

Article

The Liturgy of Life: Alexander Schmemmann

Michael Plekon

Sociology/Anthropology, Religion and Culture, Baruch College of the City University of New York, Box 04-260, 55 Lexington Avenue, New York, NY 10010, USA; mjplekon@aol.com; Tel.: +1-845-380-6343

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Abstract: The émigré Russian priest and theologian Alexander Schmemmann (1921–1983) spent most of his career as a faculty member and dean of St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Seminary in Crestwood, New York, not far from New York City. For over 30 years, in lectures, teaching and numerous publications, he presented the distinctive vision of the Eastern Church, mostly unknown to Western Christians, in which the church’s liturgy was the primary source not only of its theology but of all other aspects of its life. I offer an overview of his work, with analysis and criticism and an assessment of his continuing significance.

Keywords: Alexander Schmemmann; Eastern Orthodox Christianity; theology; liturgy

... the true sense of worship is to be found not in the symbolic, but in the real fulfillment of the Church: the new life, given in Christ, and that this eternal transformation of the Church into the Body of Christ, her ascension, in Christ and with Christ into the eschatological fullness of the Kingdom, is the very source of all Christian action in the world, the possibility to “do as he does” ... not a system of astounding symbols, but the possibility to introduce into the world that consuming and transfiguring fire for which the Lord pined—and wished that it were already kindled” ... [1]

1. Transcending Borders

Now, over 30 years after his death, is it still the case that Alexander Schmemmann is listened to as a significant voice for Orthodox Christianity? As with most writers in the Eastern Church, he always had his critics, but during his lifetime he was largely respected, even revered for his powerful, relevant thinking on the connection of faith and action, liturgy and life. While a figure such as Archbishop Iakovos of the Greek Archdiocese is perhaps the best known Orthodox cleric for his accompanying Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and others on the Selma march and his most public presence, Schmemmann’s influence has been pervasive and wide. That the majority of Orthodox churches in North America use English as the language of worship, that most Orthodox Christians receive communion frequently, many every Sunday, that the services of Lent and Holy Week are fully celebrated and well attended, even that baptism has been restored to a communal/parish celebration in many places, and faith is linked to everyday life—all of these and more were what Schmemmann wrote and spoke about during his long career as dean of St. Vladimir’s Seminary in Crestwood, New York. He lectured all across the country, and his work was ecumenical—he lectured at Catholic and Protestant seminaries and churches.

In addition to the significant works he published in his lifetime, we now have a in various languages and versions selections his journals. A massive volume of his Russian language talks for Radio Liberty, broadcast to Eastern Europe over decades, has appeared in Russia along with translations of his many talks [2,3]. While it is impossible to ignore his liturgical theological contributions, the focus here is on his vision of faith integrated into everyday life.

Born in Tallin, Estonia, in 1921, his family emigrated to Paris, where he attended both a Russian *gimnaziya* and French *lycee*, eventually the University of Paris and St. Sergius Theological Institute. Among his teachers and colleagues at St. Sergius were Nicholas Afansiev, Kyprian Kern, Anton Kartashev, Basil Zenkovsky and, perhaps the strongest influence on him, the great theologian Sergius Bulgakov. The influence of Bulgakov is evident even in journal entries that are critical as well as in an article that Schmemmann later wrote about him and in a remark made toward the end of his own life [2,4]. When asked which of all the intellectuals had the most impact on him, the instantaneous reply was Bulgakov. Married in 1943, he was ordained priest in 1946 and began teaching at St. Sergius. In post-WWII Paris he was exposed to and shaped by the *ressourcement*, the “return-to-the-sources”, namely the scriptures, liturgy and writings of early church teachers. Kern and Afanasiev would later establish the liturgical week of study and prayer at St. Sergius, still being held over 60 years later.

Thus, in his earliest publications as well as in his doctoral thesis, one can read the names of not only the emigre scholars who shaped his thinking but of many from the Western churches associated with the “return-to-the-sources”: Baumstark, Congar, Brilioth, Botte, Bouyer, Daniélou, Dalmais, Cullman, Rousseau and Dix, among others [4,5]. While devoted to Russian literature and culture, Schmemmann resisted complete identification with things Russian. There was a sense of frustration with an essentially ethnic definition of Orthodoxy that eventually led him, as well as John Meyendorff and others, to America. Schmemmann came with his family in 1951 and began what would be a long career as a professor and dean of St. Vladimir’s Theological Seminary. Here he and Meyendorff, who came a few years later, worked for an indigenous, non-ethnic Orthodox Church in America. After much effort, against much resistance both internationally and at home, the Russian Church granted autocephaly or ecclesiastical autonomy to the former Russian Metropolia in America in 1970. When the seminary moved to suburban Crestwood, NY, in 1962, Schmemmann was appointed its dean and he remained in that office until his death on December 13, 1983, the feastday of St. Herman of Alaska. His posthumously published journals, from the last decade of his life, have proved to be a rich account of his personality and thinking [5–7].

Schmemmann’s principal gift was his vision of “liturgical theology”, liturgy as the heart and as the primary theology of the church. Inspired by his teachers, he argued that the church’s identity and life could best be seen in the assembling for the Eucharist, assembling for liturgy being the best expression of the church and the life of mission leading from this [8–11]. In this he was influenced both by Bulgakov’s eschatological thinking on the church and by Afanasiev’s “eucharistic ecclesiology” [12–15]. Yet, in his pursuit of the life of the kingdom of God in church and the liturgy, Schmemmann never abandoned the world of literature and politics, of culture, society and historical process [16]. Above all, his keen understanding of the world, his ease in its midst, whether Paris or New York City, his intense delight in the good things of this life were profoundly grounded in the triadic poles of his theology and, indeed, of his own faith and holiness: creation, the fall and redemption.

To listen to Schmemmann is to be wonderfully startled by the wealth of his humane learning and thinking. Though his work as a liturgical historian is well known, his work in other areas is impressive, such as his commentary on the history of doctrine, monasticism, schism, and beyond ecclesial subjects, the history of contemporary political movements [17]. Schmemmann’s assessment of modernity, the society, culture and politics of America and Europe raises more questions than it answers [18–23]. He provided a critical perspective on American society and the place of religion in it. He recognized the social pressure that kept religion influential well into the 1960s but saw, as well, the growing cultural diversity and secularism that would make for great changes. Insightful as some of his America-watching was, his ear was deaf to the civil rights, anti-war, anti-poverty and women’s movements. He and his family benefitted greatly from the opportunities of American society, in particular the educational system. Yet his journals show little interest in the expansion of these opportunities or the continuing force of race and sexism. His own conservatism seemed also to gradually diminish his interest in ecumenical work and seemed to distance him further from the mainstream of American life. His colleague John Meyendorff’s columns for the church periodical

show greater awareness and interest in the intense changes in American life in the 1960s–1980s. Despite something of a retreat into liturgical and ecclesial matters, however, even there one finds great insight ([10], pp. 89–100; [24], pp. 187–89; [25]).

2. Teacher of Tradition

But all that said, Schmemmann displayed a remarkably humane and worldly sense of the spiritual life. He was, above all, a teacher. Tapes and the texts transcribed from them and from the thousands of “Sunday Talks” he recorded over the years for Radio Liberty capture his warm, direct speaking [26]. These talks, on the Creed, on the feasts of the liturgical year and on literature and numerous other topics, intended for listeners in the USSR (Soviet Russia) with little knowledge of the faith, are among the most eloquent, humane and beautiful of his writings [3].

Those who knew him recall his pastoral gifts as confessor and counselor. At his funeral, his colleague and friend, Veselin Kesich, eloquently summed up his witness throughout his life and particularly in his terminal illness:

He was a free man in Christ; he was a man full of joy . . . He taught us a lesson on how, in suffering, the power of the eternal God may be revealed. He taught us a lesson about power in weakness. My dear friends, to teach this particular lesson—power in weakness—is *the* fundamental lesson: that is the Gospel. The Gospel is nothing else but power in weakness. The One who was sacrificed in weakness was raised by the power of God ([27], pp. 41–42).

Schmemmann was far from being sentimental. His piety was vibrant, not the antiquarian, stereotypic, formal sort. He served the church vigorously and practically in a number of positions. Not only did he teach at St. Vladimir’s Seminary for over 30 years, serving as dean in the last 20, but he was also theological advisor to the synod of bishops and, as noted, was one of the principal architects of the autocephalous status granted to the OCA (Orthodox Church in America) in 1970. He worked as theologian with the Standing Conference of Orthodox Bishops in America (SCOBA), with various domestic and international inter-Orthodox groups for theological education and youth work such as Syndesmos, and the Orthodox Theological Society. He promoted *St. Vladimir’s Theological Quarterly*, helped create the seminary’s annual summer institute for liturgical and pastoral theology, modeled on the “liturgical weeks” of St. Sergius Institute. The mission of St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, the preeminent English language publisher of Orthodox theology, owes much to his ideals of learning for the whole Church and for the world [28].

Yet it is necessary to say that he met with often bitter resistance and rejection in his own lifetime, from the hierarchy, clergy and laity of his church. In addition, since his death I would say his work has been either politely ignored or contradicted, often diplomatically, without express reference to his name. While his name is still officially honored, his vision is very much in eclipse. While a few of his liturgical renewal efforts have held on, such as frequent, even weekly reception of communion, much of the rest of his efforts are rejected by present practice and rationale. His effort to return baptism to communal celebration, his arguing for saying the prayers of the liturgy aloud and reverently, and his critical ideas on specific rites such as those of burial are not practiced or even discussed as they now are cast as innovations. Especially in his last years, he was extremely critical of what he saw as increasing sectarianism and a rise in clericalism, both rooted in for him, a pseudo-traditionalism among many Orthodox laity and clergy. These now have become strong tendencies across Orthodoxy internationally. The Pentecost 2016 Pan-Orthodox Council in Crete gave many indications of the strength of sectarian fundamentalism rather than open churchliness. The opposition to recognizing marriage between Orthodox and non-Orthodox Christian partners, as well as the extreme resistance to calling other, non-Orthodox communities “churches”, since this detracted from Orthodoxy’s monopoly on the reality of “church”, were the two principal examples, among others [29]. Schmemmann’s own church body, the Orthodox Church in America, was rocked in the last decade by internal scandal—financial abuse, mismanagement, denial and cover up—yet with no acceptance of responsibility by the leadership

or sanctions, the principal perpetrators allowed to retire or disappear to less conspicuous positions. His death and that of his colleague, John Meyendorff, have left a vacuum in the intellectual and spiritual leadership of the Orthodox churches in America. Missing, above all, is the spirit of freedom, joy and love for the world which so characterized both teachers and all of the others profiled in this volume.

Schmemmann was also an active intellectual outside Orthodoxy. He lectured at Catholic, Presbyterian and Episcopal seminaries and cathedrals. He contributed articles to an international array of journals and scholarly collections. He was a signer of the 1975 Hartford Statement, originated by Peter Berger and Richard John Neuhaus, highly critical of tendencies within the American mainstream churches and culture, a discerning view of the “culture wars” and erosion of Christian tradition to come. He prepared an insightful essay for the collection that interpreted the statement’s intent [30]. It is striking to hear what Schmemmann said at the close of this essay in the context of regressive sectarian and traditionalist tendencies today.

I know that are those Orthodox who affirm and preach that the Orthodox can and must live in the West without any “reference” to the Western culture except that of a total negation, to live in fact as if the West did not exist, for it is totally corrupt, heretical, and sick beyond repair. To achieve this, one must create artificial islands of Greek or Russian or any other Orthodox culture, shut all doors and windows, and cultivate the certitude of belonging to the sacred remnant. What these “super-Orthodox” do not know, of course, is that their attitude reflects precisely the ultimate surrender to that West which they abhor: that in their ideology Orthodoxy is being transformed for the first time into that which it has never been—a *sect*, which is by definition the refusal of the *catholic* vocation of the Church. And there are those who maintain, as I have tried to say, a peaceful coexistence of Orthodoxy with a culture which, in reality, claims the whole man: his soul, his life, and his religion. Both attitudes are ultimately self-destructive . . . ([30], pp. 136–37).

In a life filled with both academic and ecclesiastical obligations, Schmemmann was nevertheless able to produce a substantial body of writing. His earliest published essays, in Russian Orthodox journals in the late 1940s and early 1950s, already take up such issues as the centrality of Pascha—the feast of the resurrection—the liturgy as the heart of the church, and the church as more than institutional structures, dogmatic and canonical formulations, and national (ethnic) associations ([28], pp. 11–13). His earliest English language articles, from the mid-1950s, begin with the festal cycle of the liturgical year, and emphasize the Church’s eucharistic nature [9,11,17,31–35]. Kern and Afanasiev, in particular, influenced him with their indictment of the loss of eucharistic centrality amid accumulated piety, devotional acts, individualism and ecclesial pragmatism [12–14,36]. These two teachers of his were not the only ones to shape his thinking. Despite his tendency to mention them and Sergius Bulgakov only rarely in his own writings, the imprint of these three was distinctive throughout his work. Within a few years, Schmemmann would be expanding his teachers’ judgment not only of this liturgical decline, but of the ecclesial crisis [21–23]. Schmemmann may not have always cited them or even agreed with all of their points of view, but he did express much of the same, open and outgoing sense of church characteristic of the faculty of St. Sergius Institute and the larger “Paris School” [37].

3. World as Sacrament, Liturgy as Life

Schmemmann was a most discerning critic, but he consistently affirmed the Church’s essentials. The finest expressions of these are his volumes on the principal sacraments [9,38,39]. One finds in them what was also expressed in what has been the best known, most widely read of his books, *For the Life of the World*. The recent fiftieth anniversary of the talks Schmemmann gave at the National Student Christian Federation assembly in 1963 inspired a historical reassessment of the significance of his perspectives in American church life, as William Mills has shown [40,41]. The liturgy is presented, not as one more thing the Church does, not just her enactment of historical, colorful, symbolic rites, but as the very

presence of God among his people and their ascent to the Kingdom of Heaven. In Schmemmann's vision, as Aidan Kavanagh argues, the classical principal holds, (*ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*—"the rule of prayer establishes that of belief" [42–44]. All of time is sanctified in the liturgy. All of human activity is transformed. Every moment in life is one of God's saving and bringing us back: from our burial and resurrection in Baptism, to marriage, the anointing of the sick, and burial. All the material things we need—bread, wine, oil, water, words, touch—are directed back to what they were created to be—good in God's sight and, in the case of humankind, his very image and likeness. The consequence of this life of God and with God in liturgy is made explicit. Time becomes the very "sacrament of the world to come", the eschatological icon of God's saving and reclaiming of his fallen creation ([9], p. 65). From this follows the mission of the Church, to be witnesses of these things, proclaiming the Gospel to all. Schmemmann constantly emphasized the *paschal* or resurrectional nature of the church, the liturgy and of Christian living, intensely experienced by numerous holy women and men even into our era, such as Seraphim of Sarov, Maria Skobtsova and Elisabeth Behr-Sigel, among others [45–48]. The utterly "catholic", that is ecumenical and universal, even cosmic vision is fundamental to him.

The liturgy, especially the Eucharist, as the procession, the journey of the people of God into the Kingdom, is pursued carefully [9,25,39]. The missionary thrust of the liturgy, indeed the missionary rationale of the Church, runs through all of his writing. Frank Senn and Gordon Lathrop both echo Schmemmann in his examination of the Church's primary and traditional mode of evangelization: the liturgy [49–55].

Schmemmann unfolds an expansive, catholic understanding of the liturgy through contemplation of each sacramental element of the eucharistic celebration [39]. In the Eucharist, the Church is assembled by the Holy Spirit to enter and ascend to the Kingdom. This occurs in the whole action of the assembly: by reading, singing, preaching and hearing the Word, by praying for all, by offering in unity the bread, cup and themselves in thanksgiving and remembrance, and by being joined to the Lord and each other in communion in the body and blood of Christ, his life in, with and for the life of the world. Schmemmann never loses sight of liturgy then continuing in life, what Mother Maria Skobtsova called "liturgy outside the church walls" ([47], pp. 80–83). In almost every piece of his writing he specifies the connections among liturgy, faith and life for church, world and mission. These connections lay in the three "moments" of salvation history he consistently stressed.

First, God has created the world; . . . To claim that we are God's creation is to affirm that God's voice is constantly speaking within us and saying to us, "And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good." (Gen 1:31) The Fathers state that even the devil is good by nature and evil only through misuse of his free will. Then there is a second element, inseparable from the first: this world is fallen—fallen in its entirety; it has become the Kingdom of the prince of this world. The Puritan world view, so prevalent within the American society in which I live, assumes that tomato juice is always good and that alcohol is always bad; in effect tomato juice is not fallen. Similarly the television advertisements tell us, "Milk is natural"; in other words, it is not fallen. But in reality tomato juice and milk are equally part of the fallen world, along with everything else. All is created good; all is fallen; and finally—this is our third "fundamental acclamation"—all is redeemed. It is redeemed through the incarnation, the cross, the resurrection and ascension of Christ, and through the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost. Such is the intuition that we receive from God with gratitude and joy: our vision of the world as created, fallen, redeemed. Here is our theological agenda, our key to all the problems which today trouble the world ([10], pp. 98–99).

Seriousness, passion, yet good humor, and, above all, joy pervade this theological vision. In addition there is discernment, too, for perhaps the most prevalent heresy of our day about humanity is described and dismissed here in the earthly terms of liquor, milk and tomato juice! In other places in his writings, Schmemmann uses standard American images of wealth, power, and pleasure: skyscrapers, huge shopping centers, big cars, steaks, cocktails and romance. Schmemmann's effort, as he often put it, using Johannine language, was to "discern the spirits" of the time and culture, to learn whether

they were of God. This sharp scrutiny of the ethos of both the church and the world was always accompanied by the basic vision of creation, fall and redemption. Put another way, he saw the world as sacrament.

. . . in the first chapter of Genesis, we find a clear statement of this sacramental character in the world. God made the world, and then man; and he gave the world to men to eat and drink. The world was God's gift to us, existing not for its own sake but in order to be transformed, to become life, and so to be offered back as man's gift to God . . . But sin came, breaking this unity: this was no mere issue of broken rules alone, but rather the loss of a vision, the abandonment of a sacrament. Fallen men saw the world as one thing, secular and profane, and religion as something entirely separate, private, remote and "spiritual". The sacramental sense of the world was lost. Man forgot the priesthood which was the purpose and meaning of his life. He came to see himself as a dying organism in a cold, alien universe . . . And so the Eucharist is not simply a way of discharging our duty of thanks to God, although it is that as well. It is not merely one possible relationship to God. It is rather the only possible holding together—in one moment, in one act—of the *whole* truth about God and man. It is the sacrament of the world sinful and suffering, the sky darkened, the tortured Man dying: but it is also the sacrament of the change, His transfiguration, His rising, His Kingdom. In one sense we look back, giving thanks for the simple goodness of God's original gift to us. In another sense we look forward, eschatologically, to the ultimate repair and transfiguration of that gift, to its last consummation in Christ ([31], pp. 223, 225).

Sacrament is hardly just a religious ritual but the transformation of each person, of humankind and of all creation by Christ, through the Spirit, to the glory of the Father. The rule of prayer *is* the rule of faith. The continuous death of fallen humankind is continuously trampled down by the death and rising of Christ. No corner of life is neglected, no aspect of humanity is spared. Everything is touched by Christ: "In the world of the incarnation, nothing 'neutral' remains, nothing can be taken away from the Son of Man" ([31], p. 216).

4. Against the World, for the World

In his evaluation of American society and culture, Schmemmann spoke of "secularism," but with a distinctive understanding ([22], pp. 172–75, 183–85; [23], pp. 173–74; [31], pp. 67–84). In a way, he anticipated what most sociologists would later admit they had erred in diagnosing, namely that secularization did not mean the end of religion [56]. For him by no means was secular culture without religion, and only rarely could real anti-religious sentiments be found. On the contrary, America is both diverse and secular and awash with religiosity. But here is where Schmemmann is critical of "religion", particularly religion that conforms to the values, ethos and life of Americans. It must meet their needs, console, encourage and generally support what its consumers demand or expect. The purposeful, enlightened religion he criticizes is politically and socially useful. Yet it has little to do with the Gospel or Torah, given its shallowness and functionality. Today, I am certain Schmemmann would have recognized that despite the "religious nones" lack of membership in churches or adherence to traditional religious teachings, they nevertheless had a spiritual dimension, the "upper storey" of Solzhenitsyn.

Schmemmann also catalogues a variety of "reductions" of the parish, the local community of faith. Some of this criticism is dated, coming from a time decades ago, of much larger, more active congregations. By now, as the 21st century moves into its third decade, the landscape is dramatically different, one of shrinking and disappearing congregations. It is not possible to ask him to comment on a set of circumstances he did not experience or know. That said, he still has valuable things to say. Schmemmann objected to the parish primarily defined as a constant fund-raising association, perhaps with strong ethnic or class roots. He surely had in mind the then still very ethnic character of most Eastern Church parishes. He was skeptical about "Sunday" Christianity, an hour or so that inspires,

even “entertains” the parish clientele and attracts new members, as well as the priest essentially as administrator-executive and a therapeutic professional. As cutting as some of his attacks on parish life are, I myself believe some are dated and no longer accurate, while others remain discerning. Even though he was never really a parish priest himself in all his years of ministry, he did work within the parish community of St. Vladimir’s Seminary chapel ([22], pp. 164–69, 174–75; [23], pp. 171–73, 177–86). His journals indicate not just his work in confession but also in pastoral counseling. His attitude toward both ministry and the ministry is totally free of legalism, clericalism and theological triviality. As with so much else, his humane and open spirit pervades what he says about the personal problems and sufferings of those who sought him out. Standing out is his recognition of the always personal character of Christian faith. Christianity is not equivalent to individual salvation. Thinking that it is has reduced faith to a kind of cosmic insurance policy one pays premiums on throughout life, investing on the “next life”. But if paradise is not here in each moment, then the entire project of Christianity is a fraud.

... the salvation of the world is announced and *entrusted to each person*, is made a personal vocation and responsibility and ultimately depends on each person ... The whole world is given—in a unique way—to each person and thus in each person it is “saved” or “perishes.” Thus in every Saint the world is *saved* and it is fully saved in the one totally fulfilled Person: Jesus Christ ([23], p. 178).

5. Martyria: The Personal Struggle

It is not surprising at all that Schmemmann’s responses to the very real problems of the church ran provocatively counter to prevailing churchly wisdom, both in his day and now. I would argue that he sounds a great deal like another critic of not only church life and the clergy but of the economic and political systems of power in our world. I mean here the bishop of Rome, Francis. When Schmemmann thought of the “churching” of life as he did the renaissance of faith, in the Paris in which he grew up and was educated, it was not having more services or longer ones, not about hanging up more icons and lighting candles before them. Like Mother Maria, he envisioned a transforming, a reintegration of liturgy and life, of faith and everyday activity that is subversive of the strategies of the church growth movement and of every other market-driven tactic for expansion of membership and revenue ([22], p. 178).

Rather than promoting ecclesiastical and ritual pomp, he rather lampooned the “vaudeville” of ecclesiastical headcovering and the lack of connection between so many clerics and ordinary life and people ([5], pp. 284–85). He called for the restoration of real pastoral identity and behavior by bishops and priests. The love for the “holy things” in which we have communion with God and each other should translate into love for our communities, for our neighbors ([22], pp. 175–80; [23], pp. 186–93). He makes it clear that the clergy have been not just the victims but the principal perpetrators of the many “reductions” in the life of the Church. The real encounter with the crisis is not in some church-wide restoration of rules or diocesan program of fundraising, membership growth or revival of patristic literature. The “churching” of which he speaks is a personal encounter with Christ, a personal acceptance of the Gospel and a personal confrontation with oneself, one’s neighbors (even in the Church) and with the world. Schmemmann notes that his use of the term *martyria* is hardly a rhetorical flourish.

For if one takes Christianity seriously, be it only for one minute, one knows with certitude that *martyria*, or what the Gospel describes as the narrow way is an absolutely essential and inescapable part of Christian life. And it is a narrow way precisely because it is always a conflict with the “ways of life” of “this world.” From the very beginning to become and to be a Christian meant these two things: first, a *liberation* from the world, i.e. from any “reduction” of man, and as such has always been the significance of the Christian rites of initiation. A man is set free in Christ because Christ is beyond and above all “cultures,”

all reductions. The liberation means thus a real possibility to see this world in Christ and to choose a Christian “way of life.” In the second place, Christianity has always meant an *opposition* to and a fight with this world—a fight, let me stress it again, which is primarily, if not exclusively, a *personal* fight, i.e., an internal one—with the “old man” in myself, with my own “reduction” of myself to “this world.” There is no Christian life without *martyria* and without *asceticism*, this latter term meaning nothing else, fundamentally, but a life of concentrated effort and fight ([23], pp. 179–80).

6. Church: Mission, For the Life of the World

It is perhaps startling to hear such conviction about personal conversion and transformation at the heart of Christian life. Yet Schmemmann’s perspective was rooted in lived faith and was counter to, even subversive of, hardened, legalistic ideas from his own Orthodox tradition. He was, despite his own political conservatism, a spiritual revolutionary precisely because he was so radical, so aware of authentic tradition and its lived experience. Here one sees the imprint of his teachers. He relentlessly affirmed the conciliar nature of the Church in the face of clerical domination, and struggles about power ([31], pp. 169–70). Over against models of representative democracy and clericalist autocracy, he put forward the icon of ecclesial life, namely the unity-in-diversity and personal distinctions of the Trinity. The Father, Son and Holy Spirit reveal the unity of persons living in obedient, submissive and sacrificial love—of the Son to the Father and to humankind, of the Father to the Son and of the Spirit towards the world. So clericalism, indeed, any other “reduction” of the church’s life—legalism, fundamentalism, and the like—is illegitimate and destructive. Both clergy and laity are capable of such anti-ecclesial reductions ([31], pp. 164, 170–78). The clergy can be reduced to elected, hired functionaries or can reduce themselves to religious tyrants. Neither is their true office of pastoral ministry to the flock. Laity can be reduced to fund raisers, administrators, social activists or passive dues-paying members of a voluntary organization, or to a merely political constituency that acts on majority vote. In none of these reductions is the people of God affirmed, the chosen race the royal priesthood and holy nation called out of darkness into God’s marvelous light (I Pet 2:9).

Schmemmann leans on the 19th century lay Russian theologian Khomiakov on the tendency to reify the church into some *thing*, externalize it as authority, a reality other and thus *alien* to us ([31], pp. 182–85). Perhaps because of the Russian heritage of theological personalism, perhaps also because of the context in postwar Paris of personalism in philosophical and religious thought, Schmemmann insisted that there had to be a personal encounter and experience of God and of the kingdom; otherwise, the liturgy and the rest of church and spiritual life would end up as superstition or legalism. Here, he was much in sync with the visions of “churching” life that characterized the Russian Christian Student Movement of which he was part throughout his life, that which inspired Mother Maria and others we have encountered here. His understanding of the personal encounter was expressed as *martyria* and asceticism, personal conversion and transformation and struggle, participation in a communion both human and divine. This is what the liturgy seeks to proclaim and effect ([31], pp. 209–16).

The church is the sacrament of the Kingdom, the “fullness” of God here and now, the “pascha” or passage, through Baptism and the Eucharist, into the Kingdom ([31], p. 212). At the same time, church is “increase and growth in faith and love, knowledge and *koinonia*” ([31], p. 213). So, church is also a “human response to the divine gift, its acceptance and appropriation by man and humanity ([31], p. 212)”. As such, the church must always be *simultaneously* “God-centered” and “man or world centered ([31], p. 213)”. The church reduces, distorts itself if it becomes only one or the other. It is especially telling, given his concern for liturgy, Schmemmann’s harsh criticism of its being the object of historical or legal obsession. He wrote an open letter to his bishop about this as well as discussing it in numerous lectures and articles. His journal revealed, years after his death, his awareness of just such obsessions with ritual, clerical dress and appearance and many other efforts to re-pristiniate other times as places in place of living faith. What he wrote over 30 years ago, primarily

about the Orthodox Church, is still penetrating, provocative and necessary for the churches, East and West, in America today.

The Church, the sacrament of Christ, is not a “religious” society of converts, an organization to satisfy the “religious” needs of man. It is *new life* and redeems therefore the whole life, the total being of man. And this whole life of man is precisely the world in which and by which he lives. Through man the Church saves and redeems the world. One can say that “this world” is saved and redeemed every time a man responds to the divine gift, accepts it and lives by it. This does not transform the world into the Kingdom or the society into the Church. The ontological abyss between the *old* and the *new* remains unchanged and cannot be filled in this “aeon.” The Kingdom is yet *to come*, and the church is not *in* this world. And yet this Kingdom to come is already present, and the Church is fulfilled *in* this world. They are present not only as “proclamation” but in their very reality, and through the divine *agape*, which is their fruit, they *perform* all the time the same sacramental transformation of the *old* into the *new*, they make possible real action, real “doing” in this world ([31], p. 216).

Schmemmann’s personal witness and struggle were to “church” life; that is, to connect what one confessed, celebrated, received and prayed to what one did, how one lived. This was the vision of the émigré church and theological school and its teachers in Paris from which he came. Throughout his writings it is important to note that water and bread and wine and oil are not somehow magically endowed with power by a ritual blessing. Rather, the celebration and use of them revealed their inherent purpose—to cleanse, to feed and sustain, to heal. This also held true for everything said in the scriptures, in the prayers and hymns of the services. Often in his journal Schmemmann lamented bad translations. But he also spoke of texts that really could no longer be effectively translated and used, much to the disdain of liturgical purists. He ridiculed the exaggerated regard of devotees of “mystical” texts and figures and their unusual, out-of-the-ordinary ways of life, dress and thinking. For this healthy criticism of religious extremism, he was labeled “anti-monastic” and “modernist” by neo-traditional opponents. A noted cleric from the Russian Church Outside Russia, Michael Pomazansky, attacked him for daring to use historical methods in researching and analyzing liturgical texts. Such was secular, non-believing behavior, unfit for texts revered for coming directly from the apostles! In talks about the funeral service he decried the fact that the resurrection was almost absent from the texts and the manner of celebrating, and that the terrors and suffering of the dying and the grieving took up more space than the mercy of God and promise of resurrection life [57].

For him, because of the incarnation, the coming of Christ into human flesh and blood, into time and space, into the creation, then “nothing ‘neutral’ remains, nothing can be taken from the Son of Man”, nothing can be separated or protected or distinguished from God. In a curious, seemingly paradoxical way, everything is of God, of the Kingdom, perhaps one could say, “religious” or many would say today “spiritual”, in the deepest, most authentic sense. When Schmemmann spoke of the “world as sacrament”, this was not mere theological lyricism. He was a man for whom the world was holy, beautiful and worthwhile in itself, even if there was the fall. The liturgical prayers did not produce holy water, holy oil, holy bread and wine, but rather sought to recognize what was nourishing, healing, good in these creatures of God and of our making as well ([9], pp. 14–18, 33–36, 42–43).

In the books and taped talks he left behind there are lively miniatures, small “sacramental” scenes, icons of everyday life. Traveling home on the commuter train, he wonders about all the lives being lived behind the lighted windows of houses he sees from his seat. There is the picture of love revealed in the elderly Parisian couple, sitting silently, hand-in-hand on a park bench in the sunlight of an autumn afternoon ([9], p. 90).

Then there the signs of success and happiness so much sought after—promotion and raise, the luxury car, fine dining, enviable spouse and children and home—all vanishing in the hospital room, on the bed of sickness. There is the comedy that is close to tragedy—religious fanatics interrogating a host on what is in a soup or cake that might be uneatable in the Lenten fast. There are hilarious descriptions of “wannabe” monastics and mystics poring over the *Philokalia* and debating prayer rules,

prostrations, and ascetic practices, meticulously pious individuals tracing enormous signs of the cross upon themselves . . . for all around to see. There are the many idealistic but stressed and extreme seminary students and parish members who unload on him in confession and in pastoral conversation. Schmemmann notes the comic yet tragic scene at an international conference on the Eucharist where no one except the celebrating clergy received communion. He recalls the elderly parishioner's question after the joyous services of Easter night: "But what if all this really happened, Father?" He once told a suffering, troubled friend that God was as real and as near as the blades of grass upon which they were sitting in a field [58]; and if God were not that real and that close, he said further, then God was of no use. He was able to befriend the wealthy, intelligent, perennial "seeker", who saw no contradiction in being, at one and the same time, a Christian, Muslim and Buddhist.

Here was a theologian whose reading embraced e.e. cummings, Gide, Julien Green, Léautard, who revered the classics of his beloved Russian literature but who devoured as well biographies, the writings of critics of religion, the daily *New York Times*, numerous periodicals. Nothing truly human was alien to him and this humanity pervaded his theology. At the end of his essay "The World as Sacrament", he summed up his vision and it still is a strong statement of the relationship of faith and life, one that the church, especially the Orthodox Church, needs to reclaim.

Sacrament is movement, transition, passage, Pascha: Christ knows the way and guides us, going before. The world, condemned in its old nature, revealed as life eternal in its new nature, is still the same world, God's good work. Christ came to save it, not to allow us means of thankful escape before it was discarded as rubbish. Thoughts of the "life to come" can be misleading. In a sense, we have no other world to live in but this, although the mode of our occupying it, our whole relationship to space and time . . . will be very different when we are risen again in Christ . . . Our lives are congested and noisy. It is easy to think of the church and the sacraments as competing for our attention with the other world of daily life, leading us off into some other life—secret, rarified, remote. We might do better to think of that practical daily world as something incomprehensible and unmanageable unless and until we can approach it sacramentally through Christ. Nature and the world are otherwise beyond our grasp; time also, time that carries all things away in a meaningless flux, causing men to despair unless they see in it the pattern of God's action . . . we should concentrate upon this world lovingly because it is full of God, because by way of the Eucharist we find Him everywhere . . . ([25]; [31], pp. 226–27; [59]).

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