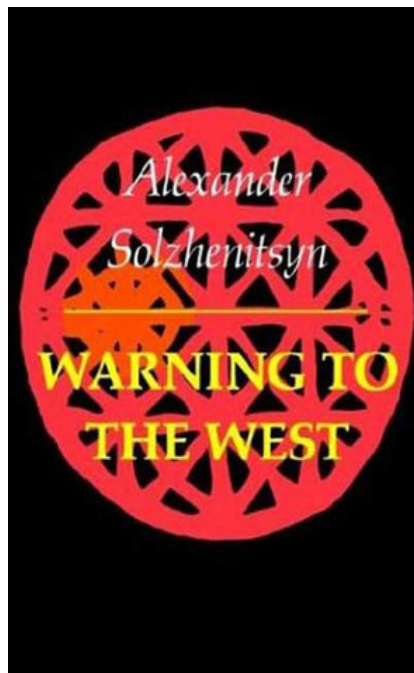
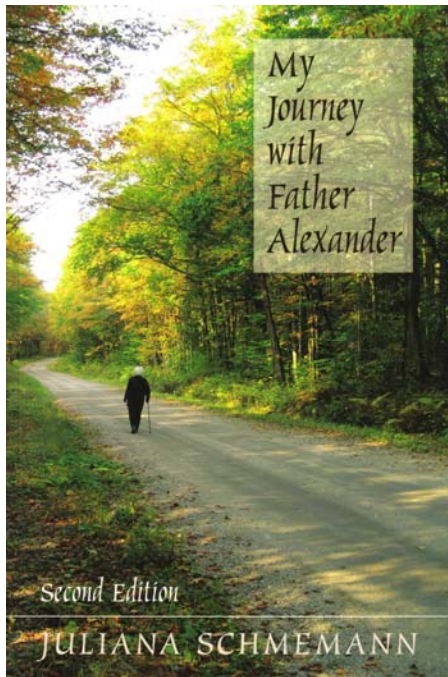


Juliana Schmemmann, *My Journey with Father Alexander*. Montreal: Alexander Press, 2007.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *Warning to the West*. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1975.



By Ron Dart

It was with much anticipation that I picked up and read through Juliana Schmemmann's *My Journey with Father Alexander*. Alexander Schmemmann (1921-1983) was definitely one of the most significant Orthodox theologians in North America in the 2nd half of the 20th century. The Orthodox journey taken by Schmemmann from Estonia (formerly part of the Russian Empire) to France (St. Sergius Theological Institute), and finally to the USA in 1951, is a touching and telling tale. Juliana Schmemmann has an eye for endearing details, and the life of

Alexander and Juliana unfolds in an inviting manner. The missive is not long, but the text and many photographs enliven the gentle but committed life of Father Alexander in a way that few could.

The many positive aspects of Schmemann's life are duly recounted and recorded. The Schmemanns were in New York when St. Vladimir's Orthodox Seminary was just about to emerge as the embodiment of a thoughtful and informed Orthodoxy in North America, and Schmemann was Dean of St. Vladimir's from 1962-1983. The fact that George Florovsky, a superb Orthodox theologian, invited Father Alexander to assist in the building up of the young seminary in the early 1950s was duly noted, and in the early years of their time together, Florovsky and Schmemann worked well together. Juliana Schmemann makes it clear that as much as they respected Father Sergei Bulgakov and his 'Sophia' tradition, this was not their way (p. 59). John Meyendorff (who I corresponded with when he was alive) arrived at St. Vladimir's in 1959, and the seminary continued to grow and flourish.

The early and unresolved tensions between Schmemann and Florovsky grew and led to a parting of the ways between the two men. "For Father Florovsky all these changes were unsettling and he and Alexander had many conflicts, misunderstandings and completely diverging opinions on the vision and the future of the seminary. In the end it became clear that the situation could not be resolved so Father George left the seminary to go to Princeton" (pp. 65-66). It would have been most informative if Juliana Schmemann had commented on the heart and core of the "conflicts, misunderstandings and completely diverging opinions" between Florovsky and Schmemann. Why did Florovsky leave and Schmemann remain at the seminary? The answer to such a question might illuminate much about Orthodoxy in North America.

The 1950s gave way, as they had to, to the 1960s, and the Orthodox community in the USA continued to grow and face the growing pains. Juliana Schmemann noted the tensions between Father Alexander and the Orthodox hierarchy (p. 72), and a meaningful storm was played out over the issue of an independent

Orthodox jurisdiction (Autocephaly) in North America. Such a transition was also influenced by the dynamics of the Cold War between the USSR and the USA, and many within the Russian Orthodox tradition feared that an independent Orthodox jurisdiction in North America would lead to an abandoning of the persecuted Orthodox in the USSR. Needless to say, there were many layers to the storm. Father Alexander was, though, often in touch with those in the USSR, and many were the broadcasts from the USA to the USSR that encouraged those under communist rule.

Juliana Schmemmann also mentioned the sadness felt by Father Alexander when the Orthodox Church of American (OCA) refused to welcome many evangelicals into their fold (pp. 75-76), hence their turn to the more receptive Antiochian Orthodox Church. Much was lost to the OCA by such a short sighted decision.

There are worrisome aspects of Father Alexander's life that do need to be pondered, though. The sacramental and liturgical life of Orthodoxy as summed up so well in Alexander Schmemmann's *For the Life of the World* tended to veer into an uncritical American patriotism. The fact that Alexander and Juliana could go to Israel and be feted by the Jewish state (pp. 76-79) should raise some curious eyebrows, and more to the assimilated point is the way Father Alexander was supportive of his son going to fight in Vietnam (p. 81), when many thoughtful young Americans opposed such an imperial adventure. The unhealthy link between Orthodoxy and American republicanism does make for some serious questions about 'the life of the World.' When Orthodox liturgy and sacraments cease to raise questions about empire, they merely become a numbing opiate, and this, I fear, is a serious fault and flaw in Father Alexander's theology.

Juliana lingered for a few pages on Father Alexander's relationship and friendship with Alexander Solzhenitsyn (pp. 83-86). Solzhenitsyn tends to get a negative read, and his many weak points are held up for all to see. I think, in fact, some of Solzhenitsyn's more probing criticisms of the West might have checked and countered Schmemmann's uncritical patriotism, but hagiography tends to ignore the blind spots in the 'saint' being discussed.

The final few pages of *My Journey with Father Alexander* tracked and traced the final journey of Alexander Schmemmann, after he contacted cancer, to his end (December 13 1983). The last few months of Father Alexander's life are sensitively written about, and his final liturgy is celebrated with much joy.

There is little doubt that Father Alexander Schmemmann has become a legend and model for many, but questions do need to be asked about aspects of his life and writings. My wife and I met in June 1975, and it was in those summer months that Solzhenitsyn gave his 'Speeches to the Americans' (June 30, July 9 & July 15). Solzhenitsyn, in the winter of 1976, gave his 'Speeches to the British' (March 1 & March 24). Most in the West assumed that Solzhenitsyn would mercilessly attack the USSR and idealize the West. But, to the shock and surprise of many, he raised serious questions about the West. In fact, he dared to go to places Father Alexander never seriously went.

I was living in a cabin in the mountain thick Crowsnest Pass in the autumn of 1976 when Solzhenitsyn's 'Speeches to the Americans' and 'Speeches to the British' were published as *Warning to the West*. My future wife, Karin, was visiting me in my mountain cabin on the west end of Crowsnest Lake for a weekend just after I had purchased a hot off the press copy of *Warning to the West*. We read all five 'Speeches' in the late autumn as brittle leaves were falling from their fragile branches and white embers sizzled intense heat in the fireplace. We were both taken (Karin having Russian roots) by the way Solzhenitsyn carefully dissected and exposed the weak underbelly of the West. Most were not pleased by his prophetic warnings. It was just a matter of time before Solzhenitsyn was ignored by the West. The imperial and political ideologues wanted someone who would champion the virtues of the West and proclaim the vices of Russia and the USSR. Solzhenitsyn, to his heroic and prophetic credit, clearly articulated the vices of the West in a way that few wanted to know about or hear. Schmemmann, to his discredit, never reached such a prophetic depth or candor, and it is rather sad that Juliana Schmemmann never probed deeper into, perhaps, the lack of a certain political depth in Father Alexander's life. When

theology does not engage the tougher political issues, it can become a sophisticated diversion, and, I fear, at times, this might be Father Alexander's temptation, a temptation, I might add, that Solzhenitsyn saw through and avoided.

We have been fortunate as Canadians, in many ways, to live on the edge of an empire. We are the product of one empire and have had to live on the border of another empire. Those of us who matured in the 1960s could not help but read George Grant's *Lament for a Nation* (1965) and Al Purdy's *The New Romans: Candid Canadian Opinions of the U.S.* (1968). Most of the more thoughtful in Canada in the 1960s were acutely aware that the USA was the most recent incarnation of the 'New Rome.' Grant saw this clearly as did the many contributors to *The New Romans*. When Solzhenitsyn gave his 5 'Speeches' to the Americans and British, we knew of what he spoke. Grant had issued such a warning to the West a decade before Solzhenitsyn, and did so in a more meticulous, historically grounded and probing manner. Those whose political theology has been shaped by the more prophetic insights and wisdom of Grant and Solzhenitsyn cannot but find Father Alexander rather paper thin on some of the more substantive issues in the material world in which we live, move and have our being. These issues do need to be faced when reflecting on the life of Father Alexander, those who follow his lead, and the Orthodox Church of America.

About the reviewer: Ron Dart, the author of more than 20 books, teaches political science, philosophy, and religion at University of the Fraser Valley, Abbotsford, BC. He is committed to furthering Anglican-Orthodox dialogue.