

Conspiracy Thinking, Orthodox Eschatology Lead Russian Nationalism Back to Anti-Semitism, Verkhovsky Says

Opinion

Posted by:

Posted on : 2017/9/10 23:09:58

The SOVA director recalls that he recently heard one Orthodox priest in Moscow deliver a homily in which he said Russians must prepare themselves for Armageddon and must be ready "to kill their enemies, including Jews and Jewish children. This will be very difficult, he said, but it has to be done because otherwise God's will won't be fulfilled."

By Paul Goble for "Window on Eurasia": September 10 – Anti-Westernism and anti-liberalism have not displaced anti-Semitism in Russia as some have argued but rather, along with widespread conspiracy thinking and eschatological links between Russian nationalism and Russian Orthodoxy, have laid the groundwork for a new recrudescence of this ancient evil, Aleksandr Verkhovsky says. The director of the SOVA Center makes this argument in a *Nezavisimaya gazeta* review of Viktor Shnirelman's new book, *The Tribe of Dan: Eschatology and Anti-Semitism in Contemporary Russia* (in Russian, Moscow: BBI, 2017, 633 pp.) (ng.ru/ng_religii/2017-09-06/15_427_book.html). Shnirelman, Verkhovsky points out, is a proponent of "civilizational nationalism," a notion that has attracted many Russians and especially the Russian Orthodox Church. That idea holds that identity does not emerge via ethnicity or language but "in the first instance via a synthetic image of Russia as the nucleus of a special great culture or civilization … inspired by high goals … and being in a global and long-term opposition to the West." Those within the Church define these goals in eschatological ways that are by their nature and for entirely understandable reasons radical because they are about what the Church views as the approaching Armageddon. As history shows, Verkhovsky suggests, such ideas cannot exist "without anti-Semitism." The SOVA director recalls that he recently heard one Orthodox priest in Moscow deliver a homily in which he said Russians must prepare themselves for Armageddon and must be ready "to kill their enemies, including Jews and Jewish children. This will be very difficult, he said, but it has to be done because otherwise God's will won't be fulfilled." "It would be interesting to know how important anti-Semitism is at the level of feelings" in a country where conspiracy thinking is widespread "and how this is simply an old instrument for the expression of eschatological emotions and corresponding political views," Verkhovsky continues. Shnirelman cites the arguments of those like Andrey Lesnitsky who assert that "anti-liberalism and anti-Westernism are displacing anti-Semitism," the SOVA analyst notes; but he suggests this is an overly optimistic assumption. Indeed, those very values can become a breeding ground for anti-Semitic attitudes and actions. A major reason for concern, Verkhovsky continues, is that the Moscow Patriarchate has failed to provide a clear analysis of the Apocalypse and thus has allowed earlier anti-Semitic readings of that to remain widespread and unchallenged – and especially the most radical positions. And it has failed to do so despite the collection and widespread publication of openly anti-Semitic eschatological texts from the Russian past and their promotion by leading commentators and church hierarchs, texts that highlight the close links between eschatology and anti-Semitic ideas. Eschatology in the Russian tradition has been important for both Russian

nationalism and anti-Semitism, often serving as the link between the two given the stress both place on defending Russia as "the Third Rome"; and thus "the last bastion in the struggle with apostasy," a struggle that over the last two decades has taken the form of what one might call an Orthodox "jihad." As a result, anti-Semitism in Russia has not lost its importance even though "in mass xenophobia it long ago moved to a secondary or even tertiary level." As Shnirelman shows, it could easily re-emerge because the eschatological elements of Orthodoxy and Russian nationalism are powerful influences in the minds of many. Indeed, Verkhovsky concludes, "anti-Semitism as part of this assemblage is in practice inevitable, but even the more modernized forms of eschatological attitudes described in the book which avoid basing themselves on anti-Semitism, all the same provoke one or another form of xenophobia in general and anti-Semitism in particular."

###

The commentary above is from Paul Goble's "Window on Eurasia" series and appears here with the author's permission. Contact Goble at: paul.goble@gmail.com