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Report on the Doctoral Dissertation of Cristian Panaitescu, *Alexander Schmemmann's Ecclesiology: Witnessing the Crisis within the Orthodox Church*

The subject of this doctoral dissertation, written by a monk of the Orthodox Church, is a critical analysis of the works of one of the major Orthodox theologians of the twentieth century. Such a study is, indeed, needed, for Fr Alexander Schmemmann's theological thought has had, and continues to have, a great impact on contemporary Orthodox theology, and even on theologians of other Christian confessions as well.

The first impression which I got from reading this study, in general well written, was the difficulty, pointed out by the author, to "classify" Schmemmann as a theologian: does he have to be regarded as a "scholar" in the field of liturgical studies? Or does he have to be seen as a "systematic theologian?"

On several pages Panaitescu refers to certain shortcomings from an academic point of view in Schmemmann's writings, such as "the lack of basic notes concerning the source of his statements" (p. 145), or the fact that "his analysis...is lacking in technical dimensions" (p. 160). Nevertheless, the author admits that "Schmemmann's lack of inner unity does not diminish his brilliant intuitions". However, "his amalgam of ideas communicated in such a dispersed fashion makes the task of expounding his theology really difficult" (p. 115).

Thus this theologian was not a "scholar" in the full sense of the term, and certainly not a "systematic theologian". In fact, his interest is more of a pastoral and practical nature: "Schmemmann focuses on life and on its liturgical and theological manifestation, in, through, and with the worshipping community" (p. 130).

The author points out that Schmemmann's theology is heavily marked by his personal experience and intuition. For that reason he rightly starts his thesis with a chapter on the biography of Fr Alexander. The next chapter deals with the second source of his theological inspiration: his teachers at the St Sergius Theological Institute in Paris, in particular Fr Nicholas Afanasiev and his "Eucharistic Ecclesiology". The last two chapters deal with the two main focuses of his interest: the liturgy and the "world". Both themes are not two different and isolated topics, but share a common interest, *viz.* the "Church".

The overall impression of this reviewer is that this doctoral dissertation is clearly written and shows a coherent structure. It is a critical study, as one might expect for an academic dissertation. However, sometimes there is a tendency to "over-criticize" and to look for "problems" in certain passages in Schmemmann's works which, according to me at least, are no "problems" at all, or "pseudo-problems". E.g. on p. 124f the author criticizes Schmemmann for the fact that in a particular article on the liturgy he does not expand the "whole life of the Church" to the social, economic and artistic life of the Church. But if one puts one glance in

his *Journal*, it is evident that for Schmemmann the liturgy was not his only focus of interest; on the contrary, he shows a deep interest in cultural and political issues.

I have noticed one major “gap” in this study: a chapter on the cultural and theological “climate” of the period (that is, the years 1960) when Schmemmann wrote his book *For the Life of the World*. This little book, written for a general public (originally a series of lectures addressed to students of all confessions), has become a “classic” and contains the major theological insights of Fr Alexander Schmemmann. It deals with the topic of “secularism”, and, in connection with that, “religion”.

It is, in my opinion, unavoidable to include in a study like this a comparative study on Schmemmann and Dietrich Bonhoeffer: the latter has dealt with exactly the same issues just mentioned and his answer to the problem of secularism (*etsi Deus non daretur*) has had a great influence on theologians in the West. Schmemmann’s uncompromising rejection of secularism should be understood against this background.

A more systematical discussion of Schmemmann’s criticism of “religion” (which he shares with Bonhoeffer!), is lacking in this dissertation. It would also have shed more light on Schmemmann’s critical attitude towards (but not rejection of!) monasticism.

It is my suggestion that, if this thesis will be published, a chapter on the theological situation in the years 1960, including a comparative study on Schmemmann and Bonhoeffer, be added, in order to get a better understanding of the way Fr Schmemmann dealt with the themes of “secularism” and “religion”.

As for now, this dissertation is certainly acceptable to be submitted for its public defense.