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Religion, Politics, and Beyond

The Pussy Riot Case

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Abstract

The recent case of the Russian punk group *Pussy Riot*, their performance in Moscow Cathedral and the subsequent legal actions against them, have highlighted many important issues that Russian society faces today. However, this case can also be the basis for a more general analysis of the relations of religion and politics and the political dimension of Orthodox Christianity.

Examining the relationship between religion and politics can point to two important elements that both religion and politics, in their institutional manifestations, share: 1) the "will to power," and 2) the communitarian dimension of human existence. In order to fully understand the paradoxical position of Christianity in respect to politics and state, it is necessary to differentiate between "eschatological" and "historical" Christianity.

An Essay

I want to begin my essay on religion and politics referring to a very recent event. It is a political *provocation* by a previously marginal and mostly unknown punk group, *Pussy Riot*. The provocation took place earlier this year (2012), triggering the process against its members. It is my hope that an analysis of this important case will lead to a deeper insight into the relations between religion and politics.

The reason for the trial against *Pussy Riot* was its performance in the Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Savior, staged on February 21, 2012. The performance was a punk "prayer" to

the Mother of God to "*chase Putin out*." The space right in front of the iconostasis served as a ready-made stage for this performance. The response of the authorities was predictably harsh. The three members of the band, Yekaterina Samutsevich, Maria Alyokhina, and Nadezhda Tolokonnikova, were arrested and accused of "hooliganism motivated by religious hatred."

I will focus on their closing statements, which were delivered on August 8, 2012, before the court sentenced each of them to two years in prison on August 17, 2012.[1] In these intellectually refined statements, they explain the main intentions of their performance, putting it in the broader context of Russian society and Orthodox Christianity.

The Closing Statements

At the very beginning of her statement, Yekaterina Samutsevich explains the reasons for choosing the Cathedral of Christ the Savior for their performance. She perceives the cathedral as an important symbol of political power in Russia since the current patriarch Kyrill took office. This claim is a platform upon which she develops her brief but very insightful analysis of "Orthodox aesthetics" that she contends are used for political purposes by the Kremlin's current administration. The question she starts with is, "Why did Putin feel the need to exploit the Orthodox religion and its aesthetic?" and continues:

> After all, he could have employed his own, far more secular tools of power – for example, the state-controlled corporations, or his menacing police system, or his obedient judicial system. It may be that the harsh, failed policies of Putin's government, the incident with the submarine Kursk, the bombings of civilians in broad daylight, and other unpleasant moments in his political career forced him to ponder the fact that it was high time to resign; that otherwise, the citizens of Russia would help him do this. Apparently, it was then that he felt the need for more persuasive, transcendent guarantees of his long tenure at the pinnacle of power. It was then that it became necessary to make use of the aesthetic of the Orthodox religion, which is historically associated with the heyday of Imperial Russia, where power came not from earthly manifestations such as democratic elections and civil society, but from God Himself.

It is interesting that Yekaterina employs aesthetical vocabulary in the context of politics, power, and religion. She does not point primarily to the institution of the church or the spectrum of popular beliefs as the way the current administration makes use of Orthodox Christianity, but rather to the "aesthetics of the Orthodox religion" that had been absent from the public sphere during communist times. According to Yekaterina, this space, which was left by the expulsion of the church and Christianity since the Bolsheviks, could be and, in fact, is being used for Putin's political aims:

> Here, apparently, the authorities took advantage of a certain deficit of the Orthodox aesthetic in Soviet times, when the Orthodox religion had an aura of lost history, of something that had been crushed and damaged by the

[1] The court released Yekaterina Samutsevich in October 2012.

> Soviet totalitarian regime, and was thus an opposition culture. The authorities decided to appropriate this historical effect of loss and present a new political project to restore Russia's lost spiritual values, a project that has little to do with a genuine concern for the preservation of Russian Orthodoxy's history and culture. It was also fairly logical that the Russian Orthodox Church, given its long mystical ties to power, emerged as the project's principal exponent in the media. It was decided that, unlike in the Soviet era, when the church opposed, above all, the brutality of the authorities toward history itself, the Russian Orthodox Church should now confront all pernicious manifestations of contemporary mass culture with its concept of diversity and tolerance. Implementing this thoroughly interesting political project has required considerable quantities of professional lighting and video equipment, air time on national television for hours-long live broadcasts, and numerous background shoots for morally and ethically edifying news stories, where the Patriarch's well-constructed speeches would in fact be presented, thus helping the faithful make the correct political choice during a difficult time for Putin preceding the election. Moreover, the filming must be continuous; the necessary images must be burned into the memory and constantly updated; they must create the impression of something natural, constant, and compulsory.

From this passage we learn how "religious aesthetics" serves political purposes. It is both the *aesthetical* properties of certain religious expressions (Yekaterina points to their "aura" and "mysticism," but one could also add other explicit aesthetical aspects, such as liturgical rituals, icons, incense, and so forth) and the *aesthetical* exploitation of some aspects of religious practices through mass-media that make "religious aesthetics" useful for wider social and political goals. However, it seems that, according to Yekaterina, it is not only that the political establishment makes use of the church, but that the very institution of the church (personified here in the figure of the Patriarch) willingly accepts its new role within the changed social context. It seems that the church, as an institution, perceives itself as a natural ally of the current regime. Supreme political authorities have been interpreted as symbols, maybe even the very embodiment of Russia, Russian history, and Russian people, which is a view deeply rooted in the imperial Russian tradition. This, in return, gives the church a prominent social position and increases its influence. Thus, the state-church deal is mutually beneficial. The state and its authorities obtain more than they could possibly obtain from other allies; they obtain "blessings," "aura" of the tradition and "glorious past" (though it has never actually been that glorious for the common people), and even metaphysical foundations.

Toward the end of her exposé, Yekaterina addresses the reasons why *Pussy Riot*'s action, which did not involve any sort of violence, provoked such a brutal response. This, in her view, also has to do with aesthetics:

> Our sudden musical appearance in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior with the song 'Mother of God, Drive Putin Out' violated the integrity of the media image that the authorities had spent such a long time generating and maintaining, and revealed its falsity. In our performance we dared, without

> the Patriarch's blessing, to unite the visual imagery of Orthodox culture with that of protest culture, thus suggesting that Orthodox culture belongs not only to the Russian Orthodox Church, the Patriarch, and Putin, but that it could also ally itself with civic rebellion and the spirit of protest in Russia.
>
> Perhaps the unpleasant, far-reaching effect of our media intrusion into the cathedral was a surprise to the authorities themselves. At first, they tried to present our performance as a prank pulled by heartless, militant atheists. This was a serious blunder on their part, because by then we were already known as an anti-Putin feminist punk band that carried out its media assaults on the country's major political symbols.
>
> In the end, considering all the irreversible political and symbolic losses caused by our innocent creativity, the authorities decided to protect the public from us and our nonconformist thinking. This ended our complicated punk adventure in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior.

The key point here is the fact that *Pussy Riot* "dared . . . to unite the visual imagery of Orthodox culture with that of protest culture, thus suggesting that Orthodox culture belongs not only to the Russian Orthodox Church, the Patriarch, and Putin, but that it could also ally itself with civic rebellion and the spirit of protest." This is, in many respects, a "subversive" perspective compared to the dominant, traditionalistic view of the role and place of the Church within Russian society. The common (mis)interpretation of church-society-state relations makes the church a political and national institution, closely tied to the ethnicity, national history, tradition, and, not least, the ruler (e.g., emperor). This interpretation is grounded in a long history of church-state relations, which goes back to the fourth century and the attempts of Roman emperors to embrace the church and the faith, making it an important political factor.[2] The history of Byzantine and, later, Russian empires managed to construct a narrative in which the church and the state (later also the entire ethnical/national community) grow together, reflecting, in the ideal case, the state of "symphony" between the "heavenly" (church) and the "earthly" (state) spheres. Rather than any justifiable Orthodox theological position, this concept primarily reflects the power quest on both sides. In other words, we do not deal here with two distinct spheres, but rather with various power structures that operate within one and the same sphere; the target on both sides is to gain social, financial and political power. In such a narrative, there is no clear distinction between mystical domains and political actions, between national interests and (pseudo) Christian faith. It is natural that in such an atmosphere any call for different views, or critiques of the monopoly that official church and state structures claim, in both religious and political domains, provoke violent responses. This leads to a paradoxical situation in which Christianity, the faith of freedom, love, personal consciousness and responsibility, is used to justify political oppression and in which a certain class has control of the religious domain and of religious truths and their practical manifestations.

[2] More on the relations between Orthodox Church and state, especially in respect to the Byzantine times, see McGuckin.

To be fair, one has to admit that there is nothing uniquely "Christian" or "Orthodox" in these developments. It is the nature of political institutions (and religious institutions are often among them) to exercise power and spread their influence as much as possible. Many different ideological narratives (religious, political, even scientific ones) can be employed to achieve these goals. We find the same story, although in very different cultural and social contexts, in Western Christianity and in the Muslim world, not to mention theocracies of earlier times. The reason why these tendencies are less visible and less dangerous in more democratic societies is the long historical struggle to build democratic institutions and procedures that protect individual and group freedoms and rights by placing state authorities under public control. However, even then we witness the difficult process of separating politically useful religious narratives from the sphere of public policy.[3]

Orthodoxy, its relation to civic initiatives, rebellion, protests and personal responsibility, is the topic with which Yekaterina closes her statement. It becomes the focus of Maria Alyokhina's speech. She comments on the distribution of power in contemporary Russia, as the goal of *Pussy Riot*'s intervention:

> And it is interesting that our situation was depersonalized from the start. This is because when we talk about Putin, we have in mind first and foremost not Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin but Putin the system that he himself created – the power vertical, where all control is carried out effectively by one person. And that power vertical is uninterested, completely uninterested, in the opinion of the masses. And what worries me most of all is that the opinion of the younger generations is not taken into consideration. We believe that the ineffectiveness of this administration is evident in practically everything.

Maria sees the roots of these complex social and political problems in the system of education. It is the very system that ignores and, to a significant extent, abandons individual approach and individual responsibilities:

> Our schooling, which is where the personality begins to form in a social context, effectively ignores any particularities of the individual. There is no "individual approach," no study of culture, of philosophy, of basic knowledge about civic society. Officially, these subjects do exist, but they are still taught according to the Soviet model. And as a result, we see the marginalization of contemporary art in the public consciousness, a lack of motivation for philosophical thought, and gender stereotyping. The concept of the human being as a citizen gets swept away into a distant corner.[4]

[3] The case of United States is particularly telling in this respect. For more on how religious fundamentalism has been articulated and adopted in public policy, see Chomsky.

[4] This is where Slavoj Žižek is, in my view, mistaken when he interprets their masks as a sign of "de-individualization": "This is why they wear *balaclavas*: masks of de-individualization, of liberating anonymity. The message of their balaclavas is that it doesn't matter which of them got arrested – they're not individuals, they're an Idea. And this is why they are such a threat: it is easy to imprison individuals, but try to imprison an Idea!" I think that it is precisely this personal consciousness that Maria affirms; the masks are there to expose the other side's mask, that of the state authorities and the entire society which wears hypocritical masks, hiding from their personal responsibilities.

For Maria, education is directly connected to the problem of freedom. Children are instructed to give up their free initiatives and individual responsibilities: "beginning in childhood, we forget our freedom." Maria's analysis is certainly right in pointing to the correlation between the level of individual freedoms and the magnitude of civic initiatives (at least in the societies with strong state apparatus). Undermining freedom is directly related to obedience as the desired mode of behavior, which results in the fear and lack of civic initiatives. Moreover, the very notion of "citizen" (as compared to the amorphous "people" or "nation") requires affirmation of individual freedom and consciousness:

> Why should they care if the wife of our Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev wants to build an official residence there and destroy the only juniper preserve in Russia? . . . This is yet another confirmation that people in our country have lost the sense that this country belongs to us, its citizens. They no longer have a sense of themselves as citizens. They have a sense of themselves simply as the automated masses. They don't feel that the forest belongs to them, even the forest located right next to their houses. I doubt they even feel a sense of ownership over their own houses. Because if someone were to drive up to their porch with a bulldozer and tell them that they need to evacuate, that, 'Excuse us, we're going raze your house to make room for a bureaucrat's residence,' these people would obediently collect their belongings, collect their bags, and go out on the street. And then stay there precisely until the regime tells them what they should do next. They are completely shapeless, it is very sad. Having spent almost half a year in jail, I have come to understand that prison is just Russia in miniature. . . There is absolutely no horizontal delegation of duties, which would make everyone's lives noticeably easier. And there is a lack of individual initiative.

In her view, this is what makes the entire society one giant jail that affirms authoritarian modes of behavior: "In jail and all over the country, people don't know where to turn with this or that question. That's why they turn to the boss of the jail. And outside the prison, correspondingly, they go to Putin, the top boss."

A reference to "jail" has a special significance in this context. Jail is not only the physical place where the sword of justice sends those who violated the (legitimate) law. It is also a metaphor for the lack of freedom in individual and public life. In totalitarian societies and in societies without functioning democracy (although they might have many democratic institutions and procedures), jail is also a place for those who have "problematic" opinions, attitudes, and behavior. At the same time, jail has been the means for making both true and false heroes and dissidents. Maria thus aptly quotes Vladimir Bykovsky and his statement: "How unfortunate is the country where simple honesty is understood, in the best case, as heroism. And in the worst case as a mental disorder." "Mental disorder," just as committing fabricated "crimes," has been an effective means of control and indoctrination. The history of this kind of political pressure against dissidents and independent intellectuals begins with the persecution of Old Testament prophets, continues with the persecution of Socrates and Jesus, and includes modern intellectuals and dissidents such as Mahatma Gandhi, Julian Assange, and many others unknown to the broader audience.

This analysis of the social and political situation in Russia leads Maria to an analysis of Christian motives that lie behind their action. Contrary to what the media and official church and state representatives wanted to portray, Maria depicts the *Pussy Riot* action as rooted in Christianity and, in particular, Orthodoxy. She looks for religious foundations of human freedom:

> I would like to note that this method of personal development clearly impedes the awakening of both inner and religious freedoms, unfortunately, on a mass scale. The consequence of the process I have just described is ontological humility, existential humility, socialization. To me, this transition, or rupture, is noteworthy in that, if approached from the point of view of Christian culture, we see that meanings and symbols are being replaced by those that are diametrically opposed to them. Thus one of the most important Christian concepts, Humility, is now commonly understood not as a path towards the perception, fortification, and ultimate liberation of Man, but on the contrary as an instrument for his enslavement. To quote [Russian philosopher] Nikolai Berdyaev, one could say that 'the ontology of humility is the ontology of the slaves of God, and not the sons of God.' When I was involved with organizing the ecological movement, I became fundamentally convinced of the priority of inner freedom as the foundation for taking action. As well as the importance, the direct importance, of taking action as such.

She even connects their motives with the Gospel: "Our motivation is . . . best expressed in the Gospels: 'For everyone who asks receives; the one who seeks finds; and to the one who knocks, the door will be opened' [Matthew 7: 8]. I – all of us – sincerely believe that for us the door will be opened." In her conclusion, Maria stresses the character of their action and the positions they take in connection to Christianity more strongly than in any of their previous claims:

> I believe that we are being accused by people without memory. Many of them have said, "He is possessed by a demon and insane. Why do you listen to Him?' These words belong to the Jews who accused Jesus Christ of blasphemy. They said, 'We are . . . stoning you . . . for blasphemy" [John 10: 33]. Interestingly enough, it is precisely this verse that the Russian Orthodox Church uses to express its opinion about blasphemy. This view is certified on paper, it's attached to our criminal file. Expressing this opinion, the Russian Orthodox Church refers to the Gospels as static religious truth. The Gospels are no longer understood as revelation, which they have been from the very beginning, but rather as a monolithic chunk that can be disassembled into quotations to be shoved in wherever necessary – in any of its documents, for any of their purposes. The Russian Orthodox Church did not even bother to look up the context in which 'blasphemy' is mentioned here – that in this case, the word applies to Jesus Christ himself. I think that religious truth should not be static, that it is essential to understand the instances and paths of spiritual development, the trials of a human being, his duplicity, his splintering.

It is Nadezhda Tolokonnikova's closing statement that most strongly stresses Christianity and Orthodoxy. She even characterizes their "punk" action as a form of *yurodstvo*, which has deep roots in the Christian tradition, especially in Russia:

> Pussy Riot's performances can either be called dissident art or political action that engages art forms. Either way, our performances are a kind of civic activity amidst the repressions of a corporate political system that directs its power against basic human rights and civil and political liberties. The young people who have been flayed by the systematic eradication of freedoms perpetrated through the aughts have now risen against the state. We were searching for real sincerity and simplicity, and we found these qualities in the *yurodstvo* [the holy foolishness] of punk. . . Passion, total honesty, and naïveté are superior to the hypocrisy, mendacity, and false modesty that are used to disguise crime. The so-called leading figures of our state stand in the Cathedral with righteous faces on, but, in their cunning, their sin is greater than our own.

She also refers to information they received about the support they have among many of the faithful Orthodox Christians, who pray for them:

> This fact alone demonstrates that there is no single, unified group of Orthodox believers, as the prosecutor would like to prove. This unified group does not exist. Today, more and more believers have come to the defense of Pussy Riot. They don't think that what we did warrants a five-month term in a pretrial detention center, let alone three years in prison, as the prosecutor has called for. Every day, more people understand that if the system is attacking three young women who performed in the Cathedral of Christ the Savior for thirty seconds with such vehemence, it only means that this system fears the truth, sincerity, and straightforwardness we represent. We have never used cunning during these proceedings. Meanwhile, our opponents are too often cunning, and people sense this. Indeed, the truth has an ontological, existential superiority over deception, and this is described in the Bible, particularly the Old Testament.

Nadezhda (which translates as *Hope*) continues in an almost prophetic manner, claiming that "the paths of truth always triumph over the paths of cunning, guile, and deception." Truth, in her view, is something both ontological and something that has to do with knowledge and (rational) understanding:

> I don't want to label anyone. It seems to me that there are no winners, losers, victims, or defendants here. We all simply need to reach each other, connect, and establish a dialogue in order to seek out the truth together. Together, we can seek wisdom and be philosophers, instead of stigmatizing people and labeling them. That is the last thing a person should do. Christ condemned it. With this trial, the system is abusing us. Who would have thought that man and the state he rules could, again and again, perpetrate absolutely unmotivated evil? . . . I believe that every person should strive for this, and not only those who have studied in some philosophy department. A formal

> education means nothing, although prosecution attorney Pavlova constantly attempts to reproach us for our lack of education. We believe the most important thing is to strive, to strive towards knowledge and understanding. This is what a person can achieve independently, outside the walls of an educational institution. Regalia and scholarly degrees mean nothing. A person can possess a great deal of knowledge, but not be a human being. Pythagoras said extensive knowledge does not breed wisdom.

Nadezhda puts their position *vis-à-vis* the regime in relation to political dissidents and innocent martyrs from the Christian past, those who were also persecuted by religious and state authorities:

> Do you remember why young Dostoyevsky was sentenced to death? His entire guilt lay in the fact that he was fascinated by socialist theories, and during meetings of freethinkers and friends – which met on Fridays in the apartment of [Mikhail] Petrashevsky – he discussed the writings of Fourier and George Sand. On one of the last Fridays, he read Belinsky's letter to Gogol aloud, a letter that was filled, according to the court that tried Dostoevsky (listen!) "with impudent statements against the Orthodox Church and the State government." After all the preparations for execution and "ten agonizing, infinitely terrifying minutes awaiting death" (Dostoyevsky), it was announced that the sentence was changed to four years of hard labor in Siberia followed by military service. Socrates was accused of corrupting the youth with his philosophical discussions and refusing to accept the Athenian gods. . . Have you forgotten under what circumstances Stephen, the disciple of the Apostles, concluded his earthly life? "Then they secretly induced men to say, "We have heard him speak blasphemous words against Moses and against God." And they stirred up the people, the elders and the scribes, and they came up to him and dragged him away and brought him before the Council. They put forward false witnesses who said, "This man incessantly speaks against this holy place and the Law" [Acts 6:11-13]. He was found guilty and stoned to death. I also hope that you all remember well how the Jews answered Christ: "It is not for good works that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy" [John 10:33]. And finally we would do well to keep in mind the following characterization of Christ: "He is demon-possessed and raving mad" [John 10:20].

The Response of Intellectuals

Many "regime intellectuals" in Russia have, predictably, attacked *Pussy Riot* and their action as "stupidity," "hooliganism," "blasphemy," and even "conspiracy" against Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church. Thus Sergei Markov explains: "Pussy Riot's act inside the Cathedral of Christ the Savior is not the stupidity of young girls, but part of the global conspiracy against Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church. According to this version [of events], Putin isn't obliged to just punish three idiots in a fatherly way, but also protect

Russia from this conspiracy with all possible severity" (Elder).[5] This is typical of (semi)totalitarian societies; victims are accused of violence and sins against the state and "national interest." Accusations of "conspiracies" of various sorts are a typical way to denounce the enemy and, if possible, destroy their credibility. The fact that *Pussy Riot* members explicitly stated, just a day after the performance, that they "respect religion in general and the Orthodox faith in particular," and that they "are especially infuriated when Christian philosophy, which is full of light, is used in such a dirty fashion," which makes them "sick to see such beautiful ideas forced to their knees," seems to have no relevance nor resonance. Obedience to the master(s) is obviously the priority over the moral integrity and intellectual credibility, not to mention Christian consciousness.

Politics as Religion – Religion as Politics

Pussy Riot's action was a successful provocation that highlighted many current issues within Russian society. However, their action can also be the basis for a more general analysis of religion-politics relations and of the political dimension of Orthodox Christianity. The case makes us think of how deeply religious institutions and state authorities can be intertwined. We are also compelled to ask, from the point of view of Orthodox theology, if the dominant and traditional understanding of the relations between the state, society, and Orthodoxy is correct.

To think of religion and politics is to face a paradox. On the one hand, it might seem that religion and politics do not have much, if anything, in common. Many would argue that politics and religion are fundamentally different and, in many aspects, even opposite spheres of human endeavor; they belong to different mindsets that should not be confused under any circumstances. Following this argument, religion is related to metaphysical and sacred things, questions about afterlife, religious rituals and so on. The political sphere refers primarily to power, legal (or illegal) violence, economy, administration, and other "earthly" and usually not particularly pleasant things.

On the other hand, history demonstrates the frequent interrelationship between religion and politics, both in the Christian and non-Christian world. Even today across the planet we witness the rise of political ideologies that seek religious justification. We also notice the rise of religious fundamentalism, which is nothing but a battle for political goals with the help of formally religious ideals, teachings and practices. These processes, to make the whole image even more puzzling, take place in both developing and developed industrial countries in an

[5] Another example is Aleksandar Dugin's analysis of *Pussy Riot*'s action in an interview for the media house Russia.ru. He perceives it as an attack on the "Byzantine model of government," which also became the traditional model of government in Russia. This model, in his view, affirms an alliance between "spiritual" and secular powers. Since this is the traditional "Orthodox" and "organic" model of government, any attack on this model is an attack on Russia, Russian tradition and Orthodoxy. However, one must admit that the role of intellectuals in supporting the dominant ideology and political order crosses the boundaries of post-communist countries. One can argue that the role of "official intellectuals" is, in fact, basically the same everywhere. In contrast to dissident intellectuals and critical thinkers, "official intellectuals" serve to provide a conceptual framework to the dominant order of power, supporting that way the ruling elites. They promptly criticize atrocities and violations of human rights somewhere else while forgetting, however, to raise their voice against attacks on basic human and civil rights in their own countries. The apparent political persecution of Julian Assange for his actions in the domains of freedom of information and democracy is telling in this respect.

age during which we have started to think that the time of religion and its strong social and political influence is past.

How can this relation be articulated from a Christian and, specifically, Orthodox Christian point of view?

To properly clarify the relation between politics and Christianity it seems necessary to make a clear distinction between what Nikolai Berdyaev calls "eschatological" and "historical" Christianity.[6] The former is charismatic, prophetic, and radical in its *personalism* and in the search for human freedom and creativity. The latter belongs to "this world" and its history, to the state of necessity in which it is compelled to make compromises with the "world." The first draws its strength from eschatological expectations, the second from the feeling of security within "this world" and its powers.

This distinction helps us understand that we can draw two very different, even opposite, Christian approaches to politics. It is, thus, not a surprise that "historical" Christianity has suffered from the same deviations that we find in the "world" within particular historical, social, and political contexts. Historical and institutional Christianity has many similarities with political institutions. They share the same *will to power*, a concept I use to describe a human readiness to dominate other human beings in a structured and institutionalized way. Political agents and authorities demonstrate this will to power when they exercise unjustifiable domination and, if necessary, repress people in a particular society with instruments they possess. The will to power makes religious institutions act quite similarly to other social and political institutions. Church and state are thus natural allies when their interests in pursuing power are complementary, and natural opponents when their intentions to spread power and influence conflict.

There is, however, another, more complex similarity between religion and politics. It is the *communitarian* dimension of human existence that they both affirm and exploit. The communal dimension of human beings is manifested at various levels – family, professional groups, ethnicities, nations, religions, and so forth. However, from an Orthodox Christian perspective, particular collectives and identities that belong to the social and political sphere are merely symbols of a much deeper, *ontological* aspect of human existence. Ontologically speaking, human beings are primarily beings of communion; they do not exist as individuals that later become members of a certain collective. The communal dimension of human existence is a constitutive aspect of each person. In other words, there is no particular human existence outside the communion of love. There is no "I" without "you" and "them." *Being in communion*, to paraphrase the title of a famous book by John Zizioulas, is what constitutes a particular and unique identity of each human being.

I will not develop this complex and interesting topic further, which is related to basic Christian dogmatic presuppositions. What I want to point out is simply that the communitarian dimension of human existence is often misused for political and ideological

[6] "My interpretation of Christianity is eschatological and I place it in antithesis to historical Christianity" (Berdyaev: 243).

purposes. The most remarkable cases of pseudo-metaphysical Christian interpretations of the communitarian dimension are found in attempts to supply national or ethnic collectives with an aura of "sacredness." Such Christianity-based nationalisms appear to be successful ideologies because people find in them surrogates for the communion of persons as a metaphysical reality based on freedom. The fascination with particular ideologies, social collectives, and political narratives poses a huge threat to human freedom and authentic human relations. Instead of being what they are supposed to be – practical and functional categories – social and political collectives paradoxically become transformed into metaphysical categories. This happens when metaphysical or mystical foundations are used to support politically-utilitarian constructs such as states or nations. This is precisely what is at stake in the *Pussy Riot* case. Their action provoked a brutal response precisely because they targeted this pseudo-ecclesial dimension of the current Russian state-church policy.

After the French Revolution, many believed that the decline of the close relationship between state and church, politics and religion, was irreversible. Secularization and secular states were thought of as vital aspects of modernity and "western progress." However, the separation between state and church, and between politics and religion, has not brought an end to close state-church relations, although the meaning of this relation has changed. I do not refer here only to special relations between states and churches and religious communities specific to each European country, which range from complete separation to an official state church. What I have in mind is that particular political constructs, such as states and nations, often occupy the space of religion in its public, political manifestation. In this case, political agents are given metaphysical and quasi-sacred foundations (e.g., Christian monarchies during medieval Europe). This can be seen when states, nations, political ideologies, or political leaders are elevated to the level of secular deities and supplemented with a quasi-religious "aura." Even formally democratic and secular systems can be faced with almost mystical concepts of "national interests," "our way of life," "defense," and so forth, that allow and justify even the most terrifying actions by such states and their armed forces. Modern states often behave as cruel gods that require human sacrifices, whether domestic or foreign, to be satisfied in order to bring their citizens "peace" and "prosperity."

Giving a "sacred" aura to society and the political sphere, whether these intentions come from political authorities or religious institutions, is a certain way to secularize the religious sphere and make the Church just another organization of "this world." On the contrary, to preserve the sacred character of religion it seems necessary to secularize society and its institutions (e.g., states), to make them practical and "user-friendly" for its members and the global community.

An Eschatological Christian Perspective

The problem with each attempt to construct an Orthodox Christian political theology is the *eschatological* character of the Christian faith. Christians see in the *eschaton* and the Kingdom of God the only "real" reality, the only *perfect* community and order, which is based on love rather than on external authorities and power. From a Christian perspective, there will be no ideal social or political system in the course of human history; all historical

social and political systems are imperfect and sometimes even contrary to a Christian understanding of what and who the human being is.[7]

However, in the mean time, until the *eschaton*, Orthodox Christians are called to make their society and inter-human relations as human as possible. I believe that it is important to strengthen civil society with various local "bottom-up" initiatives, and to support real democratic capacities, procedures, the rule of law, and other institutions that do not have metaphysical significance *per se* but certainly make life more civilized and more humane. Solutions to important social and political problems that even the most advanced societies face today do not necessarily require religion, but they certainly require solidarity and responsibility. Orthodox Christians should seek to do good things, not because it is required by any ethical or social norms and standards, but because it is a manifestation of their *mode of existence* and their testimony to the coming Kingdom of God.

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[7] This is the reason why some kind of "anarchism" is, in my view, the only authentic and consequential Christian position *vis-à-vis* society and politics. The "Orthodox Christian anarchism" is thus based on skepticism toward all power structures (such as states) that exercise domination, exploitation and violence. For more on Orthodox Christianity, democracy, and anarchism, see Džalto.

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