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**Russian Religious Thought in the West:  
an Autoethnographical Approach**

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**Русская религиозная мысль на Западе:  
автоэтнографический подход**

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In this brief exploration of the presence of Russian religious thought in Western philosophy and theology, I shall take what some of my colleagues call an autoethnographical approach. This simply means addressing the topic in question from within the perspective of one's own experience. For example, one narrates how one first heard of such-and-such an idea or thinker and maybe explores the context and impact of this experience rather than the standard academic formula along the lines of 'As x argues in his 2002 article 'yyy' in xxx', etc. However, this is not simply to reduce intellectual enquiry to a memoir. As in any other approach, the key is to identify and bring to the fore what is essential and decisive for the matter at issue and it is my experience that autoethnography can indeed yield new insights that serve the more formal academic approach.

It is also the case that when we are dealing with a matter of existential significance, such an approach can help avoid giving an inappropriate sense of detachment or mastery, as if the truth were something objectively out there, independently of the way in which it enters into the ongoing history of humanity's attempt to think the meaning of its own existence. What is true for us is inseparable from how we relate to it. Truths of this kind both shape and are shaped by the way in which we think them. This insight owes a lot to Kierkegaard, who stressed that existential truth is not a matter of what one says but of how one says it and Kierkegaard too provided an early and highly influential example of autoethnography. I am thinking here of his

pseudonym Johannes Climacus who described how he hit upon the idea of problematizing his generation's understanding of Christianity when he was smoking his cigar in a fashionable café and marvelling how his contemporaries were all collectively engaged in making life easier and easier—including Christianity and philosophy.

It is in this vein that I shall offer a brief account of my own engagement with Russian religious thought: not as a personal memoir but in order to bring to view significant aspects of the reception of Russian religious thought in Britain in the last forty years.

I have to begin, however, long before I started the formal study of theology. I was born in 1950 and the first half of my life was lived in the period of the Cold War, which undoubtedly played an important, complex, and often ambivalent part in my and my generation's overall reception of Russian culture and thought, including its religious thought.

Probably my first awareness of any distinctively Russian cultural work was, as a child, watching Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* on television. I do not know exactly when this was, but it was certainly before the age of eight. I knew that what I was watching was Russian, but not really what it was. The images of the cannon being taken to the siege of Kazan and of the people coming to beseech Ivan to return to Moscow were imprinted indelibly on my mind—although it was only when I re-watched the film as a young adult that I learned exactly what these early memories meant. Dostoevsky speaks of the importance of childhood memories, and these, undoubtedly, were very important.

Even during the Cold War era there were (at least in Britain) many positive representations of Russian culture. People read the classics of Russian literature, extending from Tolstoy, Dostoevsky and Chekhov through Sholokhov and Pasternak to Yevtushenko and Solzhenitsyn. The classics of Russian music, from Tchaikovsky through Stravinsky to Shostakovich were widely performed and recorded. Ballet too played its part as did the choirs and dancers of the Red Army who regularly toured in the West and even appeared on popular television shows. And, at a certain point, we began to be aware of the Samizdat literature, of which some anthologies were published in the West.

Now I have to admit that the way in which I experienced these and other sources played into an image of Russia and 'the Russian soul' forged during the first quarter of the twentieth century, when there was a 'vogue for Russia' in the West. In this 'vogue' Russia played the role of an exotic 'other' to Western culture, an 'other' characterized by extremism and even primitivism—as in the initial reception of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*. In a way that was both intellectually incoherent and unreflective characters such as Dolokhov, Anna Karenina, and Rasputin, and movements such as nihilism and Bolshevism fused with the testimony of extreme endurance in the War and in the Gulags to create a rather fantastic image of Russianness. In his epoch-making 1921 commentary on Paul's letter to the Romans (which was one of the first theological books I ever read), Karl Barth, an enthusiastic reader of Dostoev-

sky, spoke of 'Russian man', meaning, as he put it, the human being who lives outside the norms and conventions of bourgeois, i.e. Western society. This, Barth claimed, was the human being one encounters in Dostoevsky's novels.

I did not, in fact, read Dostoevsky during my schooldays, but Tolstoy had a big impact – thanks to *Resurrection* I decided not to study law as my parents wished! Of course, Nekhlyudov's gesture in renouncing his wealth to follow Katyusha to Siberia played to the image of Russian extremism. This was not how wealthy aristocrats behaved *or could behave* in the English novels I knew.

All of this was, of course, a fantasy Russia – but it is one that has been historically and culturally powerful, resonating with leading elements of 'orientalist' views of non-Western cultures. At the same time (as in the case of Barth) this also involved an element of admiration, a sense that Russia and Russians were able to tap sources of vitality that had been eroded or flattened out in the West.

I began to develop a more sophisticated view in the 1970s, during my time as a theology student, although this second encounter was probably still coloured by the 'orientalist' atmosphere I had soaked up in my childhood and adolescence. It was at this time that I began to read Dostoevsky, working my way fairly rapidly through the major fiction in the Constance Garnett translations. Naturally, I was especially interested in the religious themes in Dostoevsky (to which I shall return) but also in the testimony of Russian Christianity more generally. Like many in Britain, I was fortunate enough to hear the preaching of Archbishop Anthony Bloom, a powerful and attractive voice for Russian Orthodoxy. There have been few preachers (and I have heard many) who have spoken in such a way as to give full meaning to the expression 'speaking from the heart'—where 'the heart' should carry its full theological connotations as the organ of divine-human relationship. This certainly seemed something different from the often rather staid and conventional tones of average Anglican preaching at that time.

Like many others in my generation, my first real introduction to Russian Orthodox theology was Vladimir Lossky's *The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church*. Probably it is still serviceable as an Introduction, although the range of possible sources available in English is now vastly expanded. Certainly to my mind, it made connections that were often lacking in our own Western theology where religious experience and mysticism often seemed in tension or even competition with doctrinal theology. Lossky made it possible to see how these could be connected and how, indeed, doctrinal theology could itself be a pathway to mystical life in Christ. My interest was sufficiently sparked to lead me on to read other essays of his, collected in *Image and Likeness*, and also to dip into a range of articles in *Sobornost'*, the journal of the Fellowship of St Alban and St Sergius that played a vital role in the Anglican-Orthodox dialogue.

This was also a time of many experiments in liturgy and spirituality and a range of religious practices were being adopted into Anglicanism from other Christian traditions and even Buddhism. The Jesus prayer had a prominent place amongst

these and I was not the only one of my contemporaries to take it seriously as a devotional practice, guided by an anonymous pamphlet by an Orthodox monk. At that time *The Way of a Pilgrim*, an autobiographical account by a wandering practitioner of the prayer of the name, was published in English and we devoured that too, although I was put off by the second volume in which I picked up elements of Anti-Semitism that I was uncomfortable with.

Philosophically, my first mentor in Russian thought was Berdyaev, one of whose works appeared on a course reading list. I was enthused and set about acquiring more of his books, which wasn't difficult since back then (in the 1970s) copies were frequently to be found in secondhand bookshops. The vast majority of his works had appeared in English from the 1930s to the 1950s and were widely read by the generation who fought the Second World War. As they got retired or died, many of their books found their way to the kind of bookshops where I picked them up – new editions were not coming out at that time. Berdyaev's stature was recognized in 1949 by the award of an honorary doctorate from the University of Cambridge. During the ceremony he was hailed as a 'new Socrates'. Analytic philosophers, of course, tended to dislike his aphoristic and often rather generalizing style—but I enjoyed it. I liked his radicalism, by which I mean his willingness to push an idea to its limits and I liked the speculative force of his anthropogony and his refusal of an either/or between divine and human. This was good medicine for someone overexposed to the theology of Karl Barth, with its insistence on the irrelevance of the human perspective in thinking about God.

I considered choosing Berdyaev as a subject for my doctoral research, settling in the end for Kierkegaard. Coleridge had been another thinker in this mix and, although they are a very disparate group, they do have this in common: that having been shaped by German Idealism they attempted to think through a new understanding of Christianity that does not reduce Christianity to philosophy or, even worse, to logic (as they thought Schelling and Hegel did). In this respect they all had a certain proximity to existentialism and perhaps more particularly to personalism; while insisting on human beings' inalienable and creative freedom they each explored ways of grounding this in the God-relationship. The same is true of another theologian who was very important to my development—Paul Tillich, who, I later discovered, wrote the first English-language article on Berdyaev and went to visit him in Clamart on the eve of the war. Berdyaev in turn adopted Tillich's idea of Kairos, the moment of intersection of time and eternity.

For the next decade or so, my Russian interests slipped into the background and my theological investigations focussed on Kierkegaard. This changed when I took up a post in Cambridge University in 1991. Partly this was a result of external pressure—no one else in the theology faculty was willing or able to take on teaching *The Brothers Karamazov* in a first-year undergraduate course so I took up the challenge (students had one week to read it and write an essay on it before moving on to the next text). This compelled me to engage with Dostoevsky in a more sustained

manner. Fortunately, I was befriended in this engagement by Diane Thompson, an eminent Dostoevsky scholar, who had attended a lecture I gave on the dead Christ, a lecture that brought the dead Christ of *The Idiot* into dialogue with Manet's contemporaneous painting of the *Dead Christ with Angels*. In 1995, Diane and I organized a conference on Dostoevsky and religion that took place in Glasgow. Of course, by this time it was starting to become much easier for Russian scholar to travel to Britain and we were able to invite distinguished Russian Dostoevsky scholars such as Ivan Esaulov and Vladimir Zakharov. The conference was the basis for the book *Dostoevsky and Christian Tradition*, to which Vladimir Kantor, whom I had in the meantime met in Moscow, also contributed. Although the generation of the interwar years—Berdyayev and his contemporaries—had of course made an enormous contribution to reading Dostoevsky as a religious author and, indeed, philosopher, that kind of approach had been in abeyance for a number of years. Probably—at last in the West—existentialism had more emphasized Dostoevsky as an analyst of the dark side of human nature and Ivan Karamazov's rebellion had a higher profile than the Elder Zosima's response. Bakhtin was now being read in the West but, at first, this was often from a secular and atheistic perspective and his polyphonic reading of Dostoevsky was seen as being opposed to a Christian reading.

The period – the mid-1990s – was also significant for the easing of relations between Russia and the West and the re-emergence of the Orthodox Church as a dynamic presence in Russian public life. This provided the stimulus for a research project that, together with Dr Aileen Kelly, I organized at King's College, Cambridge, on the role of religion in Russia today. Speakers at the project seminars included both prominent Western scholars such as James P. Scanlan and also Russian guests such as Hilarion Alfeyev (at that time still Secretary for Inter-Christian Affairs of the Department for External Church Relations of the Moscow Patriarchate). Speakers covered a range of topics, including Shamanism and new religious movements.

At this time, I also established a connection, through Alexei Bodrov, with the St Andrew's Biblical-Theological Institute in Moscow, an Institute that has done much to stimulate the two-way flow of theological ideas between Russia and the West, through publications, conferences, and courses. The Institute hosted lectures I gave in 2000 that became the basis for my *Short Course in the Philosophy of Religion*, where Berdyayev and Dostoevsky both played a part.

It is perhaps significant that at this point the story becomes harder to tell. What had been a fairly private interest that many colleagues probably thought was rather eccentric, I now got caught up in the multiple openings and opportunities of the time. By the turn of the millennium, the fax machine was being replaced by the internet as international scholarly communication moved into a new dimension. The commonalities of intellectual challenges were coming more to the fore and it was possible for scholars from both sides of the former Iron Curtain to feel part of a shared and multi-sided movement of research and exchange. In 2004 I helped facilitate the London-based Art and Christianity Enquiry hold its major conference

in St Petersburg in collaboration with the St Petersburg State Academy of Culture and speakers coming from the USA, Australia, and Germany as well as from the UK and, of course, Russia.

History and religious affiliation remained powerful, of course, meaning that significant differences of content and approach were still felt – but that is equally true of, say, Britain and Germany or America and France. Though philosophy and religion both aspire to a certain universality and address the whole of being human, both are also—and perhaps necessarily—shaped in their concrete manifestations by the specificities and contingencies of history. Such variety, constantly generating new forms, is part of what makes work in the humanities of insistent interest. Each point of arrival is a new point of departure. In its optimal development, this facilitates a truly polyphonic intellectual universe – even if those of a monological orientation hear it as dissonance.

Without this openness and breadth, a work such as the *Handbook of Russian Religious Thought* could not have got off the ground. It embraces a range of approaches and a range of views of religious life and thought and was able to cross national and cultural boundaries with extraordinary freedom. In this regard it perhaps reflects what has become possible in the course of the last twenty-five years. Geopolitical movements, of course, do not stop and certainly do not wait on scholarship. The last few years have seen significant reversals in relations between Russia and the West. Whether or how this will impact the intellectual commonwealth of humanities scholarship is uncertain. It is hard to envisage the two-way flow of books, travel, zoom seminars, etc. ceasing. Some doors, once opened, cannot be shut again. Or so the optimist in me says. And perhaps also the philosopher, since, in the majority of its historically attested forms, philosophy reveals a certain utopianism, from Plato's Republic and Plotinus's Platonopolis onwards. Faith, though hopeful, is under no illusions as to the ways in which human beings can mess up their God-given freedoms and opportunities. Which is to say that it has never been more urgent to expand and to strengthen the conversation out of which our work has developed and to which it contributes.