

The Pussy Riot Trial and the Russian Orthodox Church

By Thomas Bremer, Münster

Abstract

The Orthodox Church reacted to the Pussy Riot case with a clear rejection of the action and calls for strict punishment. This reaction is due not only to the fact that the group's performance took place in a church, but also to the perception within Russian Orthodoxy that it—like Christianity in general—is being persecuted. Accordingly, the church demands that the state should protect it. This view relies on a pre-modern conception of societal unity and diversity that will hardly be viable over the longer term in its current form.

Punk in the Cathedral

In staging the performance that made them world-famous and which resulted in three of them being jailed, the young women of the punk group Pussy Riot chose a church—and not just any church, but the prestigious edifice of the Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. This church, built to commemorate the liberation of Russia from Napoleon in the 19th century, had been dynamited during the Soviet era. After the end of the USSR, it was rebuilt with state funding and private donations and today is not just a visible landmark in the cityscape of Moscow, but one that embodies the Russian Orthodox Church as such. It was here that the current patriarch was elected, and solemn events and services are usually held at the church. The lower floors have large spaces for church gatherings and meetings.

Yet, not only did the Pussy Riot performance take place in a church building; it also referred in its formal elements to ecclesiastical traditions. The activists billed the event as a “punk prayer service” (in Russian: “*pank-moleben*”). They imitated the formal aspects of prayer—the sign of the cross, genuflection, and bowing (a video of the performance,¹ shows that there was hardly any, or at least no audible singing in the church; as opposed to the widely disseminated, several minutes-long video of the event, which is a compilation of scenes from this and another performance in another church, while the audio track of the singing that would gain notoriety was added later). Even the lyrics imitate prayer in places by using conventional formal elements. In substance, however, it is severely critical of the Russian president and the close relations that the church leadership enjoys with him and the government.

The Reactions of the General Public and the Church

Representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church have protested against the performance in various ways. Two details are notable here: First of all, these complaints

were generally marked by a great deal of severity. From the very start, it was stated that the women deserved severe punishment, while later statements by the church also made reference to compassion and mercy, though always linked to the condition that the band members should profess remorse. Irrespective of whether these statements were based on convictions or calculation, the church increasingly called upon the defendants—especially after the sentence handed down by the court of first instance—to show remorse in order to receive forgiveness. Archpriest Vsevolod Chaplin, a prominent church representative, has mentioned on several occasions that priests could visit the accused, and subsequently sentenced, women. The remarks strongly indicate that the church was just waiting for the members of Pussy Riot to send a signal, in order to facilitate an accommodation with them—however, there is no indication that it occurred to official representatives that the church might make the first step. In this respect, it is particularly interesting that the incarcerations and sentencing of the women were defended, at the same time as representatives of Western churches, governments, and NGOs criticized them. Not only the Orthodox Church, but also representatives of the state and even President Vladimir Putin himself have argued that such behavior is also banned in Western countries. On several occasions, it was pointed out that under Article 166 of the German Criminal Code, disturbance of the religious peace is punishable with up to three years in prison (though this law is only very rarely applied in Germany).

Another element is the internal perception of the situation of the church in ecclesiastical circles. The stunt by Pussy Riot occurred at a time when Orthodoxy in Russia, but also global Christianity more generally, is seen as being under threat. This is important to remember in assessing the Orthodox Church's position on the matter. Many of its representatives have cited events in the Middle East, in Pakistan, or in Nigeria as evidence of its persecution. In Russia itself, individual acts of violence have been cited; occasionally, one also finds references to other incidents in CIS member states in which discrimination against the Orthodox Church or

¹ This video is available at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gREBLskpDWQ>

Christianity in general is alleged or even proven to have occurred. In March 2012, Archpriest Chaplin referred to a “war on Orthodoxy” and demanded severe punishment. Another clear indication of this perception can be seen in the words of Metropolitan Hilarion, head of the Orthodox Church’s Department for External Church Relations, who said on 16 October 2012, as a guest speaker to the Bishop’s Synod of the Catholic Church in Rome: “In Europe and America we witness growing pressure from those representatives of militant secularism and atheism who attempt to expel Christianity from the public sphere, to ban Christian symbols, to destroy traditional Christian understanding of the family and marriage as a union between a man and a woman, of the value of human life from inception till natural death.”

The Church and Modernity

Such a perception is certainly consistent with that of conservative members and groups within the Catholic or Protestant Churches. There is no attempt to clarify that while the value of human life must be protected, it is possible to engage in debate over euthanasia without the latter discussion being regarded as evidence of “militant secularism and atheism”. Instead, Christianity is identified quite generally as the most persecuted religion of all. Certainly, such tendencies cannot be dismissed entirely. In some Muslim countries, a wide range of anti-Christian attitudes may be found, ranging from occasional discrimination to systematic persecution. At the same time, Christianity is not only the largest, but also the fastest-growing religion on the planet, which certainly does not detract from the seriousness of persecution, but does put its consequences into perspective. However, the Russian Orthodox Church is trying to push back against the alleged war on Christianity together with the Catholic Church. Immediately before his remarks cited above, Metropolitan Hilarion said that he would use “this opportunity to call my brothers in the Catholic Church to create a common front in order to defend Christian faith in all those countries where it is being marginalized and persecuted”. These words are in line with the position that the Russian Orthodox Church has been adopting for several years towards Catholicism: While there is no agreement on theological issues, it is argued, both of these churches with their long-established traditions have an obligation to resist the pernicious phenomena of modernity.

Indeed, many societies are currently debating the correct relationship between religion and the state, or religion and the public sphere, as clearly seen in the debates in Germany over religious male circumcision or the reactions to the controversial video “The Innocence of Muslims”. Apparently, religion and modern

society are currently in a process of mutual demarcation, of defining their respective positions, and of staking out the boundaries of their mutual relationship. This is also true for Russia, as indicated by the Pussy Riot case. However, this indicator is interpreted in quite a different way by the Russian Orthodox Church, which regards it as signifying a global war on Christianity.

Nevertheless, in this particular case, there are also some elements that are specific to Russia. On the one hand, there is the special position of the Russian Orthodox Church as the church of the majority. Irrespective of all scandals, it is still one of the most trusted institutions in Russia. This despite the fact that devoutness, or religious practice, is not particularly widespread. It is true that the percentage of Russians identifying themselves as Orthodox is slightly larger than the membership of the two main churches in Germany. However, church attendance is not much higher than in Western European countries. Then again, the Russian Orthodox Church enjoys a much higher standing than do the churches in Western European societies.

The Burden of History

The Russian Orthodox Church continues to be firmly in the grip of its 20th-century history, although its situation had already begun to improve under Perestroika 25 years ago. Of course, at that point, it was strongly influenced by the persecution and discrimination of the Soviet era, at the end of which the number of churches, monasteries, clergy members, and other institutions was very low. It took enormous efforts to build a church infrastructure that was commensurate to the size of the country and the number of believers. More significant than the material losses was the spiritual damage: For many people, religion had no meaning—they had not turned away from faith as the result of a conscious decision, but in the course of their socialization had never come into contact with religion in the first place. However, especially after the collapse of the Soviet system and many of its values, many people sought a sense of deeper significance that material goods could not satisfy. The church found a huge potential here, and this is also a significant reason for the large number of people who identify as Orthodox.

However, one occasionally gets the impression that the church tried, at this time, simply to reinstate the conditions that had prevailed before 1917—not including the elements of state control over the church during the Tsarist era, but based on the understanding that Russia was a country distinctly marked by Orthodoxy. This can also be seen in the special relationship between the state and the church: The church implicitly asserts the claim that it must be protected from the state—and

the state authorities accommodate this demand insofar as this special relationship is useful for both sides. The Duma is currently preparing stricter laws on blasphemy—a crime that is no longer prosecuted in many Western countries, as that would require the courts of the land to decide when and how God (which god—the God of Christianity, the God of the monotheist religions, or also the gods of other religious denominations?) has been insulted. It is also a difficult proposition from a theological point of view: God is regarded by believers as one who is beyond comprehension, infinite, and intangible and defies human categories. However, if God can be insulted, then he is susceptible to human agency.

Polyphonous Voices in Contemporary Orthodoxy

One important consequence for the Russian Orthodox Church has been the internal differentiation that has taken place in connection with Pussy Riot's performance and the protests against the arrests of the band members. Not all prominent church members joined the chorus of criticism that the church leaders had intoned. The well-known Deacon Andrey Kurayev, who enjoys a great deal of prominence and popularity and is an unofficial spokesman for the church, distanced himself from the church's accusations and tried to play down the significance of the stunt by pointing out that it was the season of "maslenitsa" or "Butter Week", which is more or less the equivalent of carnival. Prominent Orthodox intellectuals advised the church not to take the event so seriously and referred, for instance, to the tradition of the "yurodivye" or fools in Christ, who in the Russian Orthodox tradition voluntarily subject themselves to the ridicule of their fellow humans by engaging in noncon-

formist behavior for Christ's sake, i.e., for ascetic reasons. In certain congregations, lists of signatures were circulated condemning the performance, but also other lists calling for clemency and mercy for the young women. The church leadership criticized this distinction: In a public speech, the patriarch decried the fact that some people called themselves Orthodox, but nevertheless justified blasphemy and underestimated the severity of the actions. It would be wrong to state that the Orthodox Church is divided over the matter, but it is certain that a more differentiated view is emerging. This can be seen in surveys according to which many believers regard criticism of the patriarch (who was involved in several scandals in the past year) as being compatible with loyalty to the church and the faith.

At any rate, this is due to the fact that Russian society is slowly, but surely and consistently developing into a post-Enlightenment open society. In such a society, there are no more self-evident truths, but all views posited as authoritative must be justified on rational grounds. The official representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church are not aware of this shift or believe that such societies are a "Western" phenomenon that Russia does not have to and should not take part in. Among certain exponents of the church, the notion that Russia can avoid modernity and pluralism seems to be a widespread. However, the stance of many believers in connection with the anti-Putin demonstrations of the past year shows that the church's era of conformity is over and that it is undergoing a process of differentiation. The progress of modernity implies that this process will also continue. As long as the Russian Orthodox Church believes that the only solution is to oppose such developments, it will fail to find adequate answers to these challenges.

Translated from German by Christopher Findlay

About the Author

Thomas Bremer is a lecturer in Eastern Church Studies and Ecumenical Theology at the Roman Catholic Theology Faculty at the University of Münster.

Further Reading

- Bremer, Thomas (forthcoming 2013) *The Cross and The Kremlin. A Brief History of the Orthodox Church in Russia* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans).
- Bremer, Thomas (2007) *Kreuz und Kreml. Kleine Geschichte der orthodoxen Kirche in Russland* (Freiburg).
- Sapper, Manfred, Volker Weichsel, Thomas Bremer, Jennifer Wasmuth (eds.) (2009) *Glaubenssache. Kirche und Politik im Osten Europas* (Osteuropa 59, No. 6, Berlin).
- Bremer, Thomas (2010) "Die orthodoxe Kirche als gesellschaftlicher Faktor in Russland", in Heiko Pleines and Hans-Henning Schröder (eds.) *Länderbericht Russland*, (Schriftenreihe der Landeszentrale für Politische Bildung, Bd. 1066, Bonn): pp. 441–456.
- Bremer, Thomas (2012) "Der 'Westen' als Feindbild im theologisch-philosophischen Diskurs der Orthodoxie", in Leibniz-Institut für Europäische Geschichte (IEG) (ed.) *Europäische Geschichte Online* (EGO) (Mainz, <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/bremert-2012-de>).