

Foreword

The story of Metropolitan Anthony (Bloom) is many-sided. Born in Lausanne, the son of a diplomat and member of the “serving aristocracy” of Tsarist Russia, he spent his childhood in Persia, his father’s last diplomatic posting, and then, after the Revolution, ended up, as so many Russians did, in Paris. There he trained as a doctor and became (in secret) a monk. After the war he was ordained priest and soon given the rather odd appointment of Chaplain to the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius in England – odd, because though he was linguistically talented, English was not one of his languages. In England he became priest to one of the Russian Orthodox parishes in London, eventually at the Russian Orthodox Cathedral in Ennismore Gardens in Kensington, becoming Bishop, Archbishop, and finally Metropolitan of Sourozh, as well as for a time Patriarchal Exarch to Western Europe. During the 1960s and 1970s he became well-known outside Orthodox circles, and was for many a beacon of an assured, and intelligent, faith in a period of much questioning and doubt among Christians in the West, not least in England. This witness to traditional orthodox Christianity was, in a way, symbolised in the television debate he engaged in with the famous atheist intellectual, Marghanita Laski, in 1970 – “traditional, orthodox”, but still surprising and challenging: in response to Laski’s puzzlement at his belief in God, Metropolitan Anthony replied, “. . . it seems to me that the word ‘belief’ is misleading. It gives the impression of something optional. . . . I believe because I know that God exists, and I’m puzzled how you manage not to know.”

He remained in England, leading the Russian Orthodox Church until his death in 2003, seeing his church develop from a congregation of Russian émigrés to a mixed congregation of Orthodox of all backgrounds, including many English converts – a living witness to, and embodiment of, the universality of Orthodoxy. This is, however, only part of the story. During the 1960s and 1970s especially, he became well-known in the Soviet Union through his broadcast sermons, which – along with the sermons by the

Russian Orthodox theologian and exile, Fr Alexander Schmemmann, then living in the United States – kept alive the flame of the faith in the midst of an atheist regime intent on exterminating any trace of Christianity. Many owed their faith to these sermons, which presented Orthodoxy not as a relic from the past, but as a living, and intelligent, faith.

Metropolitan Anthony's presentation of Orthodoxy was in many ways unique, for all its faithfulness to tradition. He himself had rediscovered his ancestral faith by reading – in order to expose once and for all to his rebellious mind its falsity – St Mark's Gospel. As he read, he became convinced of the presence of the risen Christ, and found a faith that never thereafter deserted him. He had little time for academic theology, little time for a human confection of concepts, however clever (or especially if clever). Faith grew from experience and that experience was something to be found, and nourished, in prayer. Metropolitan Anthony would have been surprised to be thought of as a theologian, but such he was: speaking from his heart, from his experience, of what he knew (think of his remark to Marghanita Laski at the beginning of the aforementioned interview). He spoke, too, of prayer. But above all, he communicated: there were no treatises, but an abundance of sermons and talks, and perhaps even more important the communication that took place in conversation. He would also have disdained the sobriquet "intellectual", but his understanding was based on a profound intellectual commitment, and a willingness to question ideas that made little sense to him, however traditional. He could listen, too. Not infrequently one can detect in his way of putting things ideas and images drawn from poets, not just Russians, but Germans, too. It was thought that lived on his breath, not tired ideas remembered.

There are few well placed to give an account of the many sides of Metropolitan Anthony's life, but one of them is Avril Pyman (Sokolova). She is a distinguished scholar of Russian literature, who specialises in the "Silver Age" that led up to the Bolshevik Revolution and continued to flourish during the earlier years of communist Russia – the culture into which the then Andrei Bloom was born (the composer Aleksandr Scriabin was an step-uncle). Furthermore, she learnt her Russian from the émigré Russians in Paris in the 1940s and 1950s – the very émigré circles from which Metropolitan Anthony came. In the early 1960s, Avril Pyman married the Russian artist, Kirill Sokolov, and went to live in Moscow, whence they returned in 1974. A devout Christian, she decided to embrace Russian Orthodoxy, since living in Moscow and worshipping in the embassy church would have attracted unwelcome attention. The then Father Anthony Bloom received her into the Orthodox Church. Avril Pyman thus knew Metropolitan Anthony from early days, and has experience of the encouragement he gave, not least to the intellectuals of Moscow, through his broadcast sermons. We in the UK know about

the impact that he made, among the Orthodox and beyond, in our own country; Avril can help us to understand, as an eye-witness, what he came to mean in Russia during the dark days of the Soviet Union.

She is therefore uniquely qualified to write this biography of Metropolitan Anthony, able to speak from firsthand knowledge of what he meant both in Russia and in England. Her profound knowledge of Russian literary culture enables her to discern the intellectual roots of a complex man and priest who was such a vivid and compelling witness to the depths of Orthodoxy for his contemporaries.

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