

The Ideas of the Christian Seminar

PHILIP WALTERS

*Poresh: . . . we need the whole world.
Judge: What? What do you need?
Poresh: The whole world.”¹*

The story of the Christian Seminar on Problems of the Religious Renaissance has already been the subject of an article in *RCL*.² That article concerned itself with the formation and activity of the Seminar and the fate of its members. In this second article I would like to examine more closely the ideological aspect of the Seminar, which continues despite the arrest of its leading personalities to make an important contribution to the contemporary religious renaissance in the USSR.

Those who joined the Seminar were overwhelmingly young people. Many of them, including the Seminar's leader Alexander Ogorodnikov, had followed broadly similar ideological paths. Convinced Marxists in their youth, they became disillusioned first with Marxism as practised in the Soviet Union and later with all attempts to reform Marxism. Frustrated in their search for an ideology which would guarantee social justice, they moved on to various forms of nihilism, hippydom or pop culture, attempting to follow Solzhenitsyn's injunction "do not live a lie".³ When a young man frees himself from the Marxist-Leninist yoke, says Ogorodnikov, he is confronted with a confusing mass of alternative ideologies to follow. "The brain, wearied by chaos, intuitively strives for wholeness and does not find it."⁴ Eventually they began to find answers in Christianity, and came to the Church. Perhaps inevitably, the Church they discovered was the Russian Orthodox Church.⁵ They then discovered that this Church was allowed to exist by the State only on condition that it confine itself to acts of worship in registered buildings, and did not concern itself with applying Christian ideas to the problems of society at large. These young people had already discovered the social message of Christianity, and founded the Seminar to provide themselves with an active "parish life", a forum for open discussion by church laymen of all the consequences of the Christian faith.

Ogorodnikov says that the spiritual world of young people who have broken with Marxism in the USSR and who are seeking a new faith is defined by two co-ordinates: love and freedom.⁶ It was in the spirit of love, solidarity, honesty and freedom that the members of the Seminar

met in their own religious community to discuss their spiritual discoveries, and the experience was exhilarating and refreshing, as the testimonies of numerous members show.⁷ The Seminar of course defined these spiritual experiences in terms of concrete Christian realities. The Seminar was for its members the realization of the Christian concept of “community” (*obshchina*)—“a fraternal Christian community of love”.⁸

It is Christian love which creates the “community” and binds it together: and an essential element in Christian love is freedom. The paradoxical combination of individual liberty and free unity constitutes the essence of the concept of *sobornost*, which receives such development in Russian Orthodox theology: and the “community” of the Seminar is seen by its members as an example of *sobornost* at work. “Do not imagine”, say Seminar members,

that we have exchanged the totalitarianism of communist ideology for the totalitarianism of ecclesiastical legalism [. . .] In this divided world we are trying to produce a community as the ‘unity of the spirit in the bond of peace’ [. . .] It is not in isolated self-assertion, even if this involves creative activity, that we find the depths of our personality, but in fraternal love in the image of the Holy Trinity [. . .]⁹

Vladimir Poresh, one of the leading members of the Seminar, welcomes the “normal human speech” which is now possible amongst young believers in such an atmosphere, and which flows from a clear conscience. Amongst the fruits of the hypocritical Soviet society which young Christians have rejected are cynicism, despair, calculation and political activity.¹⁰ It is therefore correct to say that the Seminar shunned involvement in political activity in the strict sense. It did however have the positive aim, based on a perception of Christian truth, of achieving social justice. (“Truth” in Russian is *pravda*, which can imply either “intellectual or spiritual truth” (*istina*) or “justice” (*spravedlivost*), or both at once.) Seminar members were aware that the decision to promote *pravda* is not one which can be taken lightly. It involves existential commitment¹¹ and the decision to burn bridges behind one. “The outward action, the deed, done in complete responsibility, is the outward sign of deep spiritual change. We affirm social action as the path towards making spiritual life more profound.”¹² In the contemporary USSR, with its denial of the importance of the individual, it is more than ever important that the individual should assert his creative power.¹³

To commit oneself to action also involves the certainty of tribulation. Poresh describes a dreadful day when he was followed by agents of the KGB, but is able to conclude his piece with the assertion that “one must accept responsibility, but only in order to see right (*pravda*) prevail: right,

and nothing else.”¹⁴ The meaning of the title of his article “*Dai krovi—priimi Dukh!*” is that in order to receive the Spirit one must be prepared to spill one’s blood. The acceptance of one’s cross is seen as a joy. “In order to understand Russia you must love her. And loving Russia in a real sense means taking her cross upon one.”¹⁵ The seminarians feel that they are building “a ‘new man’—a man called to display the revelation of a new Christian social life—‘the sacrificial elite’ of Christian chivalry.”¹⁶ It is in this spirit that the seminarians criticize the established Russian Orthodox Church, which they believe has compromised with the atheist state to an unacceptable degree. The seminarians are convinced that a new spirit is at work within the Church; they want to help the Church free itself from the “offensive protection of the State”¹⁷ and express confidence in a spiritual renewal which is beginning in the Russian Orthodox Church and will extend throughout the world.

What specific plans for action did the Seminar have? Several lists are given,¹⁸ with more or less identical main elements.

The first requirement is to give Seminar members the thorough theological and philosophical education which is provided neither by the Soviet educational system nor by the Russian Orthodox Church, which is denied any real educative role amongst laymen at large.¹⁹ As regards works by western writers, their lists of reading-matter seem rather eclectic. This simply reflects the fact that any western philosophical or theological literature is a rare commodity in the Soviet Union, and the seminarians would read and digest anything they could lay their hands on. The only generalization one can make is that existentialists feature largely. We are on more clearly chartable territory when it comes to theological and philosophical works from the Russian Orthodox tradition.

The seminarians start with the Bible and the Church Fathers, in order to achieve that “healthy theological sensitivity” which in their view is the only antidote to that “monstrous symphony of Church and State” which characterizes the official position in the USSR, and the only means of refuting what they see as the official insistence by the Church that the final goals of Christianity and Communism are identical.²⁰ They then move on through the classical slavophiles²¹ and the overtly Orthodox authors of the 19th century like Dostoyevsky and Gogol to that crucial period of Russian Orthodox thought: the late 19th and early 20th centuries. This period, which has been named “the Russian religious renaissance”,²² is the one to which the seminarians look back for particular guidance and inspiration. The names of Vladimir Solovyov, Nikolai Berdyayev, Sergei Bulgakov, Fr Pavel Florensky, Pyotr Struve, Semyon Frank, Nikolai Lossky recur time after time. Their relevance to the present day lies in the fact that they were acutely

aware that if the intelligentsia did not repent and reverse its growing alienation from the Orthodox Church, there would be a revolution and godless forces would gain political control in Russia. Many of them, just like the young people of the Seminar, had passed through a period of Marxist fervour before their discovery of Christianity.²³

Vladimir Sergeyevich Solovyov (1853–1900) is probably the greatest Russian Orthodox philosopher and his work was the primary inspiration for the religious renaissance in Russia on the eve of the Revolution. His *Collected Works* are still relatively accessible in the USSR because they went through several editions before 1917 (though the Soviet authorities make every effort to remove the works of Solovyov and his ilk from general circulation). Solovyov applies Orthodoxy to all aspects of contemporary social, political and cultural life and to universal history. He remains a major authority for Orthodox dissidents in the Soviet Union today.

After Solovyov, the thinker who has had most influence on the contemporary religious renaissance in Russia is Nikolai Alexandrovich Berdyayev (1874–1948).²⁴ The crucial interest of Berdyayev is that he was an extreme individualist who tried to reconcile his own form of existentialist “personalism” with the teachings of Orthodoxy, a faith with a tradition of distrust of individualism, pride and self-assertion. This is a conflict which resolves itself ideally in the paradox of *sobornost*. Berdyayev’s preoccupation with the individual is to some extent untypical for traditional Orthodox thought, but it is of course a preoccupation shared by young people in the contemporary USSR who are returning to the Church in a totalitarian society which denies the individual any unique importance.²⁵ While Berdyayev excites great interest he always provokes controversy. He tends to equate “God” with “freedom”: this gives pause to those who would equate God more readily with “love”. He also believes that Man is called upon to *complete* the divine process of creation by adding his own creative contribution:²⁶ for many, this gives Man too exalted a role and even implicitly denies the omnipotence of God. Poresh provides a typical response to Berdyayev, expressing doubts as follows:

In saying that every grouping of people is unfree, Berdyayev denies the Church—the mystical Body of Christ, unity in *sobornost*. Without the Church there is no Orthodoxy, just as there is no Catholicism. Not having a Church (*bestserkovnost*) is protestantism, sectarianism.²⁷

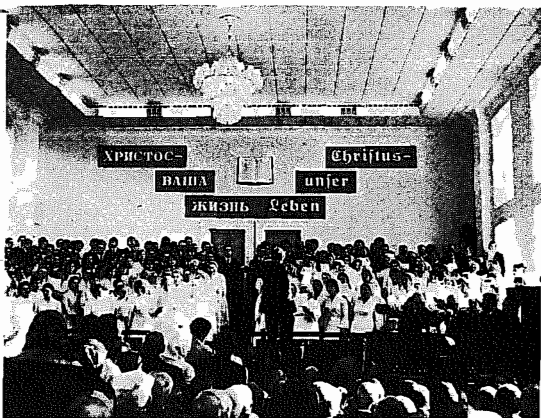
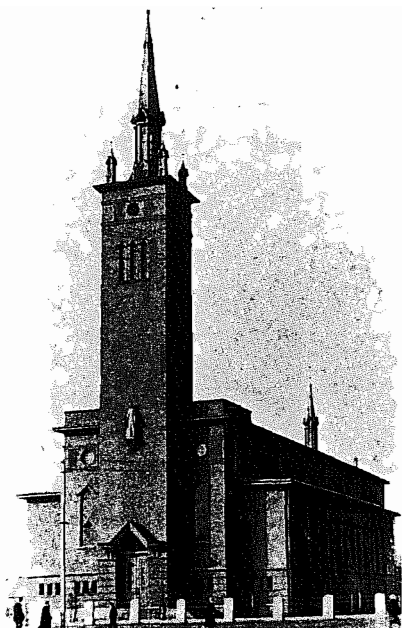
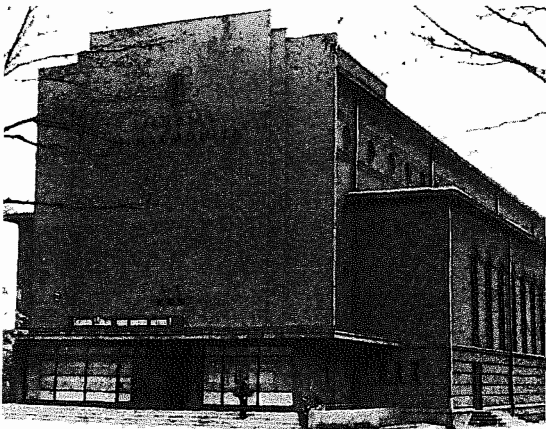
Through Russian Orthodoxy, a great many contemporary Christians in Russia are seeking to learn of their own past and to understand it. In order to penetrate the meaning of history, says Poresh, “a *theology of history* is indispensable.”²⁸ The Seminar turns to the past in order to



Members of the Christian Seminar, photographed in 1977. (See the article by Philip Walters on pp. 111-22.) Left to right: Konstantin Gremenin; unknown; Sergei Yermolayev; unknown; Alexander Ogorodnikov; Alexander Semyonov; Alexander Stolyarov; Georgi Fedotov. (©Keston College)



Above Vladimir Poresh, a leading member of the Christian Seminar, who wrote the document printed on pp. 122-4. He is currently in a labour camp in Perm. His wife Tatyana (left) is bringing up their two young daughters in Leningrad. (©ARC)



The Church of the Queen of Peace in Klaipeda, Lithuania; *above* after completion by the hands of local Catholics, and *above left* after its confiscation by the Soviet government. The steeple was demolished and the building turned into a concert hall. 148,149 people have signed a petition to President Brezhnev asking for it to be re-opened for worship (see document on pp. 137-39). (©Bronius Kviklys)



Left Two views of the new Baptist Church in Alma-Ata, which replaces a former church demolished because of urban redevelopment. The church, which seats 700, was built according to plans provided by the State. It is modelled on a cinema designed by Soviet architects. (News in Brief, pp. 158-59.) (Official photograph of AUCECB)

learn lessons which can be applied in the future. Ogorodnikov writes:

We feel ourselves to be in the mainstream of the traditional Russian attraction to historiosophy and the peculiar ecclesio-historical heritage of the Russian Church. For it is in historical experience itself that we see the best guarantee against the repetition of contemporary mistakes.²⁹

The second area of activity envisaged by the Seminar is that of defending the rights of believers to practise their religion. Beyond the mutual moral and spiritual support which Seminar members were able to give each other, there is no evidence that the Seminar was active in this field.³⁰ As we shall see later on, however, a proportion of the Seminar's journal *Obshchina* is devoted to reports of various infringements of believers' rights, and it may be that this type of activity would have increased in importance if the Seminar had had a longer life-span.

A third area of activity envisaged by the Seminar is communication with people (especially young people) of different faiths both within and outside the USSR. This desire for dialogue, while not a new element amongst dissident Orthodox groups in the USSR, is given central importance by the Seminar. It is referred to in the various declarations of the Seminar's principles as "the duty of missionary service". Here we should not suspect any crude attempt to convert other Christians to the Orthodox faith. The aim is for young laymen of all faiths simply to begin the unusual process of a frank exchange of views.³¹ One Seminar member, a Protestant, writes:

As a Protestant I have noted with humble satisfaction the interested attention of those present, which provoked a discussion of the role of laymen, i.e. simple believers, in the life of the Church, and of the community as the most fruitful form of Christian unity. It is to my own brethren in faith that God has granted to work on these problems over the centuries. And we are ready to put forward the fruits of our labours for the examination of our Orthodox friends, feeling it our duty to pray that our mistakes should not be repeated by others.³²

The consequence of "missionary activity" as understood by the Seminar is a greater awareness amongst confessions of the factors which unite them, and the ultimate aim is ecumenical co-operation amongst churches. There is a growing awareness amongst religious activists in the USSR and other Eastern European countries that the various denominations must unite at lay level if their activity is to be effective, and that they must try to unite with churches abroad as well. It seems that from the very beginning the Seminar sought contact with foreign Christians.³³ The most fruitful contacts seem to have been with various Italian Catholics, mostly apparently members of the youth organization "Communione e Liberazione".³⁴ The original encounters with young

Italian Catholics may have arisen by chance, but it is in fact in cooperation with the Catholic Church in particular that Seminar members think that international interconfessional co-operation can be most effective: it is by interacting with Roman Catholicism that Russian Orthodoxy will be empowered to realize its own religious destiny.

The idea that Russia has a special religious calling is a very old one. Proponents of this idea claim that Russia has suffered more than other nations, but that this suffering is a necessary prelude to her resurrection as spiritual saviour of the world, perhaps in the course of an apocalypse. As one of the seminar documents puts it, "Having suffered the frightful experience of violence, Russia is preparing herself to say her last great word."³⁵ This "Russian Idea" was elaborated by a great many Russian Orthodox writers in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Some of the "slavophiles" of the middle and late 19th century interpreted it in a narrowly chauvinist sense.³⁶ Most influential on the modern generation are however Solovyov and Berdyayev, together with the novelist Fyodor M. Dostoyevsky (1821–81): all three brought powerful creative minds to bear on the question.³⁷

Solovyov expressly states that in order that Russia's destiny should be fulfilled, the worldwide Church should unite under a single Pontiff.³⁸ He displayed a great interest in the Roman Catholic Church as providing a model for the structure of the future Universal Church. The idea that Catholicism and Orthodoxy might profit from the best in each other has recurrently interested certain groups of Orthodox dissenters in the USSR since the 1960s,³⁹ and it has become explicit in the policies of the Seminar. A recent letter from "a Russian Orthodox Christian" expresses similar sentiments. The Church is divided, says the author, but "human barriers do not reach Heaven!" The Churches must work toward unity: they are complementary. Orthodoxy can profit from the culture, theological learning, organizational capacity and internal discipline of Catholicism; Catholicism can profit from the breadth, non-systematic nature, gentleness and humility of Orthodoxy. Only Papal authority can avail, says the author, to combat successfully the severe atheist campaigns in Albania, Ethiopia, China and the USSR.⁴⁰

It should not be supposed that the Moscow Christian Seminar is a unique phenomenon in Russia. Reports speak of dozens such: this one happens to be the best-documented and to have been the most active in seeking publicity. Several similar groups existed and perhaps still exist in Leningrad, including the "37" group. A major preoccupation of the Leningrad groups seems to be that of the relation between Christianity and culture—art, literature and poetry. Dissident Christian artists and writers from Leningrad testify to the need for Russian culture to be imbued with Orthodoxy in order to be enriched and to enrich in turn the life of the nation.⁴¹

Poresh came from Leningrad, and acted as a valuable link between one or more of the Leningrad groups and the Christian Seminar in Moscow.⁴² It was he who added to the Moscow Seminar a further dimension: a concern for culture and philosophy. Ogorodnikov with his gregarious personality gathered the group in Moscow: he himself was responsible for recording in the Seminar's journal *Obshchina* the doings of the seminarians and the violations of their rights by the authorities. Meanwhile Poresh, described in one sketch as "the knight of the sorrowful countenance",⁴³ and his great friend from Leningrad, the poet Oleg Okhapkin,⁴⁴ collaborated in the compilation of all sections of *Obshchina* of a theological, philosophical, historiosophical or artistic nature.⁴⁵ In one of his own contributions to *Obshchina*, Poresh outlines with evident sympathy the views of the artist V. N. Chekrygin (1897–1922) on the important role of creativity in uniting the spiritual and material worlds through art. "The significance of art is fundamental", he writes, "insofar as it 'partly reveals the coming renovation of the universe' [. . .]".⁴⁶ Man's duty, continues Poresh, is "to transfigure the world (our inner world, and hence the face of the earth) [. . .] through creativity in *sobornost* [. . .]".⁴⁷ In his article on the Symbolist poet and author Andrei Bely, Poresh writes:

The Symbolists created a type of spiritual community (*obshchina*) or order, and began to work out a new type of creativity. They assembled the rudiments of the principle of *sobornost* and discovered and revealed the holy side of the world. The next step ought to have been the bringing of this already existing community (*obshchnost*) into the Church, but the split between the Church and the world, between the roles of priest and prophet, has remained too great even up to our own day.⁴⁸

It will be appropriate, before concluding, to give a brief analysis of the contents of the only extant issue of *Obshchina*, designated "No. 2".⁴⁹ The volume consists of 284 typewritten pages. Broadly speaking its contents fall into four main categories. The first category totals some 75 pages of what might be termed "contemporary theoretical writing": summaries of Seminar source material, declarations of principle, descriptions of topics to be discussed, a theological response by Poresh to contemporary reality (his article "Dai krovi—priimi Dukh"), a survey of Soviet youth and its move towards Christianity by Ogorodnikov ("Kultura katakomb . . .") a scholarly article by Viktor Kapitanchuk on the concept of Sophia, the Wisdom of God ("Ontologicheskaya problema v russkoi sofologii"), testimonies by various members about the Seminar, letters to and from young Christians abroad, and a piece on the 60th anniversary of the appearance of the Virgin at Fatima. The second category, again totalling some 75 pages, comprises documentation

of contemporary events. We may assume that Ogorodnikov was responsible for the collation of these items. They include documents on events at the Monastery of the Caves at Kiev, a letter from the imprisoned Orthodox Christian Igor Ogurtsov,⁵⁰ descriptions of events at Easter 1977 in Kiev, and a letter about KGB disruption of a meeting of Baptists in Rostov, as well as descriptions of the tribulations of Seminar members.⁵¹ The third category, totalling some 70 pages, comprises reprinted documents of historical and literary interest with commentaries by Poresh, who together with Okhapkin was presumably responsible for collating most of these.⁵² The final category, likewise by Poresh and Okhapkin, consists of about 40 pages of the latter's poems with an introduction by the former.⁵³

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The concept of the "community" is a comprehensive one. At its simplest, the community is a forum where young people can talk freely about their ideas: it involves a thorough theological education, active proselytizing and the defence of believers' rights. At its most complex, it is the matrix for a new religious form of creativity which will usher in a new age. The gulf between the secular world and the Church is to be bridged: the whole world is to become the Church, and is to be transfigured through Christian creativity. Poresh meant it quite literally when he said "... we need the whole world."

One of the reasons why the Soviet authorities were anxious to curtail the activities of this Seminar in particular was no doubt because it was concerned to relate Christianity actively to contemporary social and cultural realities. The Seminar was however innocent of any involvement in strictly political activity. Its concerns were much wider. At his preliminary investigation Poresh had been accused of calling for the restoration of capitalism. Speaking in his own defence at his trial, he quotes a phrase from the programme of the *Comunione e Liberazione* movement: "We must fight social oppression on behalf of spiritual freedom." "If I had called for the restoration of capitalism," continues Poresh,

... Why should the Italians, in capitalist Italy, have to struggle against their social system? The point is that we all have the same goal: struggle against the social sinfulness of the world. We call for liberation from sin, from the sinful life of society.⁵⁴

The Seminar was based on Orthodox Christianity, and moved out from there in a creative and progressive spirit. Describing the deliberations of the Seminar's founders, Poresh says:

We looked at a number of themes and decided that the task for the Seminar was to work out a world-view which would be Orthodox in

form and Christian in content, and to create an international Christian community.⁵⁵

As one commentator has aptly put it,

... they are trying to achieve something absolutely new. They clearly want to act in society as a leaven. We shall find the same objective, quite independent of the above, in the religious movements in Poland, in Hungary and in Czechoslovakia.⁵⁶

The seminarians are all young people. What do they rely on? "Faith and love, and the power of hope—our generation!"⁵⁷

¹"Zapis protsessy Vladimira Poresha v Lengorsude", soon after 25 April 1980, *Arkhiv samizdata*, No. 4022, p. 59.

²Jane Ellis, "USSR: The Christian Seminar", *RCL* Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 92–112.

³Vladimir Burtsev *et al.*, *Molodaya Rossiya—k molodoi Amerike*, between 1 August and 9 September 1979, p. 1.

⁴Alexander Ogorodnikov, "Kultura katakomb, k opytu istorii pokoleniya", *Obshchina*, No. 2, 1978, p. 27.

⁵The Orthodox Church has a higher visible profile in the USSR than the Protestant or Catholic Churches. While the Protestant Churches attract members of the working classes, the Orthodox Church is more attractive to members of the intelligentsia, partly because the theological literature available to the latter will tend to be of the Orthodox tradition. A useful short but comprehensive summary of the whole phenomenon of the spiritual revival in the USSR, giving Orthodoxy its place as one element in the picture, is provided by V. Veretennikov, "O religioznykh iskaniiakh v Rossii", *Possev*, 1979, No. 6, pp. 37–41; No. 7, pp. 33–6. For various descriptions of the young people's path to the Church, see Ogorodnikov, "Kultura katakomb. . ."; "Plan seminarskikh zanyatii", *Volnoye slovo*, No. 39 (*Khristiansky seminar*), *Possev*, 1980, p. 8; "Ot sostavitelei", *Obshchina*, p. 1.

⁶A. Ogorodnikov, "Kultura katakomb. . .", p. 27.

⁷See "Svidetelstva o Seminare uchastnikov Seminara", *Obshchina*, pp. 32–48.

⁸"*Obshchina* No. 2" (incomplete text), *Arkhiv samizdata*, No. 3452, p. 16. *Obshchina* (*Community*) is of course the title of the Seminar's journal.

⁹V. Burtsev *et al.*, *Molodaya Rossiya* . . . , pp. 2–3. Tatyana Goricheva, who until her recent emigration was a leading member of the "37" seminar in Leningrad, has interesting things to say on the attitude of young Christian neophytes in the USSR to the commandment "love your neighbour". By "neighbour", they understand "the nearest one in space. This love is in a hurry to express itself, and has no time to consider those neighbours who are far away. It does not even want that: in the contemporary world, love of what is far off is usually a lack of honesty." (Tatyana Goricheva, "Khristianstvo, kultura, politika", *Volnoye slovo*, No. 39, p. 15). Here, as so often, a theme which was important before the Revolution re-emerges as equally important today. While the revolutionaries of the early 20th century were advocating the sacrifice of the welfare of the contemporary individual in the name of a promised future utopia for mankind, religious thinkers were perhaps naturally emphasizing the prime duty as they saw it of responsibility to one's nearest neighbour: "love for what is near" ("lyubov k blizhnemu") rather than "love of the distant" ("lyubov k dalnemu") (see S. L. Frank, "Fr. Nitsche i etika 'lyubvi k dalnemu'", *Problemy idealizma*, Moscow, 1903, pp. 137–95; G. L. Kline, *Religious and Anti-Religious Thought in Russia*, Chicago, 1968, pp. 48–9). In the Soviet Union, the suppression of their individual liberty in the name of the communist utopia to come is the everyday experience of thinking people, and it is not surprising that the same response should be evoked.

¹⁰Vladimir Poresha, "Dai krovi—priimi Dukh!", *Obshchina*, p. 22. Translation of whole article in this issue of *RCL*, pp. 122–24.

- ¹¹Tatyana Shchipkova, "Put k vere Vladimira Poresha", *Possev*, No. 11, 1979, p. 36.
- ¹²V. Poresh, "Dai krovi . . .", p. 21.
- ¹³V. Poresh, "V. N. Chekrygin i problema sobornogo tvorchestva", *Obshchina*, p. 57.
- ¹⁴V. Poresh, "Progulka po Moskve", *Obshchina*, p. 158, translated under title "Secret Police Harass Poresh", *RCL* Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 103-6 (this quotation comes from p. 106).
- ¹⁵"*Obshchina* No. 2", *Arkhiv samizdata*, No. 3452, p. 19.
- ¹⁶*loc. cit.*
- ¹⁷"*Obshchina* No. 2", *Arkhiv samizdata*, No. 3452, p. 14.
- ¹⁸*Volnoye slovo*, No. 39, pp. 5-9; "*Obshchina* No. 2", *Arkhiv samizdata*, No. 3452, pp. 16-18; *Obshchina*, pp. 11-15.
- ¹⁹The subsection "Postroyeniye pravoslavnogo mirovozzreniya i polucheniye bogoslovs-kogo obrazovaniya" (pp. 11-12) of the section "Deklaratsiya printsipov Seminara", *Obshchina*, pp. 7-20, outlines the problem.
- ²⁰*ibid.*, p. 11.
- ²¹See the article by Philip Walters, "A New Creed for Russians? The Ideas of the Neo-Slavophiles", *RCL* Vol. 4, No. 3, pp. 20-31, for more background information. Most of the members of the Seminar were Orthodox Christians, and the question arises to what extent the Seminar can be called a "neo-slavophil" movement. Seminar writings do frequently attack western "enlightenment" as the source of godlessness and self-deification of the individual; but any bellicose anti-westernism is absent. See for example the moderate attitude taken towards western "democracy", traditionally anathema to most slavophiles ("Deklaratsiya printsipov Seminara", subsection "O zapade", *Obshchina*, p. 20). One "slavophil" trait is of course the conviction that Russia is destined to play a special spiritual role in world history; but in the Seminar emphasis is always placed on the fact that all Christians throughout the world must co-operate and eschew chauvinistic exclusiveness. (See for example a letter in defence of the Seminar, *Religiya i ateizm v SSSR*, November 1979, pp. 1-3.)
- ²²N. Zernov, *The Russian Religious Renaissance of the Twentieth Century*, London, 1963, is the best introduction to this whole subject.
- ²³See A. Ogorodnikov, "Khristiansky kruzhok v Moskve", *Vestnik RKhD*, No. 119, 1976, p. 297. The most typical member of the religious renaissance of the early 20th century in this respect was Sergei Nikolayevich Bulgakov (1871-1944), who began as a Marxist economist and ended up an Orthodox priest. A selection of his letters from the early years of the 20th century are published with a commentary in *Obshchina*, pp. 75-84.
- ²⁴Vladimir Osipov (see *RCL* Vol. 5, No. 4, pp. 229-34) called the Orthodox revolutionary movement of the 1960s, VSKhSON, (see *RCL* Vol. 5, No. 1, pp. 23-6), the "Berdyayev Circle" (V. Osipov, "Berdyayevsky kruzhok v Leningrade", *Vestnik RSKhD*, Nos. 104-5, 1972, pp. 153-65). Yevgeny Vagin, a former member of VSKhSON and now an émigré, agrees that this description is basically accurate (Ye. Vagin, *Moyo znakomstvo s Berdyayevym*, n.d., p. 1). Igor Ogurtsov, the leader of VSKhSON, was according to Vagin influenced first of all by Solovyov, and "the transition from Vl. Solovyov to Berdyayev was for him organic and natural." (*ibid.*, p. 2).
- ²⁵"Deklaratsiya printsipov Seminara", subsection "O cheloveke", *Obshchina*, p. 17.
- ²⁶N. A. Berdyayev, *Smysl tvorchestva*, Moscow, 1916, translated as *The Meaning of the Creative Act*, London, 1955.
- ²⁷T. Shchipkova, "Put k vere Vladimira Poresha", p. 36.
- ²⁸V. Poresh, "Andrei Bely o novoi forme zhizni", *Obshchina*, p. 69.
- ²⁹A. Ogorodnikov, "Khristiansky kruzhok v Moskve", p. 299.
- ³⁰The Seminar does not seem to have aimed at duplicating any of the activities of the Christian Committee for the Defence of Believers' Rights in the USSR—for information on which see the article by Jane Ellis, *RCL* Vol. 8, No. 4, pp. 279-98.
- ³¹"Deklaratsiya printsipov Seminara", subsection "Dolg missionerskogo sluzheniya", *Obshchina*, pp. 13-15.
- ³²Pyotr, "+ + +", *Obshchina*, p. 41. An early example of the interest of Ogorodnikov in the witness of members of other faiths is the film *Dzhizhes pipl* (*Jesus People*) which he was planning to make and which may have been one of the factors leading to his expulsion from the Moscow Cinematography Institute. The film was to have contained a scene showing a meeting of young people at the grave of the Roman Catholic youth Romas

Kalanta who burned himself to death in Kaunas, Lithuania. ("O seminarakh A. Ogorodnikova", *Possev*, No. 2, 1979, p. 5; *Khronika tekushchikh sobytii*, No. 43, p. 60.)

³³During the 1970s the opportunities for contact between young people in the USSR and western visitors greatly increased, and gratitude for this contact is expressed in documents such as the one mentioned in footnote three. One of the pieces of evidence at the trial of Poresh was a letter of his to Solzhenitsyn of allegedly anti-Soviet content. Poresh, conducting his own defence, quoted from it as follows: "Dear Alexander Isayevich, if possible, please put us in contact with religious communities and groups of young people of our type in the USA and other countries. We are tolerant towards any confession and have a wide understanding of this." ("Zapis protsessy . . .", p. 59). Poresh also claims that one of the aims of the Seminar at its foundation in 1974 was "the creation of an *international Christian community*" [italics mine—PW.] (*ibid.* p. 5).

³⁴See for example the document published in this issue of RCL, pp. 124–26, and a comment on this letter by Diethild Treffert, "The Religious Revival in the East Bloc", *Kirche in Not*, 4 November 1980. For mentions of other contacts with westerners, see "Zapis protsessy . . ." pp. 36–7, 41.

³⁵"*Obshchina* No. 2", *Arkhiv samizdata*, No. 3452, p. 11. See also *ibid.*, pp. 3–4.

³⁶For example, the Pan Slavist ideas of I. S. Aksakov (1823–86) and N. Ya. Danilevsky (1822–85).

³⁷See N. Zernov, *Three Russian Prophets: Khomiakov, Dostoevsky, Soloviev*, London, 1944; N. A. Berdyaev, *The Russian Idea*, London, 1947; *id.*, *Dream and Reality*, London, 1950.

³⁸" . . . there must exist a general or international priesthood centralized and unified in the person of a common Father of all peoples, the Universal Pontiff [. . .] As for the unification of different national clergies in a single ecumenical body, this cannot be effected except by means of an international centre, real and permanent, which can in law and in fact resist all particularist tendencies." V. Solovyev, *L'Idée Russe*, Paris, 1888, p. 37.

³⁹Yevgeny Vagin (see footnote 24) says that VSKhSON was interested in Berdyaev and Dostoevsky, in the universalism of Solovyov, and also in "the social doctrine of the Catholic Church." (Ye. Vagin, "Religioznoye inakomyshlye v segodnyashnei Rossii", *Russkoye vozrozhdeniye*, No. 1, 1978, p. 57.)

⁴⁰"L'unità: nostro scopo e compito comune", *Russia Cristiana*, No. 5, 1980, pp. 3–5.

⁴¹See "The Religious Significance of Unofficial Soviet Culture", RCL Vol. 8, No. 3, pp. 230–32; Tatyana Goricheva, "Khristianstvo i kultura", *Arkhiv samizdata*, No. 3329; *id.*, "Khristianstvo i kultura: zdes i teper", *Russkaya mysl*, 21 September 1978, p. 5; *id.*, "O neofitsialnoi kulture i Tserkvi", *Possev*, No. 9, 1979, pp. 45–7; *id.*, "Zadachi khristianskogo prosveshcheniya", *Volnoye slovo*, No. 39, pp. 34–41. The religious intelligentsia in St Petersburg was traditionally more innovative and experimental than in Moscow, and this still seems to be true today. For the 'feel' of the Leningrad seminars, see Ye. Giryaev, "Religiozno-filosofsky seminar v Leningrade", *Vestnik RKhD*, No. 123, 1977, pp. 169–74.

⁴²See the two speeches given by Tatyana Goricheva and Vladimir Poresh on 22 February 1979 in Leningrad at a meeting of participants in the journals *Obshchina* and *Volnoye slovo*, No. 39, pp. 34–47.

⁴³Vsevolod Korsakov *et al.*, *Otkrylas dver . . .*, n.d., p. 1.

⁴⁴For inspirational reading see Okhapkin's spirited defence of Poresh at the latter's trial in "Zapis protsessy . . .".

⁴⁵*ibid.*, pp. 21–4. Okhapkin was not intimate with all the activities of the Seminar, being too poor to travel regularly to Moscow.

⁴⁶V. Poresh, "V. N. Chekrygin . . .", p. 59.

⁴⁷*ibid.*, p. 60.

⁴⁸V. Poresh, "Andrei Bely . . .", p. 69.

⁴⁹For the purpose of *Obshchina* as an organ of the Seminar and an explanation of why the only extant issue is No. 2, see "Zapis protsessy . . .", pp. 5–6.

⁵⁰See above, footnote 24.

⁵¹These include V. Poresh, "Progulka po Moskve" (translated in RCL Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 103–6); "Dialog A. Ogorodnikova s sovetskim psikihatrom" (translated in *ibid.*, pp. 109–12); an analysis of the letter in *Literaturnaya gazeta* in 1977 attacking Ogorodnikov and others; and documents about the confiscation of the text of the prototype issue of *Ob-*

shchina from Ogorodnikov while he was in hospital.

⁵²These include letters by K. D. Kavelin from the 1860s; letters from S. N. Bulgakov from the early 20th century; an article on art by V. N. Chekrygin; prose and poetry by Andrei Bely and Daniil Andreyev (1906–59, son of Leonid Andreyev); a theological piece by the irrationalist Russian Orthodox philosopher of the early 20th century Lev Shestov (retranslated from the French); and extracts from the memoirs of a member of the Red Guard about the murder of the Imperial family.

⁵³It would be foolish to try to compare the intellectual, cultural or spiritual achievements of the Seminar members, as expressed in their writings, with those of the luminaries of the religious and cultural renaissance of the early 20th century to whom they owe so much. The small clandestine output of a group of young people in an atheist cultural *milieu* cannot realistically be measured against the voluminous writings of a whole section of the pre-Revolutionary intelligentsia in a censored but official press over two or three decades in a society steeped in Orthodoxy. The article “Ontologicheskaya problema v russkoi sofologii” by Viktor Kapitanchuk shows great spiritual and intellectual affinity with the earlier period. The writings of Tatyana Goricheva and others connected with the “37” group in Leningrad reopen with responsibility and intellectual insight questions of the relation between religion and artistic creativity which concerned Christian and Symbolist artists and writers of the “Silver Age” of Russian Culture in the early 20th century. The poems of Oleg Okhupkin are of considerable literary and spiritual power. Perhaps the only important fact to establish, however, is that a bridge has been built, spanning a cultural gap of half a century: the youth of Russia are rediscovering their own spiritual history in all its richness; and the process is self-accelerating.

⁵⁴“Zapis protsesssa . . .”, pp. 58–9.

⁵⁵*ibid.*, p. 5.

⁵⁶D. Treffert, “The Religious Revival . . .”, p. 4.

⁵⁷Oleg Okhupkin, “Nashe pokolene” (poem), *Obshchina*, p. 246.

Appendix

A Call for Christian Heroes in Russia Today

Vladimir Poresh, one of the leading members of the Christian Seminar, was born in 1949 and baptized into the Russian Orthodox Church in 1974. He took an active part in producing the Seminar's journal *Obshchina*. He was arrested on 1 August 1979 and tried in April 1980 under Art. 70 of the RSFSR Criminal Code (anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda). He was sentenced to five years in a labour camp and three years' internal exile. The following article by Poresh is entitled “*Dai krovi—priimi Dukh!*” (“Give Your Blood and Receive the Spirit!”). It is dated April 1977 and was published in *Obshchina* No. 2, pp. 21–3.

A new religio-historical epoch is beginning: a new Middle Ages. Its prophet and precursor was St Serafim of Sarov. The Silver Age of Russian culture lived in expectation of this epoch (N. Berdyayev, Fr Pavel Florensky and others). The Silver Age was a time of religious searching, but it was too exclusively cultural and refined to become a time of religious transfiguration. The contemporary Christian Renaissance, filled as it is with eschatological premonitions, feels that this epoch has now arrived. In the opinion of A. I. Solzhenitsyn, the changes which are taking place constitute a moral revolution (*Iz-pod glyb* [From Under the

Rubble, by Solzhenitsyn and others, London, 1975. Ed.]). Like a prophet of old, Solzhenitsyn calls to repentance: "Repent ye, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand". In the language of the Church, feeling sorry and restraining oneself must be translated into repentance and self-denial.

Our nation has borne incredible suffering which has formed the moral core, the religious foundation, on which a new rediscovered religious consciousness is being built. Russia has survived an onslaught of evil of unprecedented dimensions. F. M. Dostoyevsky used to say that a Russian may be a great sinner but he will never mistake his sin for goodness. Our revolutionary crime was the loss of a clear moral consciousness, the loss of a capacity to distinguish good from evil. What a dark abyss we are in now! God, have mercy on us! Our consciousness is still dimmed, our hearts still darkened, our moral sense is still infirm. Brute force masquerades as will and infantilism as purity. Some people who have begun to see clearly have felt the oppressive weight of isolation—like rejected outcasts. But Christianity is a religion of spirit and power, creativity and construction.

Born and brought up in a particular culture, a man achieves freedom only by spiritual action, by acknowledging his sin and purifying his heart, and then too by performing irrevocable and hence responsible acts (burning bridges behind him). The outward action, the deed, done in complete responsibility, is the outward sign of deep spiritual change. We affirm social action as the path towards making spiritual life more profound. "Give your blood and receive the Spirit!": so the Holy Fathers taught us, meaning work until your blood flows and you will receive the gifts of the spirit.

Each of us has felt responsibility for the fate of our Church and our homeland, and we have understood that we have an obligation to put this into practice. We blame our parents for their helplessness and we know the depths of our own wickedness, so we are looking for action. God has given us a voice. There is no way back. Giving up is betrayal. With trembling hearts, but boldly, we accept this Divine gift and pray: "Make me a clean heart, O God: and renew a right spirit within me." Placing our trust in the strength of God, praying to the Mother of God and all the

saints, under the sign of the Cross, we take up the two-edged sword of the shining Gospel.

"The time for playing is over;
Flowers do not bloom twice.
The shadow of the giant mountain
Has fallen across our path"
(N. Gumilyov)

We demand normal human speech—the speech which only a pure moral consciousness can produce. We are all concentrating on discovering this purity. We have to reject all political activity, all calculation, everything which flourishes in this vulgar talentless world where there is no place for nobility or truth. Our hearts are wrung with bitterness and the protest we have kept bottled up for so long is torn from us. We do not want talentless vulgarity, the stillness which destroys. We do not want the cynicism and despair which suppress the Word, the meaning of life. We do not want this lying peace: we want a just war. Where are you, Holy Russia, Russia of the saints and holy men? We do not believe you are dead. A terrible mirage clouds your eyes and there is a bloody fog in your heart. Forgive us our fault, Lord!

We were born in dead and god-forsaken times, we lived as Pioneers and members of the *Komsomol*, but we want to die Orthodox Christians. A longing for genuine life torments us—a life free from perversion and distortion by vulgar lies; because this vulgar life leads on not to life, but to death. Acknowledging all our nothingness before our Lord God, before Russian history, we have nevertheless decided to live at any price. This means that we die not unto death, but unto everlasting life.

The godless and blasphemous world of socialist realism is running away like sand between the fingers, and its dead skeleton stands naked. By inner spiritual strength we are throwing off the fetters of a reality to which we have been shackled—the fetters of a fantastic myth which has been set up as the truth by use of force. Right [*Pravda*] and Truth [*Istina*], the Crucifixion, and the redemptive sufferings of Our Lord Jesus Christ have revealed to us what genuine life is. A genuine perception of life is a tragic perception. The tragic is the opposite of humdrum vulgarity, just as truth is the opposite of the lie. One must not run away from tragedy, but strive for it with all the strength of one's soul. One must open

one's heart to meet suffering, thanking the Lord for every wound.

The Christian dogma of the Incarnation says that Truth became incarnate in the Lord Jesus Christ and is still incarnate in Him. It is a necessary consequence of this dogma that we should make incarnate one of the main ideas of the Orthodox Church—the idea of *sobornost*. We must act in

such a way that our faith does not simply become contemplative, estranged from life, but becomes actively incarnate in our life. History is a conversation between God and man (V. Solovyov), a continuing revelation: so each of us receives a revelation through his own fate. We have to make a concrete and substantial response.

Appeal to Young Italian Catholics

Several documents written by members of the Seminar have been addressed to young Christians of different countries in the West. The following document sent to an Italian organization of young Catholics—Communion e Liberazione—is undated but must have been written before the arrest of Tatyana Shchipkova (9 September 1979) and Lev Regelson (24 December 1979), both of whom are listed among the signatories.

Christian Seminar on Problems
of the Religious Renaissance,
Moscow.

Organization of Young Italian Catholics,
"Communion e Liberazione"

APPEAL

Dear friends,

There are many signs that our generation, represented by you as well as us, has been called on to make a great creative effort to overcome the thousand-year-old division in the Church and the whole of the Christian world.

Russia became a Christian nation at a time when this division was imminent—perhaps in order to avert it. But at that time Russia was too immature to realize her calling, and Rome and Byzantium were too occupied with their own problems to turn their great wisdom to an impartial spiritual examination of the highly autonomous, and at the same time universally responsive soul of that great young nation which had come to Christ.

The failure of understanding gave rise to a number of historical misfortunes, and the task of overcoming this alienation has fallen on your shoulders and on ours. We are conscious that we represent the youth of Russia, the Russia of the future, and at the same time we feel that we are being nourished by the deepest roots of original

spirituality. So when we tell you about Russia, we are telling you about ourselves, and we hope that you will respond to us in the same way, revealing yourselves to us.

Our poet* says:

Russia cannot be understood by the
intellect;

It cannot be measured by a normal
yardstick.

It has its own peculiar make-up—
You can only believe in Russia . . .

He was right; but we would like to amplify this notion. It is impossible to understand Russia with the intellect just as it is impossible to understand the Gospel in that way; it is impossible to measure Russia just as it is impossible to evaluate the Sermon on the Mount by the standards of the law; one can only believe in Russia, in the same way that we believe in the Church. For the things we *know* are not the objects of faith, and what we confess is precisely a *faith* in the One, Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

The essence of Russia as we understand it consists in the desire she has shown from the very beginning to become Christ's nation, Holy Russia; in her desire to construct all her life as a nation—that is, her administrative, social, cultural and family life—according to the Gospel alone. The idea is insane—no more nor less insane than the Gospel itself. And as far as we have been able to gather from several meetings with members of your brotherhood, you are not now so far from this insane intention yourselves. And you are the youth of Italy; and, it is to be hoped, the Catholicism of the future. We want you to appreciate the full seriousness of this spiritual fact: Russia took this idea to heart a thousand years ago, and throughout these thousand years, through misfortunes and temptations, she has been labouring and striving for one thing only:

*F. I. Tyutchev. *Ed.*

to actualize this basic aspiration in reality.

In her Gospel-inspired insanity, Russia has always believed, and continues to believe, that Christ's redemptive act is sufficient for the complete overcoming of sin in the soul of a whole nation, if that nation follows Christ, wholeheartedly and unhesitatingly, wherever He may lead. In her Gospel-inspired maximalism, Russia has never wished to accept, and in the depths of her being never has accepted, anything which does not issue directly from Christ and Christ alone. (Russia finds laws alien to her, because Christ is not a lawgiver, but a liberator). Russia finds culture alien to her, unless it be the culture of Christ alone. Russia finds the State alien to her, unless this state life is maintained only by an inner structure of Christian love. In real terms this means that Russia finds everything in the world alien except Christ, but is ready to accept everything in the world as Christ was ready to do. Everything in the world belongs to Him and must be brought to Him.

A young nation with this calling would be able to bring it to fulfilment only if other more experienced and mature nations were to come to its aid in brotherly love. In order to struggle against sin, Russia would have needed the teaching of biblical—Christianized—law; in order to build a society on the basis of communal love she would have needed the protective support of wise Roman law; in order to struggle against the "hordes" of the Asiatic pagans she would have needed the experience and help of the Byzantine Empire and of the Christian knights of Europe. She would have needed all this not as an end in itself, but as a temporary support on the difficult path of struggle, growth and development, in order to pour out on her foreign brothers, with thankful love, the lavish flood of Christian freedom which inwardly transfigures all the reality of earthly existence. For Russia has a superfluity of this love and this freedom—a superfluity of those things which the weary and inwardly barren world is now seeking most of all.

If this Christian co-operation, this fraternal exchange of ecclesiastical values and national values, did not take place a thousand years ago, then it must take place now.

And it is we who must do this, with your help. We probably do not know the full measure of your achievements or the full

value of your gifts, but we are capable of understanding them with your help. Demonstrate to us in concrete reality, in vital and actual activity, the full strength of your loyalty to Jesus Christ, and we shall respond to you with the full strength of the love of Christ which lives in us, and teach you Christian freedom, so that together we can begin a creative life in Christ. For we are convinced that such is the calling of Russia: and, following Christ, we are fully determined to put this calling into effect.

You may ask: "Who called Russia, and when?" We reply: she chose this calling for herself, and Christ accepted it. For we live not in the Old Testament but in the New, and this is the only way a Christian nation can come into being, like the Apostle John who followed his beloved Teacher without being called, on the promptings of his heart alone (remember, in the last chapter of the last Gospel?).

And anyway, there has been evidence about Russia's calling—not for Russia, because she knows the aspirations of her own heart without this—but evidence *about Russia—for you*.

We have in mind the evidence provided by the Mother of God at Fatima, subsequently repeated more than once. We tremble when we think of the degree of trust in us she showed when she called on you to turn your spiritual gaze on Russia, on "her people". We know what she expects from us: she expects that our hearts will melt with that love inspired by the Church, without which sacrifices, prophecies, wisdom and righteousness are as nothing, as merely "sounding brass or a tinkling cymbal". We shall not betray her expectations: we hope and believe that in answer to the prayers of our saints, her Son will give us this love.

And what does she expect from you?

You must decide this for yourselves.

Just as many centuries ago the Mongol hordes tried to wipe from the face of the earth a Russia which had sought out holiness, so now the new enemies of Christ want to kill the shoots of future Russia, of ancient Russia, of Russia eternally young.

We see the original image of this Russia not in the Empire of St Petersburg, and not even in the Tsardom of Moscow. We can now see the beginnings of the growth of a Russia which has never died, but which has lain powerless for centuries, occupied with the task of living out the

heavy times of trial, at first imposed from outside, now of her own making: the Russia of St Vladimir and the martyrs Boris and Gleb, of Sergi of Radonezh and Andrei Rublyov, of Serafim of Sarov and Patriarch Tikhon, the Russia of the saints and martyrs, the Russia of the Mother of God, the Russia of Jesus Christ.

In all her defencelessness this Russia appeals to you, to your freedom and courage, to your chivalrous spirit, to your European nobility and Roman honour, to your justice and compassion, to your consciences as disciples of Christ, to your duty as sons and daughters of the Church: do not allow the pagan savages of our time to stifle in the cradle the baby whose name is—Russia of the future.

This was Christ's wish: that her life or

death should on this occasion depend on your faith and your resolve, on your love and your trust in her, this Russia of the future. Christ wished her to become your child as well, if you will protect her now and save her from perishing. Only then will you be able to love her aright, as she will love you.

Our common future lies in your hands. We rely on you, our brothers.

Members of the Christian Seminar
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VIKTOR POPKOV
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