

# ANATHEMAS AND FR. JOHN SHAW

By Vladimir Moss

The Orthodox world was shocked when, in 1965, Pope Paul VI and Patriarch Athenagoras “lifted the anathemas” on their churches. Metropolitan Philaret led the True Orthodox in protesting that this simply could not be done. The anathemas on the Filioque and other Papist heresies were eternally valid, for falsehood remains falsehood for ever; and as long as the Papists confessed these heresies, they fell under the anathemas.

The essential point is this: if an anathema expresses truth, and the bishops who pronounce it are true, then it has power “to the ages of ages”, and nobody can lift it, because it is pronounced not only by the earthly Church, but also by the Heavenly Church, in accordance with the word of the Lord: “Whatever ye [the apostles and their successors] shall bind on earth shall be bound in heaven” (Matthew 18.18).

However, following in the footsteps of Athenagoras, we now have a man who thinks he can lift anathemas: Fr. John Shaw. Or rather, Fr. John does not pretend to lift them (that would be a truly Herculean task for a mere priest!). He either (in the case of Patriarch Tikhon and the anathema on the Bolsheviks of 1918) says that a patriarch has lifted it, or (in the case of the ROCOR's anathema against ecumenism of 1983) does something even less plausible: he says it never really happened!

## The Anathema of 1918

Let us take the first case. On January 19, 1918 Patriarch Tikhon anathematised the Bolsheviks in the following words: “By the power given to Us by God, we forbid you to approach the Mysteries of Christ, we **anathematise you, if only you bear Christian names and although by birth you belong to the Orthodox Church.** We also adjure all of you, faithful children of the Orthodox Church of Christ, not to enter into any communion with such outcasts of the human race: 'Remove the evil one from among you' (I Corinthians 5.13).”

The significance of this anathema lies not so much in its casting out of the Bolsheviks themselves (all those who deny God are subject to anathema, that is,

separation from God, for that very denial), as in the command to the faithful to have no communion with the Bolsheviks. In other words, the government were to be regarded, not only as apostates from Christ (that was obvious), but also as having no moral authority, *no claim to obedience whatsoever - an attitude taken by the Church to no other government in the whole of Her history*. The decree ended with an appeal to defend the Church, if necessary, to the death. For “the gates of hell shall not prevail against Her” (Matthew 16.18).

Now Fr. John says that this anathema, which was confirmed by the Local Council of the Russian Church, has no validity because the patriarch repented of it!!! The historical fact to which he is referring is the following. On June 16 and again on July 1, 1923, Patriarch Tikhon issued from prison a “confession”, in which he repented of all his anti-Soviet acts, including his “anathematisation of Soviet power”, and “finally and decisively” set himself apart “from both the foreign and the internal monarchist White-guard counter-revolutionaries”.

Even supposing that this “confession” was meant to “lift the anathema” on Soviet power, the anathema was confirmed by the All-Russian Council, and the patriarch had no right unilaterally to annul an act of the Council. But in any case the “confession” was by no means meant to be such an annulment. Let us consider the witness of Archbishop Nikon (Rklitsky), with whom Fr. John was closely associated and whom he evidently greatly respects. However we evaluate Patriarch Tikhon's declaration, writes Archbishop Nikon, we must recognise: “1) it did not annul the anathema in the name of the Russian Orthodox Church on Soviet power, 2) he did not declare himself a friend of Soviet power and its co-worker, 3) it did not invoke God's blessing on it, 4) it did not call on the Russian people to obey this power as God-established, 5) it did not condemn the movement for the re-establishment of the monarchy in Russia, and 6) it did not condemn the Whites' struggle to overthrow Soviet power. By his declaration Patriarch Tikhon only pointed to the way of acting which he had chosen for the further defence and preservation of the Russian Orthodox Church. How expedient this way of acting was is another question,... but in any case Patriarch Tikhon did not cross that boundary which had to separate him, as head of the Russian Orthodox Church, from the godless power.”

Moreover, as reported in Izvestia on June 12, 1924, the Patriarch wrote to Metropolitan Anthony (Khrapovitsky): “I wrote this for the authorities, but you sit and work”...

So we, the Orthodox Christians, are not meant to pay attention to the patriarch's confession, which was intended only for the Bolsheviks. Unfortunately, however, Fr. John prefers to take the patriarch's confession seriously, as if he

were a Bolshevik... This is not only a slander on the patriarch, making him out to be a sergianist before Sergius, but raises the questions: Does not Fr. John believe that Soviet power was (is) under anathema? If he does not, then does he not believe that the communist State was (is) a legitimate State?

## The Anathema of 1983

Let us now pass to the anathema against ecumenism. Fr. John has for several now years been peddling the story that this anathema is of no significance because "it was not the product of any deliberation by the ROCOR bishops", but was "slipped in" by Bishop (then Protopresbyter) Gregory Grabbe. "Metropolitan Philaret," he writes, "basically did whatever Fr. George Grabbe (later Bishop Gregory) told him to. Most of the other bishops believed it was impossible to circumvent Fr. George / Bishop Gregory, and so they remained silent." That is why it was first published in the Greek newspaper *Orthodoxos Typos* and not in *Pravoslavnaiia Rus'*.

Two sets of questions are immediately raised by this story. First: if the anathema was published without the bishops' knowledge or their authority, why did they not immediately issue a statement to that effect? And why did Metropolitan Philaret write to Fr. Anthony Gavalas quoting the anathema and saying that it was the decision of the Church? Is Fr. John asking us to believe that the bishops were really so spineless as to allow themselves to be bullied, as it were, into accepting a doctrinal definition of cardinal importance by a mere priest? Why were they afraid? What power did he have over them? And secondly: if Bishop Gregory Grabbe had really forced them to accept an anathema they did not want or believe in, why did they confirm it in 1998, two years after his death? Does this not in fact show that the bishops were not bullied or deceived or browbeaten into accepting an anathema they did not want or believe in, but in fact believed in it? (Or, if some did not in fact believe, like Archbishop Mark, they at any rate thought for one tactical reason or another that it would good that the anathema should go out under their signatures.) For if they had been tricked by Grabbe, they were now free to reveal the plot (and the shame of their own cowardice) - but did not, instead confirming Grabbe's work (if it was indeed his).

Fr. John seems to think that the fact, if it is a fact, that Grabbe (or the Boston monastery) composed the anathema somehow casts doubt on its validity. But the author of a doctrinal definition is not important. We know, for example, that Professor Ivan Popov composed Patriarch Tikhon's epistle to Patriarch Gregory of Constantinople in 1924, and the Epistle of the Solovki Bishops in 1926. But

that fact is insignificant beside the fact that the Patriarch, in the one case, and the Solovki bishops, in the other, signed the documents in question.

The important questions about an anathema are: Is it true? And: Did the bishops of the Church confirm its truth? All other questions are strictly speaking irrelevant for us, the believers, who are required to act in obedience to the Church.

Fr. John says many blatant lies in defence of his thesis. For example: "There were no pagan services, or pagan groups represented at the WCC." Or again: "The ROCOR withdrew [from the WCC] because the Moscow Patriarchate became involved" (the ROCOR was never in the WCC). And worst of all: "In reality, none of the Orthodox participants in the ecumenical movement have said that Orthodoxy was not the true faith, or any of the other things referred to in the anathema" (they have all signed up to the branch theory of the Church, which is the main object of the anathema).

However, rather than spending time on these obvious lies, I should like to draw attention to a more subtle one. Fr. John writes: "In his message, the future Metropolitan Vitaly expressed the hope that such an 'anathema' might be enacted by the other Orthodox Churches. He thus shows that he did not see it as changing our relationship with them, or as anathematizing other jurisdictions."

What Metropolitan Vitaly actually meant he himself is in the best position to explain. But the idea that inviting other jurisdictions to enact the anathema somehow invalidates its power, or shows that it has no real power, is a very strange argument. Why invite someone to do something that is ineffectual and/or invalid?

There is perfectly reasonable way of justifying such an appeal to other Churches. The meaning of the appeal could be as follows: "We have anathematised the branch theory of the Church. We invite you also to anathematise the branch theory of the Church. In this way you will proclaim your Orthodoxy and be freed from the power of this anathema. If, on the other hand, you do not join with us in anathematising this heresy, this shows that you in fact confess the heresy, and fall under the anathema's power."

## **The "Heresy of Universal Jurisdiction"**

The attack on the validity of the 1983 anathema has been waged by others, notably Fr. John Shaw's comrade-in-betrayal, Fr. Alexander Lebedev, who some years ago called the idea that the anathema strikes down all ecumenists "the

heresy of universal jurisdiction". Who the anathema actually strikes down was never made clear. The only inference must be: ecumenists in the ROCOR's own fold (Frs. John Shaw and Alexander Lebedev perhaps?)

Readers will forgive me if I quote my own reply to Fr. Alexander in 2000: "Thinking about your 'heresy of universal jurisdiction', it seems to me that you confuse two things: the Church as an external organisation, and the Church as a mystical organism, to use the terminology of Hieromartyr Catacomb Bishop Mark (Novoselov) (+1938). It seems to me that you are right as regards the Church as an external organisation, but wrong as regards the Church as a mystical organism. Let me explain.

"An anathema excludes the person anathematised from the holy mysteries, from membership of the Holy Church. In the first place, of course, that applies to the local Church of which that person is a member. It applies to other Churches only to the extent that the leaders of those other Churches agree with the original anathema and 'sign up to it', as it were. Thus the heretic Arius was originally anathematized by the Bishop of Alexandria, which meant that he was excluded from receiving the sacraments throughout the Church of Alexandria. However, not all the bishops of neighbouring Churches agreed with this anathema, so Arius was able to receive communion in other Local Churches. To this extent the anathema was only of local significance. It required the convening of the First Ecumenical Council before Arius was anathematized 'universally' - and even then, the anathema was not universally received, as the history of the Church in the next fifty years demonstrates.

"It is a different matter when we consider an anathema *sub specie aeternitatis*, in its mystical, super-terrestrial significance. From that point of view, the anathematization of a heretic begins in the heavens. Thus even before Arius had been 'locally' anathematized by St. Alexander of Alexandria, the Lord appeared to his predecessor, St. Peter, with a torn cloak, and in answer to St. Peter's question: 'O Creator, who has torn Thy tunic?', replied: 'The mindless Arius; he has separated from Me people whom I had obtained with My Blood' (St. Demetrius of Rostov, Lives of the Saints, November 25). So not only Arius, but all those who followed him, had been separated from the Church by the anathema of Her First Bishop, the Lord Jesus Christ, years (or rather, aeons) before even the first 'local' anathema had been uttered. All heresies and heretics are anathematized 'from all eternity' by the eternal Lord, for just as every truth is approved by the Truth Himself from all eternity, so is every lie condemned by Him from all eternity, being condemned with "the father of lies" to the gehenna of fire (Revelation 22.15).

“The task of hierarchs on earth is to discern the decisions of the heavenly Church, and then apply these heavenly decisions on earth, in space and time. As St. Bede the Venerable (+735) writes: 'The keys of the Kingdom designate the actual knowledge and power of discerning who are worthy to be received into the Kingdom, and who should be excluded from it as being unworthy' (Sermon on the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, P.L. 94, col. 219). From this point of view, it matters not a jot whether a heretic is anathematized locally or universally, since he has already been anathematized by the heavenly Church. Or rather, it matters in this sense: that if the heretic has been anathematized locally, but this anathema is not accepted by the rest of the Church, then the rest of the Church is under the grave danger of falling under this same anathema. For the local anathema, if it is just, is the reflection of a heavenly anathema; and the anathema of the heavenly Church is universal....

“This explains why, when local Churches anathematized a heresy, they never qualified the anathema (as you, Fr. Alexander, would like to qualify the ROCA's anathema against ecumenism) by saying: 'but of course, this applies only to the heretics in our local Church'. On the contrary: history shows that local Churches freely anathematized heretics, not only in their own Churches, but also in others. Thus Nestorius, a heretic of the Church of Constantinople, was first condemned by a local Synod of the Church of Rome under St. Celestine; the Monothelite heretics were first condemned by a local Synod, again, of the Church of Rome; and the Papist heretics were first condemned by a local Synod of the Church of Constantinople.

“Consider what St. Maximus said of the Monothelites: 'In addition to having excommunicated themselves from the Church, they have been deposed and deprived of the priesthood at the local council which took place recently in Rome. What Mysteries, then, can they perform? Or what spirit will descend upon those who are ordained by them?' Note that the saint says that the heretics have excommunicated themselves; for as the Apostle Paul writes, 'he that is such is subverted, and sins, being condemned of himself' (Titus 3.11). But the heretics' self-condemnation and self-exclusion from the Church as a mystical organism must be followed by their exclusion from the Church as an external organization, lest others be infected with their heresy. Hence the need for councils of bishops to anathematize them, following the rule: 'A heretic after the first and second admonition reject' (Titus 3.10), and: 'If he refuses to listen to the Church, let him be unto you as a heathen and a publican' (Matthew 18.17). And clearly St. Maximus considered that the anathema of the local Church of Rome had validity throughout the Ecumenical Church.

“Administrative matters and moral falls are the business of local Churches and councils. However, heresies of their very nature are of universal significance, having the potential to infect the whole Church. That is why the appearance of a heresy in one local Church is not the business only of that local Church, but of all the local Churches - and every local Church can and must anathematize it.

“Even the anathema of single bishopric has universal power and validity if it is uttered in the Holy Spirit, in accordance with the eternal Truth. Thus in 1069 the bishops of the metropolitanate of York, in the north of England, solemnly anathematized both the Pope of Rome and his stooge, William the conqueror, the first papist king of England. All the evidence is that they did not know that the Church of Constantinople had already anathematized Rome in 1054. So they were not simply confirming the word of a higher authority. They did not need a higher authority. They were successors of the apostles, with the power to bind and to loose. And they used that power, not for personal gain (on the contrary: they paid for their boldness with their lives), even against the most senior bishop in Christendom...

“In the same way, in 1983 the Sobor of Bishops of the Russian Church Abroad, using the power to bind and to loose given them by the Bishop of bishops, the Lord Jesus Christ, translated onto earth, into space and time, the completely binding and universally applicable decision already arrived at from all eternity by the Council of the Holy Trinity, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Ecumenism is, was and always will be a heresy, indeed 'the heresy of heresies', and the ecumenist heretics are, were and always will be outside the Church, the mystical Body of Christ. The decision of the ROCOR Sobor in 1983, confirmed with no change to its universal wording in 1998, expelled these already self-condemned and Divinely condemned heretics also from the external organization of the Church - and woe to any man, of whatever Church, who despises that decision, for he will then surely fall under the same anathema...”

## Conclusion

Just as there is no deadlier weapon in the armoury of the Church than the weapon of anathema, which casts heretics out of the Church and places them, unprotected by the Church's blessing, before the throne of God's fearsome justice, so there is no more serious sin than to deny, mock, misinterpret or in some other way diminish the seriousness and significance of the Church's

anathemas, thereby diminishing the fear of God among the faithful and aiding and abetting the spread of heresy. The anathemas of 1918 against Bolshevism and of 1983 against ecumenism constitute the two most important doctrinal declarations of the One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church in the twentieth century. Between them they cast the proponents of "ecucommunism" out of the Church, and guaranteed the survival of True Orthodoxy into the twenty-first century.

In July, 1937 a secret Council of the Russian Catacomb Church took place in Ust-Kut, Siberia. Although the existence of this Council is not well-known, its existence is vouched for by three independent sources. Fr. John would do well to take note of the first three canons of this Council:-

"1. The Sacred Council forbids the faithful to receive communion from the clergy legalized by the anti-Christian State.

"2. It has been revealed to the Sacred Council by the Spirit that the anathema-curse hurled by his Holiness Patriarch Tikhon is valid, and all priests and Church-servers who have dared to consider it as an ecclesiastical mistake or political tactic are placed under its power and bound by it.

"3. To all those who discredit and separate themselves from the Sacred Council of 1917-18 - Anathema!"

What was said here in relation to the anathema of 1918 will undoubtedly one day be said by another True Orthodox Council about the anathema of 1983. Those who discredit and separate themselves from it will be under anathema. For "whosoever shall fall on this stone shall be broken: but on whomsoever it shall fall, it will grind him to powder..." (Matthew 21.44).

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Nikon, *Zhizneopisanie Blazhennejshago Mitropolita Antonia*, New York, 1960, vol. VI, pp. 151-152. Archpriest Lev Lebedev, *Velikorossia*, St. Petersburg, 1999, p. 577. Shaw, "Re: [orthodox-synod' Re: 50TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE RUSSIAN ORTHODOX CHURCH OUTSIDE OF RUSSIA", [orthodox-synod@yahoo.com](mailto:orthodox-synod@yahoo.com), 31 August, 2005. V. Moss, "Re: [paradosis] The Heresy of Universal Jurisdiction", [orthodox-tradition@egroups.com](mailto:orthodox-tradition@egroups.com), October 12, 2000. V. Moss, "Ecucommunism", *Living Orthodoxy*, September-October, 1989, vol. XI, ? 5, pp. 13-18.