

Document

The Religious Significance of Unofficial Soviet Culture

Many unofficial and informal study groups have sprung up in the Soviet Union in recent years. Their members, who are usually young people, meet to discuss cultural and religious subjects, and sometimes produce journals and symposia which circulate in samizdat. One such group in Moscow, the Christian Seminar on Problems of the Religious Renaissance, was the subject of the article "USSR: The Christian Seminar" by Jane Ellis in RCL Vol. 8, No. 2, pp. 92-101. Another group, founded by Orthodox Christians but not exclusively Christian in membership, is the so-called "37" group in Leningrad. It attracts writers, artists, poets and others engaged in creative activity. Since 1976 the group has been producing a journal, also called 37.

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Religious Significance of Unofficial Culture", was originally a speech delivered by Goricheva at a conference on 16 September 1979; it subsequently appeared in 37, No. 19, September-December 1979.

It is only five years since the "bulldozer" exhibition,* but it seems like decades. So much has happened, and our "unofficial" culture, which came into existence so recently, already has a whole history of experience behind it.

There have been pictures, texts, seminars, journals—but that is not all. There have been demonstrations, arrests, trials—but that is not all either. The existential status of life has changed; the cultural atmosphere has been purified; new people have appeared—a new type of man.

Today I want to stress the fact that this renaissance has not just been a cultural one, but a spiritual one as well. Those spiritual values which have up to now been merely the preserve of romantic dreams have become incarnate in life and have demonstrated to everyone that they are real.

Five years ago a multitude of study-circles and groups united to form one organization, and immeasurably broadened their contacts. Young forces came

*An exhibition of pictures by unofficial artists was held in September 1974 on a piece of waste ground in Moscow. The authorities broke it up using bulldozers and water-cannon. *Ed.*

out from underground, eager for action. Everyone felt that we were standing on the brink of a new era, a new historical age.

There was one very important existential achievement: we conquered fear. We conquered it firstly on the level of everyday existence. We stopped being afraid that we would be sacked from our jobs, put in prison, sent into exile: it was all one to us. Secondly, we conquered fear on the level of our inner life. We managed to conquer our neurotic inner fears by ceasing to live a life of denial and by becoming aware that what we had been afraid of until then was completely insubstantial. The myth that the KGB was all-powerful was exploded, the world was demystified: we saw ourselves no longer as victims but as creators.

This victory over fear gave us a new type of person: free, fearless and self-sacrificing.

The person who had appeared was free, but did not go in for exaggerated posturing. The period of destruction and stupefaction with drugs and alcohol was already behind us. The person who had appeared was integral and undivided; his word was his deed; he was not only capable of meditating on things "beautiful and exalted" but was also striving to body forth his ideals in life.

The person who had appeared was ready to sacrifice himself fearlessly, conscious of his position in the contemporary historical picture, shouldering responsibility for his time.

The appearance of such a person was due to one fact only: from the first days of its existence the new culture had orientated itself towards uncompromising and sacrificial service of the highest spiritual values. Many of the artists and poets consciously saw their creativity as serving God. We heard more and more conversations about the establishment of a new Orthodox culture. Nowadays a "non-Christian" artist or poet has become a rarity: the only category which distinguishes amongst them is their greater or lesser degree of attachment to the Church. But before talking about the Church I would like to say a word about this "culture" itself. In the last few years we have re-experienced the concept of culture. Let us look at this in more detail.

At some point in the 1950s the *observ-*

able process of de-ideologisation of our society began. This led to monstrous nihilism and unbelief. We had not yet found any new gods. Great energy was sacrificed to Nothing. But it cannot be a normal state of affairs for a society to exist at this lowest level: what is essential is a life-giving sense of purpose, a pivot around which existence can organize itself. For many people, it is culture and cultural activity which have become this pivot. Culture has become something like a new asceticism. Cultural consciousness had to throw out idols, false absolutes, formulae for universal happiness and many other self-imposed blinkers. This was culture's first self-conscious act on the road leading to its liberation and ultimately to its entry into the Church. The complete independence of art was proclaimed: independence from any tasks imposed on it from outside. But as I have already mentioned, this announcement of independence also included an element of asceticism: art defined itself and succeeded in designating its boundaries and in revealing the finite nature of its tasks and methods. Having become free, it recognized its own groundlessness, and this recognition produced a feeling of humility: for culture, this was the first step towards repentance.

But the cultural renaissance did not just involve purification. It also helped us to develop a sense of *form*.

As I have already mentioned, cultural consciousness is the antithesis of ideological consciousness. The latter is based on the idea that existence and thinking are identical, an idea which was introduced into world philosophy by Descartes and which—unexpectedly for philosophy—established its hold in the social practices of fascism and Stalinism. With his famous "*cogito ergo sum*", Descartes gave a philosophical formulation for the fatal gulf separating man from the sources of Spirit and life. Descartes identified existence with reason, and was thus the originator of European subjectivism, in which philosophy loses its religious basis, ceases to be the reflection and result of the integral life of a human individual, and becomes a form of police violence, an ideology. A good deal has been written about this in contemporary philosophical and sociological literature, so I shall not deal any further with it here.

Let us simply say that the dictatorship of reason turned out to be the dictatorship of will, and the dictatorship of will, that of arbitrariness. The arbitrariness of one idea became a prison for all the rest.

Culture provides form, and hence liberation from the ambiguous gloomy world of ideology, from dumb pseudo-mysticism. In culture, nothing secret remains unrevealed. Culture brings underground demons to light, and puts them on general view: and we find ourselves laughing at what we had feared.

Some five years ago, then, we began to emerge from underground. People took the risk of thinking in terms broader than those of their own circles, and they were rewarded with an unexpected wealth of contacts, values, destinies, and with the unexpected joy of contact with a new Reality.

The most important aspect of this cultural activity is that it bears no trace of complacency. From the very beginning it has understood its own status as something created. From the very beginning, culture has been seeking God, striving to be more than merely a vehicle for self-expression and sublimation. It is aware of its deep ontological roots and has never lost sight of its spiritual perspective.

Five years ago, when all this was just beginning, we were full of rainbow-coloured hopes: we thought we were standing on the threshold of some spiritual turning-point. But it must be said that over the last few years the external circumstances of unofficial culture have changed considerably. The movement has again collapsed into circles and groups (we meet up only at people's trials or to see people off); many have emigrated; many have gone over to the official culture; some have been sentenced.

Gone is that mood of exultation which prevailed at the beginning: it almost seems

as if unofficial culture has either been absorbed into official culture or gone underground.

And in this situation, outwardly so gloomy, many people are nevertheless discovering an island of unsullied meaning: the Church.

Even if everything around one is permeated to the last atom with the spirit of death and falsehood, the Church still remains the pure Bride of Christ: today, as always, she is the "pillar and the ground of truth".

The stinking carnal world not only does not touch her, but is being overcome by her every day, every second, for Christ has overcome the world. Even in our own crisis-ridden age, the words of the Saviour about the Church still ring out with special force: "The gates of hell shall not prevail against her."

As it enters the Church, the Russian intelligentsia is flowing into the main channel of Russia's great culture; the prodigal son is returning to his Father and discovering in our Lord Jesus Christ the solution to all his problems.

The discovery of the Church seems to me to be the greatest discovery made within our unofficial culture. The Church is the salvation of all the values which culture has won and acquired. The Church gives freedom and daring, and cures us of all the sicknesses of individualism, instead revealing within us an integral personality orientated towards creativity.

We live at a time when a new Christian culture is being created. We can only guess at what it might be like. It does not yet have a language or any masterpieces; but there are some individual creative people who have inwardly recognized the possibility of a synthesis of culture and faith, and who have recognized this possibility as their own mission in the Church.