

The Orthodox Church and Peace – some reflections

By Olivier Clément

The spiritual and eschatological meaning that Scripture and Christ Himself give to the word *peace* characterizes the Orthodox Church as it does all Christian communities, although she is perhaps more wary than others of secularizing reinterpretations. The Biblical *shalom* which the Septuagint translates as *eirene*, indicates the gift, the coming, the presence of God himself, for God is the one and only source of peace. The Messianic title 'Prince of peace' that we find in Proto-Isaiah¹ applies in its fullness to Christ, the 'king of peace'.² In the New Testament, the 'peace of Christ' is a synonym for that life stronger than death which is brought to us by the Resurrection. Peace, life and joy are thus almost synonymous. 'Peace on earth' – the message of the angels, is in fact accomplished by Christ – and in Him – for He reunites God and humanity by triumphing over death and hell. He 'makes peace by the blood of his cross'.³ In rooting Himself in the Church, Body of Christ, place of an ever-continuing Pentecost, the Christian, to the extent of his ascesis, an ascesis of trust and humility, is able to experience – whatever the changes and chances of his life, despite 'wars and rumours of war'⁴ – that deep peace which is the foreshadowing within him of the Kingdom. 'May the God of peace himself sanctify you wholly, and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ', writes St Paul to the Thessalonians.⁵ Similarly, Peter points to the 'gentleness' and 'peace' of the 'hidden man of the heart'.⁶

Nevertheless this peace is not a withdrawal into oneself. Man is called to share in the very life of the Trinity: 'That they may be one, even as we are one,'⁷ said Jesus to His Father whom He has made ours. Our personal peace is realized in the peace of communion. The Christian, wherever he finds himself, has to become a peacemaker of human and cosmic existence – 'Strive for peace with all men, and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord', we are told in the Epistle to the Hebrews.⁸ The eucharistic community, which in the first centuries was called *agape* in Greek, *caritas* in Latin, ought to become, perhaps above all, a seed of peace in the world. The key text here is the Beatitude about the peacemakers, those who work to make peace⁹ – who 'shall be called sons of God', adopted in the Son, therefore literally 'deified'. Thus the disciples of Jesus are 'to be at peace with one another'¹⁰ and with all men.¹¹

The first Christian communities are to be found in a 'universal' Empire which is a vast area of peace. They pray therefore for its preservation, while refusing to divinise the power of Rome and of the Emperor. But this refusal, which discloses the area of the free personal conscience between the Kingdom of God and that of Caesar, does not express itself through rebellion but through martyrdom, that is to say, through a non-violent stance, which has remained characteristic of the Christian East to this day.

The following text from the First Letter to Timothy¹² has been almost entirely integrated into the eucharistic liturgies of St Basil and of St John Chrysostom which are still used today in the Orthodox Church: 'I exhort... that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and giving of thanks be made for all men, for kings and for all that are in authority, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and honesty.' The Christians of the first centuries felt very strongly, as do many Eastern Christians today, that the Church covers the world through her presence and her prayer (Paul Evdokimov goes as far as to say that 'in

the mystery' it is the world which is in the Church and not the other way around); that she preserves peace, delays the Parousia in its aspect of destruction, hastens it in its aspect of transfiguration. 'What the soul is in the body, such are Christians in the world', says the second century *Letter to Diognetes*.¹³ They sustain and support the world of which they are a fundamental element of its internal cohesion, life and peace. 'I have no doubt at all that it is because of the intercession of Christians that the world continues to exist', writes Aristides in his *Apologia*.¹⁴ Such is the priestly role of the entire Christian people, plainly indicated by the Sermon on the Mount: 'You are the salt of the earth',¹⁵ which refers back to Leviticus: 'With all your offerings you shall offer salt',¹⁶ and through to Revelation and the First Letter of Peter, which applies to the members of the Church the promise once made by the mouth of Moses to the chosen people: 'You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.'¹⁷ The Fathers of the Church, of whom as is well known, the Orthodox are always very much aware, emphasized that peace as the anticipation of the Kingdom, had not only a spiritual but also a dynamic and communicable character. St Clement of Rome in his Letter to the Corinthians¹⁸ insists that 'peace is the aim that has been proposed to us from the beginning.' 'A deep and joyful peace has been given to us for all men, with an insatiable longing to do good and an abundant outpouring of the Spirit.' St Basil recalls that 'Christ is our peace', and hence 'he who seeks peace seeks Christ... Without love for others, without an attitude of peace towards all men, no one can be called a true servant of Christ.'¹⁹ 'The love which Christ bears for mankind spreads his peace among them,' writes St Dionysius the Areopagite.²⁰ Barnabas describes Christians as 'children of love and of peace.'²¹ The saying of Christ is quoted constantly: 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you; not as the world gives do I give to you,'²² – that peace 'which passes all understanding'.²³ The peace of Christ comes to birth in man's heart, it flows forth, becomes responsible and creative love, acquires a social dimension. Christians are the peaceable race (*eirenikon genon*) remarks Clement of Alexandria.²⁴ Christ calls them to be 'soldiers of peace'.²⁵ 'Nothing is more characteristic of a Christian than to be a worker for peace,' writes Saint Basil.²⁶ The fight for peace cannot be separated from the fight for justice. The great boldness of the Fathers in social matters is well known. For St John Chrysostom, the 'sacrament of the altar' is nothing if it does not extend itself in the 'sacrament of the poor'.

In the period before Constantine, the Church expected Christians to adopt a position that was fundamentally pacific (but not pacifist in the systematic and ideological sense that the word has taken on). In the second century, at the height of the Roman Peace an apologist like Justin could take the view that the Messianic age prophesied by Isaiah, when swords would be beaten into ploughshares, had arrived with Christianity, for Christians, he says 'refuse to make war with their enemies'.²⁷ The army is a professional army and ecclesiastical authors, for the most part, consider that the military profession is among those that Christians should not take up. Tertullian gives two reasons for this: because the cult of Rome and of the Emperor is obligatory for legionaries and because the 'sons of peace' cannot be soldiers, 'Can a son of peace take part in a battle?'²⁸ In the third century, when Christianity was beginning to become a widespread religion and there were Christian soldiers, the *Apostolic Tradition* acknowledges that they maintain order and guard the frontiers, but forbids them to kill. If they do so, they must be excluded from the Church.²⁹ Origen mentions that although Christians can pray for the Emperor in wartime – the situation had become dangerous for the Empire – 'they may not themselves bear arms against any nation nor learn the art of war. For the fact is that Jesus has made us sons of peace.'³⁰ However, it

should be noted that from the third century, the Church prays for the authorities engaged in defensive wars when it is a matter of preventing invasion, chaos and the shedding of innocent blood.

The psychological climate changes with the conversion of the Emperors, the end of persecution, state support for the Church (without which the Ecumenical Councils could not have taken place) and the embedding of Christian values in imperial legislation. Christians are to be found in the highest positions, and the Church is called upon to take, as it were, direct responsibility for the course of events. However, an overriding requirement for peace continued to be a vital element in the Christian conscience. 'God is not the God of war,' writes St John Chrysostom. 'To make war is to declare oneself against God as well as against one's neighbour. To be at peace with all men is what God, who saves them, requires of us. "Blessed are those who work for peace, for they shall be called the sons of God." How are we to imitate the Son of God? By seeking peace and pursuing it.'³¹ The pacific stance of the early Church then falls back to liturgical prayer and to the role of exemplars and intercessors allotted to monks (still laymen in the East), and to the clergy. Fr Michel Evdokimov has already very well presented the theme of peace as it appears in the Orthodox Liturgy. As for monks and clergy, not only must they refuse to serve in armies but they must also forgo the right of legitimate self-defence. The 5th canon of Gregory of Nyssa, which is still in force, states that should a priest 'fall into the defilement of murder even involuntarily (i.e. in self-defence), he will be deprived of the grace of the priesthood, which he will have profaned by this sacrilegious crime.'

The prohibition³² against clergy and monks serving in the army is paralleled by the canons forbidding them to take office in the administration or government of the State.³³ These two injunctions of non-violence and of non-power are combined in the 7th canon of the Council of Chalcedon: 'Those who have entered the clergy or who have become monks must no longer serve in the army or accept civil office.' Henceforth, it is the monks who take upon themselves the universal priesthood of working for peace among mankind and the whole of creation, which formerly fell to all Christians. From the mid-fourth century, Serapion of Thmuis, the friend of St Antony, did not hesitate to apply to monks that saying of Christ: 'You are the light of the world.' 'Because of you', he comments, 'by your prayers, the universe is saved.'³⁴

Or rather the peace-making service of the universal priesthood is ascribed both to the monks and – to the Emperor. The myth of Christian Empire meant a lot to the Orthodox Church, at least until the fall of the Russian Empire in 1917. The conversion of Constantine, linked to the apparition of a 'sign in the sky', has been thought of as an inauguration of the *eschaton*. For Eusebius of Caesarea, the union of the Church and Empire 'converted the whole human race to peace and friendship, since from now on, men mutually recognize one another as brethren and discover their natural unity (in the sense of one human nature gathered up in Christ)'. This for Eusebius is a sign that the Scriptural prophecies have been fulfilled.³⁵ In the Byzantine view, Christian mankind, constantly extended through missions, ought to constitute a kind of 'city' *politeuma*, headed by the Emperor and which he had to keep in peace. His role was to be fulfilled symbolically and by reciprocal agreement rather than by domination. For example, the Emperor sent Clovis, the King of the Franks, consular titles, which integrated him into the *politeuma* without calling into question his independence. In the Middle Ages, when the Slav and Caucasian nations asserted themselves – thanks in part to evangelization from Byzantium in their own languages – the Empire

organized the *politeuma* as a kind of Christian 'commonwealth'. It is also true, unfortunately, that the confrontation of Bulgarians and Byzantines, and later of Serbs and Byzantines, for the imperial title led to exhausting wars.

After the fall of Constantinople the Empire passed to Russia. In the nineteenth century, she made very great efforts – and often disinterested ones – for the protection and freedom of the Orthodox of the Balkans. Even so, the division of Christendom was a major obstacle to the reconstitution of a *politeuma*. After the defeat of Napoleon, Tsar Alexander I entered Paris and all he asked in compensation for the burning of Moscow was that the Easter Liturgy should be celebrated in the very square, now called 'La Place de la Concorde', where King Louis XVI had been guillotined. And he tried to reconstitute the *politeuma* by the creation of a 'Holy Alliance' (which should not be confused with the Realpolitik of Metternich's reactionary Quadruple Alliance). The idea was to bring lasting peace to Europe through an understanding - in all but words an 'ecumenical' understanding - between Orthodox Russia, Lutheran Prussia, Anglican England and Catholic Austria and France. The dream was of a Christian society of European nations capable of reconciling tradition and liberty. The rise of secular nationalism in Europe doomed the project to failure. However, it should not be forgotten that in 1901 Tsar Nicolas I proposed and obtained the creation of the International Tribunal of The Hague, to which he would have wished to give a greater capacity to act to prevent future conflicts

This whole long history, as is well known, has not gone by without wars. The Orthodox Church has become intimately linked to every people among whom she has taken root, to whom she has given a script, whose language she has blessed by using it for her Liturgy, whose culture she has safeguarded, and whose Christian ways she has upheld during periods of foreign domination (e.g. of the Ottomans in South East Europe and of the Mongols in Russia). She has thus been totally involved in movements of resistance and wars of liberation. To limit oneself to Greece (although analogous examples could be found in the history of Serbia, Romania and Bulgaria), the banner of insurrection during the terrible war of independence was raised by the Archbishop of Patras. Half the Athonites left the Holy Mountain, monks though they were, to fight the Ottomans (oppressors and, I shall return to the point, Muslims). One should not forget that under Turkish domination (the 'Turkokratia') the bishops were regarded, in the Islamic conception of the occupying power, as religious and civil leaders, without distinction, of the *milet*, namely of the Christian 'people'. This explains the role assumed by Archbishop Makarios as virtual 'ethnarch', i.e. 'leader of the people', during the liberation of Cyprus!

However the Orthodox Church has never elaborated a doctrine of the 'just war' as the Christian West did following St Ambrose and St Augustine. The latter, let us not forget, designated as Manichean heresy – and he was a past master in the field! – the affirmation that war is intrinsically evil and contrary to the Christian understanding of love. The Christian East, on the other hand, has always thought of war as an evil but a sometimes necessary evil for the defence of justice and freedom. The only normative ideal is that of peace, and hence the Orthodox Church has never made rules on the subject of *ius belli* and of *ius in bello*. To kill in war is permitted by a kind of commiseration but, for the Fathers, it is still a sin which must be forgiven! In his 13th canon, St Basil notes: 'Our fathers have not, in fact, held the homicides committed in warfare to be murders, thus pardoning, it seems to me, those who have taken up the defence of justice and of religion. However, it would be good to advise them to abstain from communion for three years since their hands are not

pure.' Killing in war is relevant to a significant concept of Eastern canon law, that of 'involuntary sin'.

From this point of view, the only war permitted by the Church as a lesser evil is a defensive war, or a war of liberation. Byzantine treatises on tactics and strategy begin by affirming that war is an evil. Thus, an anonymous sixth century author writes: 'I am well aware that war is a great evil, and even the greatest of evils. But because enemies shed our blood..., because everyone has to defend his homeland and his fellow citizens..., we have decided to write about strategy...' ³⁶ However, the work is concerned only with defensive strategy. It recommends ruses, manoeuvres and subterfuges to avoid battle and to lead to the enemy's withdrawal. The *Strategikon of Maurice*, another handbook on the art of war, ³⁷ advises against complete encirclement, which would drive a cornered enemy to fight to the end, and recommends always allowing him an outlet to take flight. For the aim is to get him to withdraw, not to slaughter him.

Byzantium, the Balkan countries, Russia at the time of the Mongols, have all been attacked by Islam, an Islam rougher, often far more opaque, than that of the Arabs. Nevertheless it would be wrong to speak of 'crusades', but rather of a difficult and painful defence of the Cross. This attitude is imprinted in the liturgical texts and they still have a strange actuality, I have been told, for Greek Cypriots. Certainly, there was a great temptation to identify the Christian people with a particular historic nation. For example, on the feast of the Exaltation of the Cross, on 14 September, we sing: 'Lifted up of Thine own will upon the Cross, O Christ God, do Thou bestow Thy mercy upon the new commonwealth that bears Thy Name. Make our faithful kings glad in Thy strength, giving them victory over their enemies: may Thy Cross assist them in battle, weapon of peace and unconquerable ensign of victory'. ³⁸ In this context, where eschatology runs the risk of being borne off to the advantage of national Messianism, the ancient canon distancing the warrior from communion is quite forgotten. He who fights in defence of his land and his faith is henceforth regarded as a *martyr*. 'God will account our blood as that of the martyrs', said one of the 'holy Princes' of Russia, to whom it went against the grain to take up arms, and yet who fought to save their people, and sometimes accepted humiliation and death at the court of the Tatar Khan by freely offering themselves as hostages. In 1380, the Khan marched on Moscow. The Grand Prince Dimitri went to ask the advice of St Sergius of Radonezh, the restorer of the monastic life and therewith of the moral and cultural life of Russia. 'Your duty demands that you defend your people', said Sergius. 'Be ready to offer your soul and to shed your blood. But go first of all before the Khan as his vassal and try to hold him back by submitting to him in all loyalty. Holy Scripture teaches us that if our enemies require our glory, if they want our gold or silver, we can let them have it. We only give up our lives and shed our blood for the faith and in the name of Christ. Listen, Prince, let them have your glory and your wealth, and God will not let you be defeated. Seeing your humility, He will come to your aid and will abase their indomitable pride.' The Grand Prince made it clear that he had done all that he could to appease the Khan, but in vain. 'So fight then, they will perish. God will come to your aid. May His grace be with you.' And he gave Dimitri two of his monks to fight with him. The Russian victory at Kulikovo was decisive. What we have here is neither a theology of violence nor a theology of non-violence, but the unmistakable savour of the Bible, which becomes evangelic when history becomes tragic.

The same conception of warfare is found in the strategy of Kutuzov in the face of Napoleon's invasion of Russia in 1812. The battle of Borodino was purely defensive. On its

eve, everyone fell to their knees before a particularly venerated icon of the Virgin. Kutuzov then abandoned Moscow to the invader. And when Napoleon, overtaken by winter, withdrew, Kutuzov limited himself to harassing him, having no other aim than to drive him back to the frontier. Tolstoy, who was later to become non-violent, has described these events magnificently in *War and Peace*.

Since the disappearance of the last Orthodox Empire, that of Russia in 1917, and of the last Catholic Empire, that of Austria in 1918 - the latter deliberately destroyed by anticlerical France - the dream of a Christian *politeuma* has completely vanished. (It is true that a good number of the notions of John Paul II spring from an 'imperial' charisma, rather than from a 'pontifical' charisma, but that is another story). This has accentuated the national character of the different Orthodox Churches. During the Second World War, they were at the side of their respective peoples. The Patriarch of Serbia was behind the 1941 plot to dismiss the Regent for having granted free passage to the German armies. He was sent to a concentration camp by the Nazis. In Russia, on news of the German attack, when Stalin floundered and an attitude of wait-and-see was growing in a good many quarters, it was the head of the Russian Church, the Metropolitan, and future Patriarch, Sergius, who called for national resistance. Subscriptions from the faithful enabled the Church to offer the State an armoured column, which flew the flag of Holy Russia and bore the name of the victor of Kulikovo and friend of St Sergius, Dimitri Donskoy. During the 900-day siege of Leningrad, the Church made a decisive contribution through prayer, exhortation and social assistance. But previously, unlike, for example, the Spanish Church, the Russian Church had refused to participate in civil war. Patriarch Tikhon did not give his blessing to the White armies. He himself offered the State the wealth of the Church to combat the famine, and he simply exhorted the faithful to non-violent resistance; while Lenin, having refused his offer, ordered the confiscation even of the things needed for public worship. This was the time when Starets Alexis Metchev opposed the calls for an anti-Bolshevik crusade made by some émigré bishops, and declared that a powerful spiritual renewal was the only way in which Russia would be able to overcome anti-theism.

So, historically, the Orthodox Church has accepted warfare sorrowfully as a sometimes necessary evil, but without concealing that it is an evil which must be avoided or limited as much as possible. Her spiritual men and women have never ceased to pray for peace. St Silouan, who died in 1938 on Mount Athos, carried the whole of mankind in his prayer; and he, a Russian, interceded especially for the persecutors of his Church; persecutions, to which the response was martyrdom - of tens of millions of Martyrs, many of whom died praying for their tormentors.

Today, in a context which has become global and extremely precarious, there are two signs which appear to make specific the position of the Orthodox Church: one is her stance in the war in the Lebanon, and the other is the text on Peace worked on by the Third Pre-conciliar Pan-Orthodox Conference, which met at Chambésy near Geneva from 28 October to 6 November 1998.

In Lebanon, the Orthodox community, which is one of the most significant in terms of numbers, economic importance and cultural influence, was the only one to refuse to take up arms and form a militia. The Orthodox Youth Movement of the Patriarchate of Antioch, inspired, above all, by Metropolitan George Khodr, has always put into practice the non-violence of the Gospel, going to the assistance of victims on all sides and developing a dialogue with Islam, which could be of great future importance.

The Third Pre-conciliar Conference has drawn up a long text on 'the contribution of the Orthodox Church to the achievement of peace.' This text offers a definition of peace which is that of Scripture and of the Fathers. The basis of peace can be none other than unconditional respect for the human person who, being in the image of God, is rooted beyond this world and, in Christ, becomes irreducible. At the same time, the human person is fulfilled in communion, for the Church as 'mystery' of the Risen Christ, makes the person a participant of the love of the Trinity. The Trinity would thus appear, in its radiance of unity and diversity, as the guiding image for a humanity which is unifying but does not want to become uniform. Christ's Gospel is the Gospel of peace (Eph. 6:15). Christ has become 'our peace' (Eph. 2:14). The peace 'which passes all understanding' (Phil. 4:7), as Christ himself said to his Apostles at the Holy Supper – peace which is broader and more essential than the peace which the world promises. On this point, the Conference quotes the text of Clement of Alexandria on the 'peaceable race' to which we have already made reference. Peace is inseparable from justice, which is the social aspect of communion; and from freedom, where the mystery of the image of God is inscribed. The Conference therefore makes a vehement appeal on the one hand, for respect for persons and for minorities and on the other, for justice on the planetary scale.

However, it is only in the Church (and this is why the Church must be the Church) that evil, the root of all discord, can be healed radically by the Life-giving Cross, whose sanctity alone can radiate the strength to do so. Here we discover again the meaning of a peace-making priesthood of all the faithful as in the pre-Constantinian Church. The Church constitutes a force for peace quite different from that of international organizations or States. This 'force for peace' is infectious, it is 'caught' and spreads through the communion of Eucharistic communities, through prayer, service, and the active love of people who become capable, as St Paul requires, of 'making eucharist in all things' (1 Thess. 5:8).

In this way a creative spirituality is defined which involves all Christians – people of the Resurrection – in the struggle against death as it ravages society and culture in all its dimensions. As regards war in particular, the text reads:

'Orthodoxy condemns war in general, for she regards it as a consequence of the evil and sin in the world. Out of commiseration she has allowed wars, undertaken to re-establish justice and freedom where they have been trodden underfoot.'

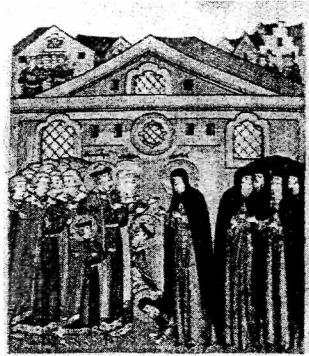
Today, however, the risk of the self-destruction of mankind and of the annihilation of all life on earth through a nuclear war can no longer be a matter of a lesser evil. At this point, politics becomes 'metapolitical' and addresses the problem of the meaning of existence itself. The text then condemns armaments of all kinds, especially nuclear and space weapons 'wherever they come from'. (It is not a question of unilateral disarmament as in pacifist movements).

'The consequences of a nuclear war would be terrifying, not only because it would cause the death of an incalculable number of human beings, but because the life of those who survived would be intolerable. Incurable diseases would appear, and genetic mutations would occur with dire effects for future generations, assuming that life on earth continued. In the opinion of scientists, one result of nuclear war would be the so-called nuclear winter – climatic disturbances on our planet the end result of which would be the disappearance of all life. Consequently, nuclear war is unacceptable from all points of view, environmental and ethical. It would be a crime against humanity, a mortal sin against God, whose work would be destroyed.'

Confronted by this threat, by the no-less-suicidal progressive destruction of the environment and by famine in so many regions of the Third World, while 'the economically developed countries live in a regime of opulence and waste, committing themselves to a sterile policy of armaments,' only a spiritual leap can open the paths of the future. The Conference summons Christians to adopt a new lifestyle based on voluntary limitation, sharing, and sympathetic respect for Nature. The Conference text concludes:

'Because we know the meaning of salvation, we have the duty of striving to alleviate illness, unhappiness and anxiety; because we have access to the experience of peace, we cannot remain indifferent when peace is lacking in contemporary society; because we are blessed with the justice of God, we have to strive for more complete justice in the world and for the disappearance of all oppression... Because we are nourished by the Body and Blood of the Lord in the holy Eucharist, we feel the need of sharing the gifts of God with our brethren – we understand better what hunger is and we strive for its abolition. Because we are preparing for a new earth and a new heaven where justice will reign, we struggle here and now for the vivifying and the renewal of man and of society.'

First published as "L'Altra Pace" in the volume "La Pace come metodo," Milano 1991



*St Sergius blessing Dimitri Donskoy.
Russian, 16th c.*