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The Religious Roots of Change in Present-day Russia

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This article is an account of the proceedings at an international interdisciplinary conference convened at Dartmouth College, Hanover, Vermont, USA, from 8 to 11 July 1992, entitled 'The Renewal of Russian Spiritual Life: Its Relation to the Emergence of Democratic Institutions'.¹

'In Search of a Usable Tradition' was the title of one paper. In devising this title the historian Professor Robert Daniels successfully pinpointed three prominent themes that were to emerge from a particularly full and stimulating programme: firstly, the notion of a *quest*; secondly, the attempt to characterise and evaluate a particular *tradition*, namely a Russian tradition of spirituality and religious philosophy; and thirdly, the attempt to gauge the *utility and applicability* of that tradition to contemporary Russia.

This was the second meeting organised by the Transnational Institute of Norwich, Vermont. The first, rather more modest, gathering took place in Moscow in September 1991, in the closing and very precarious months of Soviet rule, when scholars from Russia itself, the USA, Sweden and elsewhere committed themselves to further serious study of Russian religious philosophy and established a Vladimir Solov'yev Foundation to assist Russian scholars in undertaking research in the field.² With an extremely generous grant from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation, the Transnational Institute was able in July 1992 to bring together nearly one hundred scholars from the USA, Russia and Europe, to explore further aspects of Russian religious thought and its contemporary influence.

Many factors contributed to the marked success of the conference and to the fruitful interchange of ideas that took place there: the obvious importance of the subject matter under discussion; the active interest shown by scholars from a number of different fields; the organisational efficiency which came from many months of forward planning and sustained work on the part of Clinton Gardner and Ruth Stalker at the Transnational Institute office; and the timing of the event. Coming almost one year after the attempted coup of 19–21 August 1991, this conference provided an ideal opportunity to reflect extensively on the discredited legacy of Soviet rule and on the various attempts, during the Soviet years, to present alternative, non-Leninist ideas on the welfare of society. Participants were engaged in an attempt to judge how far the ideas of Vladimir Solov'yev, Semen Frank, Lev Karsavin, Pavel Florensky and other religious philosophers could be said to have inspired and shaped independent endeavours to elaborate a range of ethical and social values that were, in the fullest sense, 'spiritual'. In the first place, the discussion sessions at the Dartmouth College conference benefited from the complete absence of post-coup euphoria: it had become clear that Russian society (and indeed all the peoples of the former Soviet empire) needed remedies that were significantly more sustaining than blind imitation

of western market economies or the elevation of yesterday's 'villains' into the 'heroes' and 'saints' of a radiant, non-Soviet future.

This sobriety and realism were, in considerable measure, made possible by the presence of some individuals who, living in Soviet society in the 1970s and 1980s, had tried to orient themselves and their immediate community towards spiritual goals. This was the experience of ex-prisoner of conscience Vladimir Poresh, who attended the conference as a guest speaker and who with considerable personal humility gave an account of his involvement in the Christian Seminar movement of the second half of the 1970s.

A very striking feature of the conference was the prominence given to the social consequences of Russian thought, especially by spokesmen for various independent groups that engage in charitable and educational projects. Discussion was thus not confined to the theoretical level, and the activist orientation of much nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian religious philosophy was made plain. Vladimir Poresh and his colleague Konstantin Ivanov described the organisation and running of the school that their 'Open Christianity' group has established in St Petersburg;³ Vladimir Malyavin described in some detail the voluntary work in hospitals undertaken by Christian 'brotherhoods' (*bratstva*) such as the Brotherhood of the Transfiguration, to which he himself belongs; Vladimir Malyavin joined Oleg Genisaretsky in describing the aims of the independent educational organisation *Put'*,⁴ which is affiliated to the Russian Academy of Sciences; Claire Lacattiva described a project designed to assist Russian children to overcome the negative formative influences of Soviet society and to reorient themselves towards positive self-images and images of society; Lev and Kseniya Pokrovsky, together with Sergei Khorujy, described the social and religious dimensions of the work and influence of Fr Aleksandr Men', which they knew through very close personal contact with the murdered priest. The importance of social activism in Russian religious thought was recognised and welcomed at this conference to an extent that I have not encountered at any other conference or seminar.

Another notable feature of the conference was that it expressed a sense of the *continuity* of Russian religious and philosophical thought: it was not merely the turmoil of post-Soviet society that prompted one to consider the very foundations of Russian social and political life, their strengths and flaws, but also the introspective and eternally self-questioning cast of 'the Russian mind'. There were many times during the conference when ideas uttered during the panel discussions evoked the lengthy 'kitchen-table' disputes known to virtually all Slavists who have studied in Russia. Of course, this sense of *déjà entendu* has its negative as well as its positive aspects: one wonders how many more times it will be necessary to consider the features of the 'Russian soul' or the value of Russia's contribution to world culture, and to what extent these preoccupations are symptomatic of the intelligentsia's inability to judge what is really at stake in their country. (This line of thought can itself be grounds for further self-reproach on the part of the contemporary Moscow or St Petersburg *intelligent*!) On the other hand, the way that the names of figures like Radishchev and Chaadayev are evoked in discussion even today testifies to the enduring quality of their ideas. Few have been cited as frequently as Dostoyevsky, that contentious yet emblematic embodiment of 'prophetic' vision. No one could have done more to convey the immediacy and urgency of those Russian 'kitchen-table' disputes regarding the existence of God, or of the rebellious speculation now associated with the names Raskol'nikov, Shchigalev, Shatov, Verkhovensky and Ivan Karamazov. Dostoyevsky was, indeed, given consideration at the conference: in a

moving address by Yuri Karyakin, in numerous discussion sessions throughout the proceedings and, as a background presence, when Konstantin Ivanov spoke so powerfully about the tenaciousness of Russian nihilism.

Attempts to characterise and evaluate what is 'Russian' in the world of ideas and cultural influences remain singularly important at the present time, as the paper by Fr Venyamin Novik made clear. This is not merely the artificial perpetuation of a debate that should have been consigned to the intellectual salons of the remote past; it is critically important that this whole area of debate should *not* be surrendered to nationalist ideologues of the extreme right. In the interests of promoting a truly pluralistic society and, at the same time, ensuring that sound and cogent debate about Russian cultural values remains possible, this much-discussed theme needs further exploration. Just as well-founded philosophies affirming the worth of the individual were needed at times when the collectivist orientation of official Marxist-Leninist thought was most strictly imposed, so truly free and wide-ranging reflection upon the national culture and history of Russia is needed as a corrective to the fanatical intolerance and extremism of present-day Russian nationalists.

It was to be expected that the papers delivered at this conference would in some way or other treat the various polarities, clashes and tensions within Russian philosophy and culture. Nikolai Berdyayev described Russian culture as being fundamentally riven by schism (*raskol*), and before him, Vladimir Solov'yev devoted much thought to the enduring influence on Russian society of the actual seventeenth-century schism in the Russian Orthodox Church. Divisions and polarities of this kind were considered in papers by Vladimir Malyavin ('Russia facing East and West') and Vyacheslav Stepin, Director of the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences, who concentrated more on the clash between traditional (pre-Petrine) and modern value systems and the consequent divorce between the western-oriented intelligentsia and the people. Especially valuable papers were offered by Fr Venyamin Novik and Konstantin Ivanov, and these merit a particularly close reading, all the more so since they fully confront the problems and malaise of present-day Russia.

'In Russian philosophical thought there was at once too much and too little religiosity', writes Konstantin Ivanov. Here we have a paradox that served as a basis for extensive discussion and lay at the heart of both his and Fr Venyamin's papers. In a paper entitled 'The Russian idea in the present day', Fr Venyamin focused attention upon the excessive tendency, in the Russian Orthodox tradition, to value the 'spiritual' dimension and discard the secular realm, which amounted to 'a reluctance to think about the practical possibility of correlating the two kingdoms, heaven and earth'. This characteristic, one-sided spirituality brought with it a reluctance to participate in political life, and the consequences were extreme and negative: effectively this allowed the bolsheviks to deceive the Russian people, 'who had no tradition of Christian understanding of social problems, because in Russia Christianity was conceived only as a religion of personal salvation'. 'Now theologians have to face the basic problem of a Christian understanding of the civic responsibilities of an individual,' writes Fr Venyamin. It was a need about which Vladimir Solov'yev had spoken a whole century earlier in his highly controversial 1891 lecture 'On the decline of the medieval world view', attacking the quietist stance which he believed to be characteristic of Byzantine Christianity and which, in his view, threatened to weaken the fabric of Russian society.⁵ In his paper Fr Venyamin decisively establishes the relevance of these matters for present-day Russia. He notes a continuing reluctance, on the part of Russians, to involve themselves fully in political life:

None of the reforms is carried through to the end, no one cares to follow the laws or edicts passed by Parliament or the President. No careful consideration of the organic connection between a naturally total communist ideology and violence has been accomplished. And the fact that no really critical analysis of communist party activities has yet been made shows us that its long-term dictatorship in Russia was not accidental.

People have been affected by the violent manner in which the bolsheviks imposed their ideology and suppressed Christian and other alternative value systems.

Fr Venyamin expresses the hope that the former richness of Russian spirituality and culture signifies the possibility of well-being and sound growth in time to come. The present period of turbulent transition, he comments, is marked by a very pronounced need to 'recover a sense of identity'. The specific, characteristically 'Russian' elements that he wishes to see in play are identified in his conclusion:

It seems that the Russian idea can be realised in a new synthesis of Russian openness, a sense of social justice, personalism and also entrepreneurship when that ceases to be looked upon as something sinful. To sum up: before us is the challenge of *a personalistic discovery of Russian universalism* about which Dostoyevsky spoke so prophetically.

Konstantin Ivanov's paper covers similar terrain, using the philosopher Lev Karsavin's ideas as a point of departure and affirming that Karsavin's contribution to Russian philosophy and religious thought ought to be accorded greater recognition than it has had to date: 'It should be noted that Karsavin even more than Berdyayev or Frank emphasised the Christian meaning of the problems which manifest themselves in nihilism or are hidden by atheistic doctrines.'

Like Fr Venyamin, Konstantin Ivanov focuses upon the imbalance that characterised much Russian Orthodox theology and contributed to the total sacralisation of Russian society so that the state (and eventually the communist-based Soviet state) acquired an unwarranted degree of authority. A further effect of this total sacralisation is that ideas and institutions which are, by their fundamental nature, *secular* acquire a spurious aspect of religiosity. This impedes the balanced coexistence of the spiritual and secular aspects of life. To quote Ivanov: 'Instead of western secularisation we observe, in Russia, a strange consecration of what is actually separated from the church, of statesmanship, social life and culture.' Among the Russian intelligentsia this tendency was especially apparent in their exaggeratedly positive and uncritical reception of western European thought (Hegel, Schelling, Comte, Proudhon, Fourier, Darwin, Marx, to name just the foremost idols). Ivanov suggests that this adulatory and quasi-religious response to western ideas 'makes balanced and peaceful secularisation impossible'.

A fundamental issue which concerns Ivanov greatly (and which is fully articulated in his valuable paper) is this: there is, he believes, a very real danger that the enduring and seemingly laudable preoccupation of Russian religious philosophers and social thinkers with notions of All-Unity and *sobornost'* could contain the seeds of totalitarianism. Here it is appropriate to cite Ivanov's paper at greater length:

The ideas of 'total unity', 'all-encompassing knowledge', '*sobornost'*', 'God-made-man' are the greatest achievements of Russian thought; it is exactly here that they share the responsibility for utopian, fanatical totalitarian communist ideology with all its disastrous ramifications. It is the ideas that called for dismissing western secular culture and declared their

readiness to bring together and unite on the religious-Orthodox basis all disintegrated and free elements of culture and social life that were hidden and deeply-rooted sources of totalitarian ideas. The idea of all-embracing culture and social life which was proclaimed as a religious ideal was not well thought out and could hardly be realisable. Considering all this, it would be only natural to expect pseudo-religious ideology to claim culture and society totally. It is not accidental that the pre-revolutionary flowering of culture and thought (religious too) was replaced by an outburst of nihilistic and utopian ideology The ideal of total religiosity easily turns into the ideal of totalitarianism, the ideal of theocracy into that of despotism.

For all these reasons Ivanov pleads for a serious and sustained reassessment of Russian religious thought, a reassessment founded upon recognition of the fundamental nature of nihilism in its various forms.

It is fitting that several papers delivered at the conference were, indeed, devoted to the task of reassessment. Prominent among these was a very lucid paper that sought to examine closely the term '*integral knowledge*' which is so frequently encountered in Russian religious-philosophical writings. The speaker, Fr Robert Slesinski (author of a well-received study of the ideas of Pavel Florensky), chose to question whether the notion of 'integral knowledge' was entirely clear to the very philosophers who used the term, and whether this mode of knowledge could be properly distinguished from 'faith' or 'intuition'. Another paper, that delivered by Professor James Scanlan of Ohio State University, sought to establish that the *secular* stream of Russian thought (eminently well represented by Radishchev) constitutes a valuable source of humane values and of formative ideas that might serve to enhance the present-day process of reform. Professor Scanlan asked his audience firmly to resist the temptation to turn to the Russian tradition of religious thought and treat that tradition as an *exclusive* embodiment of truth. This paper served as a welcome affirmation of the best qualities in Russian secular thought and also elicited good and lively discussion. The case for resisting philosophies and political creeds oriented towards the remote future was put by Professor George Kline, Emeritus Professor at Bryn Mawr. In a paper entitled 'The potential contribution of Russian philosophy to the building of a humane society', Professor Kline drew particularly on Herzen, Bulgakov, Berdyayev and Solov'yev in order to show that there were, indeed, prominent Russian philosophers and social thinkers who understood that thought systems wholly oriented to the future (and to the happiness of future generations) came to treat the present era as no more than the means to the distant, desirable goal. With that depreciation of the present came the rejection of the notion that each individual, here and now, deserves opportunities to achieve fulfilment – another very recognisable feature of the Soviet social experiment.

Aware that the accent of the conference was on the state of contemporary Russian society, Peter Quimbey, a postgraduate student from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, examined the dilemma now confronting the leadership of the Russian Orthodox Church. In a clear and closely argued paper, Quimbey sets out the reasons why the church leadership is unable to benefit fully from the demise of Soviet power. He writes of the 'crisis of legitimacy' that is holding church leaders back from fully assuming a guiding role for Russian society: virtually all the factors involved relate to the thorny question of the church's relations with the state during the Soviet period (complicity, subservience, pragmatic attempts to save at least something of church life). Quimbey's paper goes into considerable detail about the Moscow Patriarchate's

present options and about ways it might present itself so as to enhance its authority. Should Patriarch Aleksii and his bishops strive, above all, to provide the stability and continuity that are so painfully lacking in the community at large, and achieve this principally by concentrating upon their spiritual ministry? Should they establish more clearly than before that the Moscow Patriarchate regrets the harm caused by previous complicity with the Soviet authorities? Is support for certain parties, factions or individuals in the political arena a viable option at the present time? Should the church make more of its new scope for involvement in charitable work in the community, which had been forbidden for whole decades?

Numerous other subjects were covered during the four-day programme: there were excursions into liberal legal philosophy (by Sergei Chizhkov and Aleksei Kara-Murza, both of the Institute of Philosophy of the Russian Academy of Sciences); and in a special keynote address towards the end of the proceedings Jack Matlock, formerly US Ambassador to the USSR, gave his views on the prospects for democracy in Russia. Papers were offered on Rozanov (Stanislav Dzhimbinov, Gorky Institute of World Literature, Moscow), Merezhkovsky's readings of Tolstoy (Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, Fordham University, New York), Florensky (Donald Sheehan, Dartmouth College, Hanover), N. S. Arsen'yev (Nadja Jernakoff, New York) and Solzhenitsyn in the context of *Vekhi* (Allen McConnell, Queen's College, Flushing, NY). Entire panel sessions were devoted to Solov'yev, Berdyayev and Bakhtin. Especially impressive was the paper delivered by Professor Caryl Emerson (Princeton University), a prominent figure among specialists on Bakhtin: her paper, entitled 'Bakhtin, Solov'yev, Shestov, Tolstoy and the problem of "systems thinking"' devoted considerable attention to aesthetics and set a particularly high standard for papers and discussion. At this conference academic discourse, concern for the welfare of Russian society and the encounter of diverse disciplines and media of expression all found their place. An exhibition of icons painted by Ksenia Pokrovskaya and of photographs of Russian churches echoed the content of Professor Sheehan's paper introducing Pavel Florensky's work *The Iconostasis*. And in two ways the whole proceedings were touched by the world of the Gulag: by the proximity of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn in his Vermont home, and by the presence of former prisoners Vladimir Poresh and Mikhail Kazachkov, the latter of whom delivered an address regarding his prison experiences. Among the merits of this very moving paper was the way it ensured that the conference participants would confront that problem which is so crucial for philosophy generally and for Russian philosophy and culture in particular, namely the problem of evil.

Notes and References

- ¹ A shorter account of these proceedings by the author of the present article, in Russian, was published in *Russkaya mysl'*, (Paris), no. 3942, 21 August 1992, p. 14, under the title 'Dukhovnoye vozrozhdeniye Rossii: problemy i perspektivy'.
- ² A brief report on that first conference may be found in the newspaper *Nezavisimaya gazeta*, (Moscow), no. 115, 25 September 1991, under the title 'Vozrozhdeniye traditsii'.
- ³ During the conference Vladimir Poresh informed participants of his organisation's plans for establishing a human rights centre in 1993, and the newspaper *Russkaya mysl'* published details of the projected opening of an institute for the study of religious philosophy (see *Russkaya mysl'*, no. 3938, 17 July 1992, p. 9). For further material about the educational work of 'Open Christianity', see Sergei Levin, 'Ot vseobshchego obrazovaniya k obrazovaniyu vseobshchego', *Russkaya mysl'*, no. 3918, 28 February 1992, p. 16.
- ⁴ The organisers of *Put'* set out their educational goals and philosophy in the introduction to

Tserkov', kul'tura, obrazovaniye: materialy kruglogo stola, Moscow 1991 (93 pp.), published by *Put'* in association with the Ministry of Culture and the Academy of Sciences.

- ⁵ Vladimir Solov'yev, *Sobranie sochinenii* (Foyer Oriental Chretien edition, Brussels, 1966), vol. VI, pp. 381–93. For a detailed analysis of Solov'yev's 1891 lecture and its importance for his later views on religion, culture and the course of history, see Jonathan Sutton, *The Religious Philosophy of Vladimir Solovyov: Towards a Reassessment* (Macmillan Press, 1988), chapter 8, 'Solovyov's conception of Christian culture'. In her book *The Russian Orthodox Church: a Contemporary History* (Croom Helm, 1986) Jane Ellis points out, interestingly, that Solov'yev's 1891 lecture was known to religiously oriented Soviet dissidents who in the 1970s used it as material to support an *activist* stance in matters of religion and the individual's civic responsibilities (see pp. 347 and 495, note 58).