Martyrdom:
a Jewish-Christian perspective

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This conference is taking place in Romania. It is dedicated to the theme of martyrdom. Of course, the memory of those who suffered for their Orthodox faith under Communist rule must be foremost in our minds. Then there is much to say about martyrdom in the history of the Church herself, at all times and in all places. There are people here who can speak with actual experience about the first type of martyrdom, and other people here who have far more knowledge than myself about the second type of martyrdom. It would be inappropriate for me to speak about these matters here. Thus, I would like to add a different perspective, a meditation that arises from my own experience. I would like to speak as an Orthodox Christian of Jewish origin about how I, and then perhaps we – if you agree with some of what I say – can speak about victims of another 20th century totalitarian repression, the Holocaust, and how this can be related to the theme of Christian martyrdom.

Most of these victims, of course, were Jews. Some were observant Orthodox Jews, some were not observant, some were atheists, some communists, some agnostic. Many had no particular dedication to their Jewishness. There were also, of course, among the victims of Hitler's attempt at genocide, Jewish Christians, such as Edith Stein, or Ilya Fundaminsky – a secular Russian Jew who accepted Holy Baptism from an Orthodox priest in Ravensbruck.

Two questions arise immediately, both extremely important. The first is: well, what has all this got to do with martyrdom? The Greek word 'marturos' means 'witness', and is usually understood as witness to the Christian faith (though there are important qualifications to this, as we will see). The second question is related: why am I talking about Jews and the Holocaust at a conference of Orthodox Christians? Six million Jews were murdered by Hitler, true: but 23 million Soviet citizens perished fighting Hitler, a third of Belorussians died in the same endeavor, 2-10 million people died in the Holodomor, the famine deliberately engineered by Stalin in the Ukraine to crush Ukrainian separatist aspirations. Then, of course, millions of Christians lost their lives. I could continue. As someone who now lives in Russia, however, these are the statistics that are most relevant. And in Russia, as in many Eastern European countries, where for several historical reasons interpretation of the Holocaust sometimes differs from in Western Europe, the question which these statistics more or less loudly imply (depending on the asker) is: So why the Jews?

I will start with the last question, and it will lead into the first question.

There could be different answers to why I am talking about the Holocaust. An obvious one is that any Jew born after the War cannot but think of it. Perhaps especially one raised in a comfortable Western country like England, as in my case. The Holocaust brought home to me the arbitrariness of evil in the twentieth century in a deeply personal way: quite simply, that could have been me. But this statement leads me, for the moment, away from a Jewish-centered answer straight on to a more Christian-centered answer. Now that I am a Christian, why would I continue to dwell on the death of Jews, deaths engineered by a rather banal demagogue with a tedious ideology? The answer is that I believe that having become an Orthodox Christian, I have not ceased to be a Jew – at least as far as origins and self-identity are concerned. This is not the time and place to delve into the theology of this belief, but to cut a long story short, surely it would be absurd to undergo such a strange identity flip: I used to be a Jew, I used to have Jewish parents and be engaged in Jewish culture – but now I don't and am not! But grace perfects nature: it does

not erase it and start from a staring nullity. God does not utterly destroy a person, leaving nothing at all, and create something utterly different in their place – as if the unbaptized person had been an error of creation after all, so that no cultural, social or other continuity with one's previous self is possible.

So I have partly answered the second question. I am a Jewish Christian for whom the fate of Jews is of personal interest. But I would like to go beyond the personal and indicate why non-Jewish Orthodox Christians should also be interested in thinking about the deaths of Jews at the hands of Hitler, and not just Christian Jews either. I will do this briefly so that I can get back to the main question of martyrdom.

I think the briefest way to state this is to quote St Paul: "I want you to be quite certain, brothers, of this mystery, to save you from congratulating yourselves on your own good sense: part of Israel had its mind hardened, but only until the gentiles have wholly come in; and this is how all Israel will be saved….as regards the gospel, they are enemies, but for your sake; but as regards those who are God's choice, they are still well-loved for the sake of their ancestors. There is no change of mind on God's part about the gifts he has made or his choice (Rms.11.25-29)."

Fr. Sergii Bulgakov quoted this passage, and added to it the passage from Revelations 11 in which John talks of the two witnesses of the Second Coming, who Bulgakov sees as Jews. This led him to formulate his own response to the Holocaust in occupied Paris in 1941: briefly, he asked, how can "all the gentiles wholly come in", how can "all Israel be saved", and how can the two Jewish witness of the Second Coming be born, if the Jewish people has been eradicated? Answer: they can't. The fate of all humanity in history, and the fate of humanity in its transition to meta-history depends on the continuing existence of the Jewish people. In sum, Bulgakov saw clearly that Hitler with his genocidal ambitions against the Jews was a threat to the salvation in Christ of all mankind. Like other Russian thinkers, he referred to the Jews as the 'axis of world history', and as Christians we should be able to see why now: the attempted genocide of Jewry highlights in sharp bright colors the Christ-hating nature of Hitler's egotistical war. This was evident in the nature of the genocidal project into which Hitler poured the regime's technological and scientific efforts. And yet, despite this rationalistic-scientific aspect, the murder of Jewry in fact consumed and diverted far more resources than it produced and hindered the rest of Germany's war effort. And in this obsessive irrationalism, we can see quite clearly a demonic element.

At this point, I would like to quote a Soviet Russian-Jewish atheist poet to help me make the transition from the Christian meaning of the Holocaust to the theme of martyrdom. Boris Slutsky wrote a short poem in the fifties:

We Jews are lucky.
Without hiding under a false flag,
Without a mask, evil set upon us.
It did not pretend to be a blessing.
The arguments had not yet begun
In the deaf triumphant country.
And we, pressed up against the wall,
Found the wall gave us our balance.

Slutsky merely confirms Bulgakov's insight. There were those who saw the Germans as liberators in the Western regions of the Soviet Union, and the Germans were keen to support such nationalist, and it should be said, ecclesiastical, elements. But the Jews "were lucky": for them self-delusion was not an option. But I quote Slutsky for another reason: he was one of the few Soviet writers to break the ban on openly mentioning the Jewish Holocaust. Stalin's policy was to claim

that all nationalities had suffered equally, that all nationalities were equal against the gloriously leveling background of the great Soviet nation and the great Soviet victory over fascism. Slutsky's few Jewish-themed poems earned him the damning epithet of 'cosmopolitan' and he soon found himself without work and under invasive supervision by the regime.

Using his own language, we might say that Slutsky was lucky: despite the fact that he was an atheist who was enthusiastic about the socialist regime, his Jewish roots alerted him despite himself to truths which only became truisms for many people decades later. Naked of any conventional Judeo-Christian sensibility, he was forced to bear witness to another evil whose nature he had so far not suspected: that of his home regime, for which he had fought in defeating that regime about which the above poem was written. Stalin's fear of Jewish particularity was very telling.

I deliberately referred to Slutsky as a Jewish 'witness' of Stalin's evil, and in what follows I will now focus on the meaning of witness and martyrdom for Jews and Christians, and Judaism and Christianity, in the light of the events of communist and fascist totalitarianism that we have just briefly examined.

First of all, we can all safely agree that Boris Slutsky was not a Christian martyr, for at least two reasons. One, he did not testify to Christ, and two he did not die testifying to Christ. We can also agree that he was not a Jewish martyr: for Orthodox Jews a martyr is one who makes a public declaration of allegiance to God and Torah in the face of official demands to betray that allegiance or die. Both these notions of martyrdom have their origin in the deeds of the Maccabees. They died for their faith in the One God, and through their death and suffering they atoned for the sin of the rest of the nation. They were also, in one of the earliest Jewish conceptions of the afterlife, borne straight to heaven after their deaths. In this sense, martyrdom in both faiths contains the notions of conscious confession of the faith, sacrificial death, and atonement for the collective – the same elements later found in Jesus Christ's own death. Without going into the differences in interpretation of the Maccabees in Judaism and Christianity, we can simply reiterate our conclusion that according to this notion of witness-martyr, Slutsky and others like him do not fit the bill.

However, Christianity inherited from the Jewish Old Testament other images of the martyr/witness. One striking example is the Orthodox tradition of venerating as martyrs the infants massacred in Bethlehem by Herod. These infants are recognized by the Church as martyrs because they gave their lives so that Jesus Christ, another Jewish infant, might be born. Through their deaths, the salvation of the world was set in motion. Now the death of the Bethlehem infants is interesting: for, unlike the Maccabees venerated by both Jews and Christians, they could not have been conscious of what their deaths were enabling. Another case is that of the three youths in the Old Testament book of Daniel: they are considered martyrs for their witness in the furnace even though they did not die, but escaped unscathed. None of these cases contains both consent and death, but in both instances, the deeds of the youths and the infants still *witness* to onlookers about the presence of God in the world and the unfolding of salvation in history. It seems, then, that witness alone – without consent or death – can sometimes merit the title of martyr.

I do not wish to make any dogmatic or doctrinal point, even if I was capable of so doing. But the concept of a bold 'witness despite oneself' (the case of the infants, especially) haunts me here. Before considering how this concept has impacted on me personally, I would like show how this concept in fact emerges organically from the Church's own ponderings on these figures. For it appears that the Church herself seems to recognize implicitly the martyr-like status of those who died without confessing consciously to a belief in Christ, who predate Christ and who thus cannot in this world be aware of Christ – but who still point to and help Christ.

In the second troparion for the Feast of the Holy Innocents we sing[122]: "'The king of transgressions sought out the King of Eternity who had entered this age; yet he found him not and thus harvested a great multitude of innocent infants: he *unwittingly* made them martyrs and citizens of the kingdom from above, and they thereby exposed his great folly for all eternity." It is true that the word "unwittingly" is applied to Herod's action in making the Infants martyrs – but that meaning could as well be applied to the Infants themselves, who at least in this world cannot possibly be aware of the meaning of their deaths.

The Church's attitude to the Infant martyrs is made even more fascinating when we consider that their Feast falls a mere two days after the Feast of St. Steven, who is unambiguously called the First Martyr. Can the Church really have forgotten that only a couple of days earlier she had fixed the starting-point of the time of martyrdom, only now to shift the boundaries inexplicably?

In fact, the Church is fully aware of this paradox, as becomes clear when we consider how she venerates the Maccabees, whom she also considers martyrs, although they lived before Steven.

In the kontakion for the Feast of the Invention of the All-Honorable Cross, which coincides with the Feast for the Maccabees, we sing about the Maccabees as the "seven pillars of the wisdom of God and seven pillars of the divine Light, all-wise Maccabees, *greatest of the martyrs before the time of the martyrs*, with them we ask the God of all to save those who honor you."

Here, we learn quite overtly that there are "martyrs before the time of the martyrs". If interpreted according to conventional logic, such a statement is a simple contradiction. However, as we all know, Orthodox dogma and liturgy are permeated with an antinomian, non-Aristotelian logic: how else can we accept that Christ is fully God and fully man, that God is one and yet three? In light of this, we can say with the Church that the Infants, too, are martyrs before the time of the martyrs, and also that their martyrdom is not a conscious confession of faith in the Incarnated Christ.

I also deliberately said that the "infants *are* martyrs" – for this is another well-known antinomy of Orthodox belief. Christ was sacrificed once on the Cross – and yet our salvation is achieved because He still undergoes that sacrifice for each and every one of us since then. Indeed, he has been raised to a place where place (space) both is and is not place in our sense of the term, and where time both is and is not time. This cannot be explored here – but, likewise, although the unconscious infant-martyrs precede Christ, like Him, they are venerated because their sacrifice has enduring relevance to our salvation now.

In light of this understanding that Judaic martyrs such as the Maccabees and the Infants can be called martyrs in a different and more mysterious sense than the martyrs who followed Steven, I would like to once again switch back to a more personal note and share a story from my Jewish past, which I believe lives in altered though continuous form in my present Christian self – perhaps in a not dissimilar way to how the Church herself contains within herself her pre-Incarnational Judaic, Old Testament past – which as we saw is not 'past' but lives on eternally. That at least is how I propose as a Christian to view my own Jewish past, and this might help on a larger scale to see how the Church of Christ can relate to events which have befallen still living non-Christian Jewry.

Aged eighteen, I was traveling round Eastern Europe, and I visited Cracow. I wandered through the Kazimierz district. Before the War, this was the Jewish district of the city and photographs from that time show it to be a bustling, crammed district. What I saw in 1990 was a rundown area whose most striking feature for me that it was almost utterly devoid of any Jews – and yet the streets still bore Jewish names: Isaac Street, Elijah street and so on, if I remember rightly. The displays in the few remaining, museum-like synagogues added to the eeriness: there

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[122] Thanks are due to Fr. Christopher Hill, St. Andrew's Monastery, Moscow, for pointing out these hymns and discussing their meaning.

were old pre-war Torah scrolls replete with the golden crowns that are usual in such objects. The crowns made me think that an entire kingdom of religious devotion had been turned into thin air. And I also wondered, in this funereal darkness, at my own aliveness, my own Jewish aliveness.

Many of those vanished Kazimierz Jews were religious – the pictures in the synagogue exhibitions showed their earnest, pious faces – and may have become martyrs for God and Torah in the full Jewish sense. But in other cities, and in different parts of Cracow no doubt, there were Jews who would have found the Kazimierz district and its communalistic and ancient religion an oppressive anachronism. But both those types of Jews 'witnessed' to me with their loud and resounding absence. Oddly, most oddly, given the brutality needed to ensure their vanishing, they witnessed to me about none other than – God and True Life. Perhaps to be precise, their witness was in the form of a puzzle: such evident evil seemed to tell against a banal world of 'nice' and 'not-so nice' and to point to absolutes. Evil was shown to be a deliberate and violent swerving away from something else, and that something else was good, was God. Likewise, in the pall of the shadow of death, I felt myself gasping for and imagining, true life.

But how could I make the counter-intuitive and emotional leap from human evil to the existence of God? The most salient absence in Cracow was the absence of the religious Jews rather than the non-religious Jews – simply because, despite the attempts at eradication, the religious had left behind their Jewish buildings, street names and in the pictures of them, their clothes and ritual dress, while the assimilated Jews had been much less noticeable. In other words, the witness of the religious Jews even so many years later, bore a physicality, a trace of density. And these traces were the traces of Israel, the worshiper of God. Thus the physical absence of these very physical Jews pointed my heart and mind in the direction of God. The absence of any ancient people is shocking: when I was in Poland, I learnt and saw much about the Gypsies, too. And yet it was only this Jewish absence that set me thinking about God, the God of Israel.

My quest for God is not a subject for this talk. But in the present context, it has to be said that those vanished religious Jews who set me on the path to the God of Israel would, years later, come to seem to me, in Paul's words, "as regards the gospel…enemies." And yet it was their witness which brought me first to the God of Israel, and then to God's Son, Jesus Christ. So I quite understand Paul's next words that these witnesses are paradoxically only "enemies, but for my sake…" and that in their task of witnessing-despite-themselves, they are "still well-loved." And it is good that their physicality cannot be eradicated, just as it is good that God too took on flesh and physicality for our sakes.

Now of course, the unfortunate fact is that Jews, religious or otherwise, have very often in Christian Europe not been "well-loved", and it is the fate of Jewish Christians to have to discover the rather woeful history of their particular church's anti-Semitism, and the anti-Semitism of figures who on other fronts seem so holy. One of the reasons Jews have not been well-loved in modern times is not so much the fact that they killed Christ or did not accept him, but rather that they were not proper Russians, Englishmen or Romanians – at a time when it was of crucial importance to present a unified front in those nations – often in order to do war against other nations. But here, Fr. Sergii Bulgakov is very good again on how precisely Jewish cosmopolitanism and internationalism are a very good witness to the Christian Church: while the Nazis saw these traits as reprehensible, Bulgakov pointed out that Jesus' disciples' possession of just these qualities enabled them to mingle with the nations while retaining their separation from the places they visited. The Church these Jews founded also has that property of being in the world, dispersed throughout the world, and yet not of the world, and not even of the nation where that Church has its seat. And indeed, at those times when the Church has become too identified with that nation, it has surrendered to the heresy of philetism.

And in fact, it has also been my experience that often when thinkers call their thought Christian, and yet it is permeated with anti-Semitism, a little bit of investigation reveals that their thinking in other areas is not quite so Orthodox after all. It is one thing to claim that Christ has fulfilled the Old Law, the Jewish Law; it is quite another to claim that Jews must therefore cease to exist spiritually, culturally or otherwise. Because that position cannot be derived except by force and distortion from the New Testament and patristic writings, the effort in doing so soon pollutes the rest of a thinker's belief. Codreanu, the leader of the Iron Guard, which grew out of the pseudo-Orthodox Brotherhood of the Archangel Michael, soon began referring to himself as Jesus Christ, invoking the cult of sacred Romanian ancestors, and urging the nation to use the sword against its enemies, including the Jews. What seemed like a glorious combination of Orthodoxy and patriotism was really the worst kind of paganism. Not dissimilar examples exist in my own Russian Orthodox Church. I do not wish to point fingers. I merely wish to point out that Orthodox Christians, in addition to all the other blessings the Lord has given them, also have an important witness in the "lucky Jews", to help them discern truth from falsity.

I should perhaps add that the Jews have often been lucky despite themselves. It is not that Jewry is "infallible", always choosing the side of the good – a depiction of Jewry which veers towards the anti-Semitic stereotype of Jews as reveling in their own chosenness and superiority. In actual fact, many Jews in Germany and particularly in Italy also had fascist sympathies. If Hitler had not been anti-Semitic, but still as violent in other respects, there is reason to think that some German Jews, just like any other Germans, would have supported him if his interests coincided with their own. But, as so often, when "evil set upon" the world, it made its presence felt by loudly declaring its antipathy to Jewry. Jewry was a litmus-paper, unable to be the ally of evil, becoming instead its victim.

What then am I proposing as food for thought regarding Jewry and martyrdom during and after the War? Before summing up, I would like to make a partial contrast with the thought of Edith Stein, who had a more traditional notion of martyrdom coupled with Jewishness. Her powerful words deserve to be quoted: "I spoke with the Savior to tell him that I realized that it was His Cross that was being laid on the Jewish people, that the few who understood this had the responsibility of carrying it in the name of all…;" "I firmly believe that the Lord has accepted my life as offering for all. It is important for me to keep Queen Esther in mind and remember how she was separated from her people just so that she could intercede for them before the King."

Stein confessed Christ and died for it: due to her conscious consent, she was a martyr in the full sense of the term. And yet we see in her words a recognition that the Holocaust was a cross-bearing. She leaves ambiguous whether this cross-bearing can be a fruitful martyrdom if it is not accepted consciously. But certainly, she takes no risks and rushes to announce the meaning of that Cross. But in the other sense of an unconscious cross-bearing for Christ, can we not see some of the victims of the Holocaust as bearing witness to humanity about God despite themselves? And we should not delude ourselves: the Bethlehem infants averted the death of the divine infant. Likewise, the wrath and energy Hitler poured into annihilating Jewry delayed similar projects for massacring Slavs and other non-Aryan nations. Once the Jews had been annihilated, it would have been the turn of many others, including the churches. In addition, the senseless project of eradication also slowed Hitler's general war effort.

But Edith Stein, a witness for Christ, is also a witness to the fact that being a Jew is not, as has sometimes been thought – by both Jews and Christians – incompatible with being a Christian. Often such a conclusion has been made because the international, cosmopolitan nature of the Orthodox Church has been overlooked, and what is really meant is that the Jew has not become sufficiently Russian, English or Romanian to merit the name Christian. But for Edith Stein, the Jewish people was "well-loved", despite being an "enemy as far as the Gospel is concerned", and

her own Jewishness was brought to the foot of the Cross in a close bond with her love of Christ. In her person, we can see two different types of martyrdom combined[123].

The link between Jewry and the Christian concept of martyrdom was also noted by Mother Maria (Skobtsova), an Orthodox nun living in Paris at the same time as Edith Stein, and who herself died as a martyr in Ravensbruk. She made it the task of her Christian brotherhood to save Jews from the Nazis, and was arrested and deported for those activities. Of the Nazi persecution of Jews, she said: "It is a time of the martyrs. We would all wear the Star of David if we were brave enough." Certainly, in most cases perhaps, the choice of the Star of David and the death that came with it was not voluntary and it was not for Christ. Nonetheless, Mother Maria's comment indicates that the Star of David was somehow deeply linked to the Christian conception of martyrdom.

And yet, even without Edith Stein, Sergii Bulgakov, and Mother Maria to consciously interpret the witness of the Star of David in those times, I, for one, found long before I was acquainted with Orthodoxy in general, or these names in particular, that God was trying to tell me something about Himself through the death of His well-loved ones throughout the cities, towns and villages of Europe. I only wish and hope that those Christians, that is, men and women to whom Christ and the Holy Spirit have spoken and who witness to Christ *consciously* in their lives, those who are lucky enough that Christ has granted the bounty of His presence to them, do not neglect the strange witness of those victims of the Holocaust – to whom to our worldly eyes, Christ's message was not overtly granted – and worse, do not hate or envy those who still bear God's ancient chosenness and the sometimes difficult signs of His Love. That would mean to destroy God's witness. It would mean not to rise to the challenge of that witness. It would mean not to avail oneself of the chance to respond to that witness by becoming, as Mother Maria did when she saw the persecution of the Jews, a witness oneself, a martyr in the full sense of the word.

I should add, too, that in seeing Jews as 'witnesses', I have another precedent in tradition, which adds to the thoughts I explored above concerning pre-martyric martyrs – although in a slightly different way.

St. Augustine, for example, also referred to Jews as witnesses to Christ. He meant this in a negative sense: their exile proved that their rejection of Christ had been punished by God. But he also meant – and Pascal was to develop this thought in more detail – that the continued survival of Christ's blood relatives gives validity to the Gospel narratives, proving they are not myths or tales: such a people with its language and customs lived, and if you do not believe it, see that they live now. If you like, I have developed this one step further: the Jewish presence can also be a witness, an indicator of the dividing-line between good and evil on the stage of world history, as the Old Israel persists while the gentiles slowly come into the Church. This further step in interpretation is perhaps justified by the fact that Jewish history in Christian Europe took on an ever more tragic aspect after Augustine's times, so that such a reading of history would not have seemed necessary to him.

Thus I have distinguished, following the Church's own hints, two types of martyrdom: the 'hidden' and the 'open'. The 'open' includes those who died consciously for their faith. In the case of a pious Jew who accepted conversion at the point of a sword, I hardly think we can take such a conversion to be a victory for Christ. However, nor is it the place of the Church to determine the meaning of a Jew's decision to chose death to forced conversion. Can we say for sure that such a death does not indeed take the Jew straight into the hands of God, as the book of Maccabees tells us happened to the Old Testament saints? With Augustine, we must recognize that we cannot

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[123] It is true that Edith Stein's Christianity was an offense to many Jews, as was her proposed beatification by the Catholic Church….but these issues do not concern me here.)

know where the Church is not. Furthermore, the Church's hymns regarding the 'pre-martyric' martyrdom of her own Judaic saints – who are still alive in her eternal bosom – warn against such quick judgments. While Christians cannot dare to judge the status of those whom Jews unquestioningly consider to be martyrs in their understanding of God and Torah, moments such as these in our own tradition seem to show that the contemporary Judaic understanding need not be alien to the Church's understanding, and indeed shares a profound affinity – even if 'their' martyrs are 'before' or 'after' or 'tangential' to what we can see of the visible boundaries of the Church.

But the question of the full meaning of the suffering of those who do not die openly for Christ is for God to decide. What we can do, however, is decide in our own lives where the 'hidden' and 'open' martyrdoms can meet. Mother Maria, and Edith Stein, and Ilya Fundaminsky, did that by deciding that in France in 1942 the guise that the Cross had taken was the Star of David. The deaths that remain obscure for us, the hidden martyrdoms, need the 'open' martyrs to make their witness visible to the Church and the world. But even those of us who do not have the courage to turn hidden witness into open witness can still be touched by the hidden witness of the paradoxically 'lucky ones' through whom God has spoken.

To conclude, we might also remember that in the history of the Church, martyrs have not always been "in the open": Maximus the Confessor was considered a heretic when his tongue was ripped out and he was exiled by the "Orthodox" emperor. Only later was his position on faith vindicated. The lesson of Christian martyrs has always been to show that the truth, and power or officialdom, even when attired in all the symbols of Christianity, are not synonymous. In saying that some of the Jewish victims of Hitlerite power may have been 'hidden' martyrs who should provoke one to think of Christ's action and suffering in history, there might be other lessons as to how we think of those of other faiths who also bravely underwent persecutions in camps and prisons. This might more generally be called the martyric challenge of the Good Samaritan, that is, the heterodox who witnesses to the Orthodox about how he or she should act in this world, and which the Orthodox in humbleness can learn from.

But that opens up an entirely different avenue of thought…