally, Georges Florovsky’s *Ways of Russian Theology* (Kostjuk, incidentally, cites Florovsky’s work from time to time). In Kostjuk’s case, the range of his work is just as large, but the scope of its coverage of the history of Russian religious thought is even broader.

Of course, the differences are also obvious. They consist not only in the fact that the current volume adopts a carefully considered, detached analytical approach free of the pronounced acerbity and evaluative subjectiveness characteristic of Florovsky’s well-known work. What is central is the subject under investigation itself. Kostjuk set himself the goal of drawing out from the same tradition and the same history of ideas the “social-ethical” dimension, which, “in the history of Orthodox thought, is treat-

ed quite rarely and which as an independent phenomenon hardly ever comes to the surface” (7). For this, there is indeed an objective reason, insofar as social ethics, as Kostjuk recalls, is a relatively new discipline, and the areas it encompasses (man and the state, man and power, man and the social system) were component parts of the system of religious (Christian) thought in the pre-secular epoch. What is more, “the categories of social ethics are derived not only from theological works, but also in general from the structures of traditional society that existed for centuries and the history of a people in its entirety, its makeup and way of life” (9).

The book, which comprises eight chapters, can be more or less divided into three parts. The first (chapters 1–2) is dedicated to “cultural-historical roots”: the peculiarities of the Eastern and Western Church traditions, including the Platonic and Aristotelian inheritance in Orthodox theology as well as the fundamental elements of Christian social thought in Byzantium, which subsequently became the essential source of Christian concepts and values for Russian Orthodoxy.

The second, essentially historical, part (chapters 3–6) covers the period from the acceptance of Christianity to the

twentieth century. Kostjuk essays a thorough, detailed investigation of the Muscovite period, on which he writes the following: “Thought associated with the Muscovite state formed the ideal type for Orthodox social thought, which was subsequently treated as a sort of unshakeable constellation of fundamentals true for all periods. While this set of concepts and ideas was only loosely outlined in a theological-theoretical key, it subsequently became mythologized and transformed into a legendary outline for all ecclesiastical thought” (144). In a particular section, Kostjuk, using works of Old Russian literature and the works of Russian historians, describes a “canon of values,” which includes such concepts as “orthodoxy” (*pravoverie*); “tsar”; “service; beneficence (*zhertvennost*); patience”; “honor and duty”; “popular assembly (*veche*) and liberty (*volia*);” “justice (*pravda*);” “mercy”; “order in the state”; “holy Rus”; “antiquity” (*starina*); and “awe or dread (*groza*)” (“the concept of thunder [the literal rendering of *groza* – the editors] was associated with the concept of authority and its power”) (144-64).

Kostjuk then considers “social-cultural ideas” in Russian Orthodoxy (chapter 4), that is, those ideas pertaining to jurisprudence, everyday life, the economy, and

education; he also considers the social-prophetic function of the church and, finally, the phenomenon of the social elite's turn away from the church.

The epoch of secularization in Russia begins with Peter the Great. Kostjuk investigates this three-century period by examining the output of Orthodox hierarchs and theologians, state ideologues, and religious philosophers and writers, by tracing "the development of the idea of social Christianity" in the nineteenth century, and by drawing out the social-ethical dimension of Russian Orthodoxy-oriented thought in the later period in various contexts (including the pre-revolutionary, Soviet, and emigrant contexts).

The third part of the study is dedicated to the post-Soviet period, which Kostjuk sees as the most productive in terms of the development of social ideas in the Church (336). In chapter 7, Kostjuk examines the positions of "the Church's intellectual leaders, whose views on questions of faith and society have come to serve as a point of departure, orienting many millions of the faithful" — specifically Metropolitan Ioann (Snychev), Archpriest Aleksandr Men, and Metropolitan (now Patriarch) Kirill (Gundiaev), who represent, respectively, right-conservative, liberal, and liberal-conservative tendencies.

The final chapter is dedicated principally to an analysis of the "Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church" from 2000, on the publication of which Kostjuk writes: "For the first time, the Church acknowledged its right to have its own views on the proper ordering of society and to communicate them to society itself. After this right had been absent for centuries, such a pronouncement sounded truly revolutionary" (359). Kostjuk analyzes the contents of the Concept, highlighting such topics as "Politics and Political Ethics," "Society and Social Ethics," and "Stance on Life and Bioethics," and he also draws attention to the absence in the document of many elements of Christian social teaching that he considers indispensable.

Attention is additionally paid to two other documents that Kostjuk considers in the context of the development of the social teachings of the Russian Orthodox Church: the "Code of Moral Principles and Rules for Economic Life" (2004) and "The Declaration on Human Rights and Dignity" (2006), which were passed by the World Russian People's Council. Unfortunately, Kostjuk analyzes and discusses the Church's position on the question of human rights exclusively on the basis of the Declaration — which is an exceedingly brief, "thesis-style" text

that does not even have the status of an official Church document. It is certainly an omission that the later document, “Basic Teaching on Human Dignity, Freedom, and Rights,” is ignored. Passed by the Council of Bishops in 2008, it is much richer in terms of its ideas and its argumentation, as it was precisely intended to develop the Russian Orthodox Church’s social teaching.

In the course of the book, Kostjuk delivers an overview of political and societal processes as well as brief *précis* of persons, thinkers, and historical actors relevant to the study, so as to analyze the fundamental tendencies of each stage of the Church’s development and to draw general conclusions. Such a strategy is fully justified given the current cultural situation. Recalling these numerous standard figures and events appears appropriate and necessary if one has in mind new generations of readers. In this regard, Kostjuk’s book has didactic significance and could serve as one kind of textbook on Russian history, the religious dimensions of which were either distorted or nearly ignored for so long.

Kostjuk purposefully does not reveal his “ideological” credo, but it is implicitly present in his assessments. One can say that it consists in three elements: scholarly soundness and impartiali-

ty in his handling of the material, historical realism (in the sense of evaluating ideas and conceptions on the basis of their relationship to real social processes), and personal interest — as an Orthodox Christian — in illuminating and elaborating upon the social-ethical position of the Russian Church and its relevance to contemporary processes (this interest from the point of view of an Orthodox Christian becomes fully explicit in the book’s conclusion).

To which general conclusions does Kostjuk come? “Orthodoxy strives, while residing and serving in the world, to turn away from it and not to become absorbed in it (...) The church wishes to be and to remain in the world without being ‘of the world,’ maintaining a stance of reproach (...) It can accept the world only by ‘churchifying’ it (...) Thus, the church sees its ethical mission not in ‘improving’ the laws of this world, but in transforming them eschatologically;” “the centuries did not lead to a working out of a this-worldly ethics: even today, every Orthodox believer is supposed to harmonize his actions not with the laws of this world, but with higher divine law.” “Church life has followed this model for centuries, and what follows from this — the ‘abandonment’ of the world, neglect of everyday life, the institutional weakness of the church and the clergy, and finally a hun-

ger for freedom on the part of the world and even the temptation to persecute the church — for the Church, these are external matters that are not in its power to change” (387).

As a result, a comprehensive social teaching is lacking, and in its place there is merely the possibility for the researcher, as Kostjuk himself says, “to construct a typology of views, which is precisely what was done in this work.” These views pertain to such concepts of differing magnitude as state, tsar, fatherland (*otchizna*), war, service, authority, mercy, justice (*pravda*), and, finally, labor and family. One easily notes that nearly all these archaic concepts derive from the canon of values of Muscovite Rus. Beyond the boundaries of the space described by these concepts “lies contemporary society — not the people, not the fatherland, but a complex aggregation of differing social relations, interactions, and groups. When faced with active lay thought, the church acknowledged it, in the form of conciliarism [*sobornost*].” Kostjuk believes that “conciliarism is practically the church’s sole and simultaneously most expressive social concept describing the state of modernity,” but it too remains undeveloped and unelaborated (392). According to Kostjuk, the same can be said

for the church’s Social Concept, whose drafters were so careful that they preserved nearly all the norms passed down by tradition and merely described but did not prescribe the state of affairs that Christian reason demands (393). In response, Kostjuk identifies five *social-ethical* topics and issues that either are not extant or that remain unformulated not only in tradition, but also at the foundation of social doctrine: the concept of love (“the Gospel’s tidings on love appear not to break through the boundaries of the social,” Kostjuk notes); education and enlightenment; money and property; workers and unions (the discussion of this latter topic revolves around rather broad considerations: “A dynamic, institutionally differentiated society with prospects for the future should stand at the center of Christian social thought. It is not enough simply to speak of an abstract ‘world’ that can be accepted or rejected” — 394); and finally the concept of secular modernity.

This last element is extremely important, especially today, when post-secular tendencies and processes can be observed both in Russia and internationally. This ignoring in the Church’s consciousness of the meaning and problematics of secularization — together with its simultaneous exposure (even though

secularization in Russia began not in 1917, but with Peter the Great [Sinelina 2004]) — is genetically connected with a certain theology of authority (a separate section of the book is dedicated to this): “The theology of authority that took shape in Muscovite Rus was the pathos-filled, culminating expression of the social ontology of the ‘sanctification’ of everyday life, which was concealed in Orthodox consciousness. If in the Byzantine tradition the historical division of authority prevented the seeds of ‘holy authority’ from taking root, in Muscovy’s evolution the tsar’s authority quickly became not simply the center of national political power, but also the foundation and bulwark of *the church’s presence in this world* — a world encircled by foreign, satanic forces” (126). “Owing to the positioning of political authority at the center of its mental universe, Russian Orthodoxy formulated a concept of autocracy that formed the essential specificity of Russian religious culture (...) In the Orthodox Church itself, the figure of the tsar is transformed into an archetype of sorts of heritage and tradition, from the influence, power, and charm of which the church has not been able to free itself to this very day” (149). At the same time, “in the new interpretation [autocracy in its imperial incarnation], Russian rul-

ers succeeded in combining the Protestant conception of the independence of earthly authority with the Orthodox claim to total authority” (224).

In this regard, from a historical perspective the following is key: “At the turn of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, changes occurred in the life of the church that were more significant than at any subsequent time, including times of persecution. The church, which for centuries had been the heart of the life of society, in the course of just a few generations ceased to be included in it. The Christian epoch in Russian society came to an end. The life of the church continued as an institution, but it entailed completely different social functions” — in particular “the social function of *guardianship*, of preservation of the other segments of society in a stable condition,” was entrusted to it by an elite that was, in essence, already secular (200).

As a result, in the nineteenth century, there arose that specific phenomenon of “the official Church,” which beginning in that era, existed over the course of the two following centuries, even in the Soviet period. A constituent element of this arrangement was the careful reproduction from a distance of state political doctrine, distinguished by the coloration of theological language, accompanied by the precise surveying of

both external secular (party) social teachings and internal Christian ideological currents" (236). Social topics were taboo for both church hierarchs and academic theologians, among whom "that same withdrawal into traditional virtue ethics could be observed" (234). "The social was perceived as an external milieu, encircling but by no means entering into the system of Christian life" (247). Connected with this is another aspect noted by Kostjuk (while analyzing the position of the noted hierarch and theologian Archbishop Sergius (Stragorodsky), the future patriarch of the Soviet era) — a skeptical attitude toward law, which led not only to the belittlement of law's significance in comparison with morality, but also to the devaluing of attempts to transform law into morality" (249).

On the other hand, "at the same time that an adequate language for the analysis of contemporary social processes could not be found in academic theology, this language developed within the framework of religious philosophy." However, the cost of this was the distancing of the Church from these philosophers, since they "only appealed to a limited extent to the authority of the Church, and did so at their own risk" (296). The official Church "generally has not viewed religious philosophy, for

all the richness of its ideas and its flights of theoretical sophistication, as an authentic source of Orthodox thought" (270). Kostjuk notes that "the primary difficulty for theologians and philosophers in the development of social ideas in Orthodoxy was the absence of a basis for philosophizing, a role fulfilled in Catholicism by natural law" (307).

Kostjuk provides a nearly exhaustive survey of the social dimension of the views of the most well-known secular intellectuals, dividing them into "Slavophiles," "conservatives," *littérateurs*, liberal religious philosophers, and twentieth-century emigrants. Together with the survey of church authors and theologians as well as various ideological currents, including even official positions from the Soviet era (and those of several *Zerkalo* members and dissidents), this creates an expansive picture of religious social-ethical ideas and concepts in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (let it be noted that the book's bibliography encompasses 45 pages of Russian and foreign works).

However, the book's chief merit, in my view, consists not so much in the scope of its material (which could always be enlarged or always be considered inadequate) as in Kostjuk's ability empathetically to penetrate into the internal logic of religious

consciousness — of a concrete thinker, an ideological tendency, or an entire era. We are dealing, namely, with *logical constructions*, which can be elucidated and described and then assessed thanks to, on the one hand, Kostjuk's non-ideological approach to research and, on the other, a certain logical partiality, that is, the position of an invested Christian intellectual. This is a fruitful (one could say "felicitous") approach that has been successfully implemented, for instance, by Jaroslav Pelikan in his monumental *Christian Tradition*. It is precisely this approach that justifies Kostjuk's brief, occasionally aphoristic, but pithy characterizations (which is also partially true of Florovsky's aforementioned work).

His uncompromising assessments notwithstanding, Kostjuk's position is *critical* in the scholarly, not the polemical-popular, sense. Konstantin Kostjuk's study should thus be considered an essential contribution not only to understanding of religious-social processes in the Russian past and present, but also, let us hope, in the development and refinement of the Russian Orthodox Church's social teaching.

Speaking of the deficits of the publication under consideration, one would rather draw attention not so much to several mistakes and inaccuracies of a factual na-

ture¹ as to the all too negligent approach of the publisher, which displayed little concern not only for stylistic editing, necessary in places, but also simply for quality proofreading. At the same time, these sad manifestations of the general decline in Russian publishing culture notwithstanding, one must thank all those who ensured that this remarkable book, long-awaited by interested readers, would see the light of day.

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References

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1. For instance, Kostjuk confuses the Orthodox seminary in Crestwood, which is part of the Orthodox Church in America, and the Seminary of the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad in Jordanville; additionally, N. Afanas'ev was not a professor at an American seminary (330).