In Memoriam

Father Gleb Iakunin (1934–2014)

Father Gleb Iakunin was one of those people who, in Russia, are known as ‘human-rights activists’. In fact, that’s what they call themselves. However, this term was coined in the West, while in Russia it has been used in a very peculiar context. Human-rights activists, in the West, act within a certain legal system and appeal to concrete laws.

The 1917 revolution in Russia did not change the law and legislation but, rather, did away with them. Even the decrees passed by Lenin's successors were purely pretense; at least those that had to do with ‘political matters’.

According to Lenin’s followers, any question that doubted their right to manipulate and adapt the law according to their liking was regarded as ‘political’. Therefore, it would be incorrect to compare Bolshevik dictatorship with tsarist autocracy.
The Russian monarchy openly declared that the will of the Tsar was above the law and was the source of the law, while Lenin's regime—which hypocritically claimed that law was above the will of individuals—in fact put the will of Communist functionaries above the law.

Reserving the right to alter legislation, Russian monarchs abided by the laws in force. Under Communism, Russian laws were respected only when they suited the powers-that-be or left them unaffected. All legal stipulations that guaranteed human rights were violated.

In such a situation, 'human-rights activists' first and foremost violated the tacit consent not to reveal that legislation in Russia was nothing but fiction. Human-rights activity was regarded as a 'political crime' because one could not defend human rights without violating the unwritten set of hypocritical rules in regard to the country's legislation. The government ruthlessly persecuted human-rights activists not because it feared human rights activity but, rather, because it could not allow a serious attitude to law and legislation.

That is the reason why the entire work of Father Gleb Iakunin was primarily aimed at defending the general principle of law rather than at helping individuals whose rights were violated (although he did help hundreds of people). He tried to promote law as the foundation of political life and the constitution of a society.

It is noteworthy that the famous 1965 open letter written to the Patriarch of Russia by the Orthodox priests Gleb Iakunin and Nikolai Eshliman began with an appeal to law as the country's greatest asset.1 The second paragraph quotes an appeal by Patriarch Aleksii I (Simanskii), to whom the letter was addressed, in which the Patriarch called on the people “not to violate the canon law of the Church”. The Patriarch's words were a classic example of demagogy and hypocrisy. The Patriarch, all the bishops of the Russian Church, all the religious figures of Russia—as well as all believers and non-believers—constantly were violating laws. Violation of laws was the trump card of the despotic regime, and the use of that trump card was strictly regulated. The amount of power was determined by the amount of permissible violations of the law. The General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) was free to violate any of the country's laws, while the Patriarch of the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) (Moscow Patriarchate, or MP) could break (and did break) any of the Church's canons. And they did this with perfect impunity.

Russian human-rights activists did not dare tell the country's authorities or the church leaders the truth about their attitude to law. In a bid to expose the

---