

## RUSSIAN ORTHODOXY: RENEWAL OR REVIVAL?

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### I. Preliminary Observations

The fall of communism substantially changed the life of the world community. It brought about both positive alterations hoped for by many and new, unexpected problems and dangers. The Cold War, with its deadly confrontation of two "monolithic" superpowers, ended with the flaring up of bitter regional but, nevertheless, "hot" conflicts. The seemingly secular opposition between socialism and capitalism has been followed by the struggle among rival religious ideologies. What conceptual network can be applied, then, to this unstable situation of dispersed powers or, using today's popular terminology, different "language games"?

The revival of religion in our postmodern age may tempt us to return to that traditional view that in modern times has been propounded by German sociologist Max Weber. This general approach ascribes to religion a foundational role in human culture. According to Weber, an analysis of any specific type of civilization must take into account the religion(s) that gave rise to it. If so, the separation of the Eastern and Western Christian churches, for example, which occurred centuries ago and led to the formation of distinct Western and Eastern Christian traditions, may still be playing a significant, though often underestimated, role in the contemporary world. Moreover, the whole of modern secularism might well be characterized a period within the history of Christianity.

Seen through the prism of religious transformations, many contemporary events acquire a new meaning. For example, did the old tension between the Eastern and Western churches underlie the recent opposition between the former Soviet Union, headed by communist Russia, and the Western alliance, with the United States at its head? Are we in the beginning of a subsequent stage of this struggle, when atheistic and secular masks will be thrown off and the problem revealed in all its religious significance, if not irreconcilability? There can be little doubt, at least, that religious intolerance, combined with aspirations for a reward in the afterlife, could be even more militant and dangerous than an atheistic fanaticism, the ambitions of which are limited to our material reality.

### II. The Project of Modernity

After the Soviet Union ceased to exist, Russians were getting quite optimistic about their convergence with Americans. It seemed that America might do for Russia what it could never have done for non-Christian countries, namely, to help in rebuilding a civil society based on Christian ideals. However, the shared religious identity, which underlies the collective unconscious of both nations, created along the way as many obstacles as advantages--connected with basic difficulties for Russia in accepting fully the challenge of modern times. Let us first clarify what is meant by modernity before explaining these difficulties.

There are many approaches to the understanding of modern times. According to some accounts this term refers to a distinction between the ancients and the moderns--in other words, a difference between the pagan past and the Christian present of contemporary European civilization. Another German thinker, Jürgen Habermas, for example, argues that "[w]ith varying content, the term 'modern' again and again expresses the consciousness of an epoch that relates itself to the past of antiquity, in order to view itself as the result of a transition from the old to the new."<sup>1</sup> Other thinkers connect the concept of modernity to the Renaissance. For instance, according to the prominent Russian philosopher Nicholas Berdyaev, "in the basis of the historical process lies a relation of the human spirit to

nature, and the destiny of the human spirit in these interactions with nature."<sup>2</sup> Berdyaev describes three stages in the relationship of spirit and nature. On a first or pagan level, spirit is deeply united with nature. Christianity started a new era of antagonism, opposing the human spirit to "blind" natural forces. Finally, since the Renaissance, which is associated by Berdyaev with the beginning of modern history, the human spirit turns back to Mother Nature by exploring her powers in order to possess them.

Another opinion, the most widespread, is that the beginning of modern times has to be counted from the Enlightenment. According to this view, the coming of modern times is marked by doubt of any authority. It was precisely the Enlightenment in Europe that broke with religious authorities and proclaimed both the primacy of reason and sciences and the vital necessity for humans to purify themselves from all kinds of prejudices.

The author of this essay, however, sees the definite border of modernity neither in Christianity, as contrasted to the foregoing paganism, nor in any particular and culturally distinct epoch within it, for example, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, or the like. It seems to me that the idea of modern times is specifically tied with the rise of Protestantism and the Reformation in the Western church that initiated a renewal of Christianity.

### III. Religion as Organism

According to the theory of the organic development of religion, which I defend here, any religion may be compared to an organic system. Like every other kind of organism--plants, animals, or human beings--religion passes through certain stages of life, namely, birth, formation, growth, maturity, decline, and, finally, death. The spirit of religion is manifested in the realm of matter, as the tree appears from the seed. The symbol of organic life, the seed, potentially contains all of its future actualization. In a similar fashion, the life and teachings of the founder of a religion represent such a seed for the subsequent fruits of that religion.

There is, however, at least one important difference between the spirit of religion and the spirits of other organisms. The life of plants, animals, or humans does not incorporate other organic systems. The continuity of religion, on the contrary, necessarily requires the activity of human beings who are free to change its course and direction. Thus, religion begins with the prophet and ends up when no one professes it. Religion proceeds through the interaction between the sacred scripture and the sacred tradition, both as initiated by the founder and as interpreted by the legitimate successors of the founder. Religion, therefore, is developed by means of the changes in the latter as related to the former.

The history of Christianity might serve as a perfect illustration of this general claim. The life of its founder, Jesus Christ, and the formation of the Christian canon in the time of the first ecumenical councils was followed by the establishment of Orthodoxy. The function of the Orthodox form of Christianity consisted in freezing the balance between the written and the oral traditions. The cornerstone of Orthodoxy is expressed in this short and precise formula: "The scripture is the written tradition; the tradition is the living scripture."

Catholicism was a next step in the growth of Christianity as organized religion. While preserving the inherited tradition, the Catholic Church was nevertheless open to changes whether in dogmatic issues (the filioque question) or structural concerns (the status of the pope). The appearance of Protestantism marks the culmination of the process. Church reform weakens the oral tradition to the extent of proclaiming salvation attainable by personal faith alone. The Reformed church is no longer considered the Body of Christ but a community of believers, all of whom possess equal rights in interpreting the scriptural text.

The Holy Bible as the unshakable written word of God to humanity is respected in Protestantism as the only authority and the center of religious life. However, gradually the indisputable authority of the Bible also becomes contaminated with doubts. The historical authenticity of both the Old and New Testaments is questioned, and they are studied now more as a source of arts and literature rather than a religiously authoritative document. To sum up, the rejection of the oral tradition inevitably leads to the consequent denial of the whole of it, which signifies the decline of religion.

The appearance of the fruits on the tree also ultimately leads to their falling from it. Nevertheless, this does not mean that the fruits are useless, or bad. Similarly, the essential doubt of the scriptural authority that follows the weakening of the oral tradition in Protestantism does not have to drive us to a conclusion that Protestantism is a mistake. On the contrary, the Reformation of the Western church brought about the maturity of Christian religion. It

was accompanied by the flourishing of arts and sciences, the establishment of democratic institutions, and an unprecedented progress in technology.

It is my understanding, therefore, that different branches of Christianity, while disunited formally or institutionally, always form a unity on a spiritual level, the unity in Christ. This mystical or unseen church does not coincide with any particular confession, be it Orthodoxy, Catholicism, or Protestantism, because at any given moment it contains the future developments in the earthly churches.

The idea of such a unity of Christianity has been expressed in modern Russian religious thought in the concept of *sobornost'*, which is rendered in English as "religious conciliarity" or "organic togetherness in faith." As formulated by one of its nineteenth-century pioneers, Ivan Kireevskii: "The sum total of all Christians of all ages, past and present, comprises one indivisible, eternal living assembly of the faithful, held together just as much by the unity of consciousness as through the community of prayer."<sup>3</sup>

The meeting of Orthodox Christianity with Protestantism symbolizes, then, a reunion of the roots and the fruits of the same tree. The recognition of the latter by the former as part of itself, and acceptance of what it has given to humanity, I would call the "renewal" of the Orthodox faith, while resistance to growing with its younger sibling, the hostility toward Protestantism in its secular or religious form, I would name the "revival" of Orthodoxy.

Given this understanding of modernity, how did Russia respond to its challenge? Which of the two paths did Russia take?

#### IV. Russia and Modern Times

It is quite characteristic that the first two intellectual movements of nineteenth-century Russia, Westernism and Slavophilism, were religiously oriented. The root of their disagreement was in their differing positions regarding the separation of the Western and Eastern churches and, consequently, the role of Russia in the contemporary Christian world. Both parties from the beginning evidenced intellectual extremism in their proposed solutions. The Slavophiles claimed that Russia should follow its traditional Orthodox Christian path strictly, while the most radical of their antagonists were dreaming of de-Orthodoxizing their homeland. Surprisingly, however, the founders of both ideologies shared one thing in common, namely, their mutual hostility toward the spread of the Reformation.

The first "Westernist," Pyotr Chaadaev, for example, who became famous for his extreme skepticism toward Russia, argued that his native country exemplifies a fact of geography but not of history understood in a sense of Divine Providence. The seed of this Russian tragedy, he thought, was the consequence of Russia's acceptance of the Byzantium schism, as he put it, and the rejection of the principle of Christian unity. Chaadaev greatly sympathized with Catholicism for being the guardian of Christian civilization. His admiration for the role and the influence of the Western church nevertheless was not extended to its younger Protestant offshoot. Accordingly, Chaadaev did not approve of the political and social trends in the Europe of his time.

One of the first Slavophiles, Aleksei Khomyakov, was of an opposite opinion with regard to the Roman Catholic Church--Papism or Latinism as he called it--as related to Orthodoxy. In Khomyakov's view, Romanism was fully responsible for breaking Christian unity, while Orthodoxy represented an unchanged 2,000-year tradition of the true Christian faith. He insisted that Orthodoxy alone preserved the pure church and was the only hope for the future implementation of original Christian ideals. Under such circumstances, Protestantism as part of the Western confession was declared by Khomyakov a further development--or, better, "degradation"--of the Roman Catholic legacy. In his essay, "On the Western Confessions of Faith," Khomyakov defined Western Christianity thusly:

Romanism began at the moment it placed the independence of individual or regional opinion above the ecumenical unity of faith; it was the first to create a heresy of a new type, a heresy against the dogma of the nature of the Church, against her own faith in herself. The Reform was only the continuation of this same heresy under another name.<sup>4</sup>

More precisely, he wrote: "Protestantism means the expression of doubt in essential dogma. In other words, the denial of dogma as a living tradition; in short, a denial of the Church."<sup>5</sup> Khomyakov wrote the article, by the way, to prove the total incompatibility between the Western, especially Protestant, confession and Eastern Orthodox Christianity. His arguments for this thesis seem quite strong in light of modern Russian history.

The subsequent evolution of both trends in Russian thought is also remarkable. Thus, Westernism in the course of its development in the nineteenth century went through several significant transformations. Chaadaev was followed by the major Westernists, Vissarion Belinsky and Alexander Herzen, who, while defending liberalism, were already inclined toward materialism, so they severely criticized religion. The former spoke negatively, not just about Orthodoxy or other forms of historical Christianity but also about ideal Christendom. In his famous letter to Gogol, Belinsky stressed that the Russian people are "deeply atheistic" and claimed that "The Church has been and is a champion of inequality, a flatterer of authority, an enemy and persecutor of brotherhood among men." In his letter to Herzen he generalized this thought: "I see darkness, obscurity, chains, and the knout in the words 'God' and 'religion.'"<sup>6</sup>

Herzen, in turn, rejected a religiously oriented worldview and became a true believer in secular republicanism, in which he had moral faith. However, after the many years he spent as an emigre in Europe, he found himself completely disillusioned with Western culture. Herzen's "spiritual drama" led him to an "accusation of the spiritual order, the spiritual universe, of Western Europe . . . [to] his struggle with the Philistinism of Western Europe, in his passionate unmasking of the moral narrowness and spiritual insignificance of this Philistinism."<sup>7</sup> In the following generation, the tendency toward primitive atheism prevailed over the will to liberalism. After the period of nihilism and materialism under Nicholas Chernyshevsky and Dmitry Pisarev--the former, the son of an Orthodox priest--Russia witnessed the birth of extremist revolutionary ideologies, including Bolshevism, a Russian (per)version of Marxism that was destined to take over the country for more than seventy years.

The metamorphosis of Westernism in the nineteenth century toward leftist radicalism was paralleled by the degradation of Slavophilism to a reactionary nationalism. The so-called "younger Slavophiles," Nicholas Danilevsky and Konstantin Leontyev, were already able to sacrifice the principle of Christian universalism for the glorification of the future greatness of the "Slavic cultural type" and the Russian nation.

Thus, according to Danilevsky, the adherent of pan-Slavic ideals, all of humanity is divided into different cultural-historical types. These types never did, and never will, constitute a unified civilization. Moreover, domination of one type over all others would lead to the degeneration of humanity. Every cultural type, Danilevsky claimed, has its specific features that cannot be inherited by another cultural type. In Russia and Europe, his magnum opus, he noted, for example, that:

". . . Jewish culture [has] a religious foundation, Greek [culture has] an artistic foundation, while Rome has developed a highly political culture. The Roman-Germanic type has a dual foundation and is distinct in political culture by having a scientific and industrial character."<sup>8</sup>

Our time, Danilevsky argued, will, of course, witness the coming of age of the Slavic cultural-historical type in all its brilliance and power.

Another step in this direction was taken by one of Danilevsky's admirers, the Russophile, Konstantin Nikolayevich Leontyev. Leontyev's philosophy of culture was based on a triadic formula of history, according to which "Historical cultures, like living organisms . . . develop from an infantile stage of 'initial simplicity' to a mature stage of 'flourishing complexity', and then sink through a stage of 'levelling interfusion' to organic death."<sup>9</sup> Leontyev associated the pre-lethal stage of "levelling interfusion" in European culture with the new spirit of freedom, equality, and comradeship. He equated the decline of nineteenth-century Europe with the spread of democracy and the total standardization of life. He then preached the need for "freezing" Russia to give it a chance to escape the miserable destiny of the West. Such an unmasked apologia for reaction was followed by the appearance of right-wing ideologies advocating chauvinistic ideas mixed with Russian messianic expectations.<sup>10</sup>

Unfortunately, those thinkers who proposed a more moderate response to the challenge of the West have remained in almost total isolation. The writings of Vladimir Solov'ev (1856-1900), for example, which probably could have renewed Orthodoxy on the foundations of liberalism, were completely forgotten during the Soviet period in Russia. However, many Russian religious thinkers, the followers of the Solov'evian project in exile, were sharply criticized by their fellow compatriots--emigrants who belonged to conservative Orthodox circles. It will suffice to name such twentieth-century thinkers as Fr. Sergei Bulgakov and Nicholas Berdyaev--the "Parisian modernists," as they have been sarcastically labeled by their critics for their efforts to introduce innovations into static Orthodox doctrines.

## V. Concluding Remarks

The fall of the Soviet empire revitalized for the second time in this century the old problem of the Russian choice. If Russia takes the path of revival again, we will observe the same pattern of hostility toward the West and the claims for religious exclusivity, concentration of political power in the hands of a few, and messianic forms of nationalism. If, instead, Russia follows the way of renewal, we will witness the spirit of ecumenicity and interreligious dialogue, the establishment of democratic institutions, and an aspiration for universalism and the global integration of humankind.

In spite of the dramatic weakness of the tradition of "liberal Orthodoxy" in the Russian past, the second solution must finally prevail. It seems to me that two things are urgently needed in the domain of religion to speed up this process: a real openness on the part of Orthodoxy to a constructive dialogue with other Christian branches, especially with Protestant denominations; and Orthodoxy's recognition and realization of complete religious freedom in Russia without any reservations or limitations.

## ENDNOTES

1. Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity--An Incomplete Project," in Hal Foster, ed., The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), p. 3.
2. Nicholas Berdyaev, The Meaning of History (Smysl Istorii) (Moscow: Mysl', 1990), p. 16.
3. Quoted in George L. Kline, "Russian Religious Thought," in Ninian Smart, John Clayton, Steven T. Katz, and Patrick Sherry, eds., Nineteenth Century Religious Thought in the West, vol. 2 (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 183, from Ivan Vasilyevich Kireyevsky, "On the Necessity and Possibility of New Principles in Philosophy," tr. Peter K. Christoff, in James M. Edie, James P. Scanlan, and Mary-Barbara Zeldin, eds., Russian Philosophy, vol. 1 (Chicago, 1965, 1969; Knoxville, TN, 1976), p. 177.
4. Aleksei Khomyakov, "On the Western Confessions of Faith," in Alexander Schmemmann, ed., Ultimate Questions: An Anthology of Modern Russian Religious Thought (New York, Chicago, and San Francisco, CA: 1965; Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1977), p. 40.
5. Quoted from Vasily Zenkovsky, A History of Russian Philosophy, vol. 1, tr. George Kline (New York: Columbia University Press, 1953), p. 269.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid., pp. 276-277.
8. Quoted in Nicholas Lossky, History of Russian Philosophy (Moscow: Vysshiaia Shkola, 1991), p. 98.
9. Quoted in Kline, "Russian Religious Thought," p. 195, from P. Ya. Chaadayev, Sochineniya, ed. M. O. Gershenzon (Moscow, 1913; repr., Oxford, 1972), vol. 5, p. 197.
10. For details, see The Russian Challenge and the Year 2000, tr. Iden J. Rosenthal (Oxford and New York: Basil Blackwell, 1987), and other books by Russian scholar Alexander Yanov on the history of Slavophilism.