

Truthseekers, Godbuilders or Culture Vultures?

Some Supplementary Remarks on Religious Perspectives in Modern Soviet Literature

IRENA MARYNIAK

In her article on religious themes in recent Soviet literature (*RCL*. Vol. 16 No. 2) Mary Seton-Watson draws attention to a very important aspect of modern Soviet writing. Over the past twenty years religion — Christianity in particular — has come to be treated with a serious and at times cautiously sympathetic interest in a sizeable proportion of officially published Soviet prose. When they draw on religious ideas and experience, Soviet authors are doing little more, of course, than reviving a tradition in Russian writing, which was stifled after the Revolution and further quashed by the enforcement of the doctrine of Socialist Realism on literature in the early 1930s. Some of Russia's most highly regarded literary figures rooted their work in religious thought, and it should come as no surprise to see the latter-day successors of Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Bulgakov or Pasternak trying to do the same.

It would not, then, be fully appropriate to welcome the introduction of religious ideas in official Soviet prose as an indication of a rising surge of religious faith within the Soviet literary establishment. The expression of some kind of religious perception has been given a chance, it is true, but the thinking behind it cries out for closer analysis, particularly as an examination of the way in which religious themes have been treated in some works suggests that the purpose behind their introduction could be less religious than ideological.

Three types of Religious Theme

In the prose written and published since the mid-1960s, there have emerged three main "types" of religious theme, as follows.

1. Poetic descriptions of mystical experiences, usually inspired by the natural environment and often related to dreams or visions. These may include references to familiar archetypal images of the holy (the earth, sky and sun for instance) or local religious beliefs such as shamanism, the cult of ancestral spirits, or cults associated with objects and places.

2. Direct references to Christian tradition and culture (the other great religions feature scarcely at all), suggesting that religious culture could have its value, and that in the past religion acted as an effective outlet for human creativity and helped to reinforce social cohesion, responsibility and moral fibre.

3. Presentations of religious faith, or indeed faith of any kind, as an effective tap for the energies of the socialist collective. These may also carry a suggestion that it might be useful to create a deity (even though none exists) in order to encourage people to behave in a more decent, patriotic way and to make them work harder. This is not a new idea. Shortly after the abortive revolution of 1905, a group of socialist intellectuals including Maxim Gor'ky and Anatoli Lunacharsky tried to promote the notion that religious faith, or rather the enthusiasm it could generate, was a creative and motivating force, potentially useful to the socialist cause. The "godbuilding" theory, as this was known, was discredited when it met with Lenin's personal disapproval; but it appears now to have reemerged in Soviet literature — how far as a direct result of the thought of the original godbuilders, it is still difficult to say.

As a supplement to Mary Seton-Watson's remarks, I would like to reexamine some of the works mentioned in her article in the light of these three categories.

Mysticism

It is perhaps indicative that works in the first category ("mysticism") appear to be less prominent in the writing of the past three years. The writer who most readily springs to mind as an exponent of mystical perceptions is one of the most popular and widely read Soviet authors of the 1970s: Valentin Rasputin. Much of his prose is deeply evocative of an immanent spiritual reality and rich in subtle religious association. The following passage, taken from his early story *Time Running Out* (*Posledny srok* 1970) describes the experience of an old peasant woman slipping slowly into death.

The old woman shut her eyes, quickly, without a final farewell glance. Within the firmly closed folds of her eyelids smoky rings floated meandering from left to right, as though someone had begun to burn incense in preparation for her new sacrament. She stretched and lay still, tensely awaiting the first gentle touch which would send a sorrowful and sleepy bliss flowing through her body. Yes, she had been human, she had known the Kingdom of Man. Amen. She sensed her consciousness flicker and her

hands grow numb. Or was that merely the way it seemed, was that merely her wish? And, filled with the promised chime, bells hung over the earth.¹

Rasputin's best-known work, *Farewell to Matyora* (*Proshchaniye s Matyoroi* 1978), tells of the flooding of an old village in strikingly apocalyptic terms which many critics have noted. A later work, *Live and Love a Hundred Years* (*Vek zhivi, vek lyubi* 1981), describes an unexplained mystical experience which a small boy undergoes during a night spent in the Siberian forest.

However, Rasputin's most recent work *The Fire* (*Pozhar* 1985) has less of a religious flavour and suggests a greater concern for more mundane themes such as social ethics and responsibility. The same could be said of the latest work of two other writers of the '70s who explored the spiritual dimension of life: Vasili Belov and Viktor Astaf'yev.² Even Semyonov's *The Ring Game* (*Igra v kolechko* 1982) which includes the description of a mystical vision, and Soloukhin's semi-religious meditation *Pebbles in the Hand* (*Kameshki na ladoni* 1981), mentioned by Mary Seton-Watson, are pieces of writing from the pre-Gorbachev era. Under *glasnost*' writers appear to be more preoccupied with social and historical issues than with intimations of the divine.

Contemporary Apologists for Religion

More interesting from the point of view of this article, however, are the works which fall into the remaining two categories, where reference to religion is made directly and where the writer seems to act as an apologist for religious tradition, for the historical role of the church, or for the principle of faith. Mary Seton-Watson cites several titles which could serve as examples: Daniil Granin's *The Picture* (*Kartina*), Sergei Kaledin's *The Humble Cemetery* (*Smirennoye kladbishche*), Sergei Alekseyev's *The Word* (*Slovo*), Yuri Bondarev's *The Game* (*Igra*), Chingiz Aitmatov's *The Scaffold* (*Plakha*) and Vladimir Tendryakov's *An Attack on Mirages* (*Pokusheniye na mirazhi*). All these works incorporate the message that religious tradition has its value, culturally, socially or morally; but the novels by Aitmatov and Tendryakov contain additional "godbuilding" elements which merit serious notice.

¹ V. Rasputin, "Posledny srok", *Nash sovremennik*, 1970, No. 8, p. 44.

² Belov's *Everything Ahead* (*Vsyo vpered*) and Astaf'yev's *Sad Detective* (*Pechal'ny detektiv*), both published in 1986, are novels which bitterly expose corruption and division in the urban community.

One striking feature of Soviet prose published over the past twenty years is its fascination with memory and history: its rediscovery of pre-urban, pre-industrial and pre-revolutionary cultural traditions and values. Granin's novel *The Picture* intriguingly also suggests that art which inspires recollections of the past can affect or transform the present. "Beauty affects the soul and seems to increase its perception," one of Granin's characters remarks. The cathedral scene, to which Mary Seton-Watson refers, develops this idea. Granin's party official, Losev, experiences a sense of *déjà-vu* in the church. The Orthodox liturgy takes him down the corridors of time and awakens in him memories of music and words which "it seemed he did not and could not know". The music harmonises his relationship with his girlfriend Tanya, and induces him to contemplate the human condition and the transient values by which he lives. The experience is evidently aesthetic, not religious, and Granin's description of the priests celebrating the service remains ambivalent, if not overtly negative. The metropolitan has a "small wise little face", his deacon looks "sick and hopeless", the server has "puffy, feminine hands". The congregation is old and feeble and the metropolitan seems more interested in Tanya than in prayer. The conversation between the two visitors and the church server which follows also has an ambiguous quality. It is an encounter with a lesser demon rather than with a committed Orthodox Christian. The server flaps his elbows like wings, his eyes blaze with a dark fire and he cringes from the sight of the altar. He declares that his life has been moved by doubt and recommends that good men should be sent to hell to test their real motives. He withdraws, sweat pouring down his face, only when Tanya declares that selfless love is stronger than any desire to reach heaven, and capable of any sacrifice.

To the fresh eye of outsiders, the ancient ritual of the Orthodox Church gives a momentary aesthetic awakening, Granin suggests, but those permanently within its walls are sick or corrupt. Yet there may be a suggestion between the lines that like an ancient work of art, like a painting, the church needs cleaning and revitalising so that the beauty and mystery it hides might be more clearly revealed.

Granin's novel indicates that religion reflects permanent aesthetic value; Kaledin's *The Humble Cemetery* gives it a moral emphasis, as Mary Seton-Watson has pointed out. The story suggests that Christianity can make people behave with greater kindness and dignity. The point is made in passing by Kaledin, but it receives considerable prominence in a postscript written for *Novy mir* by the well-known critic Igor' Vinogradov. The Christian tradition, Vinogradov writes, is a source of "spiritual culture" (*dukhovnaya kul'tura*) which implies a "complete image of the world and man

within it, able to communicate an absolute meaning to life and thus define the whole system of man's orientation."

The theme of "spiritual culture" which can offer meaning and consistency to life is being widely explored by Soviet authors now, but in some works it has been suggested that this may be found only when national roots have been recovered and the influences of external cultures sifted out and rejected. The novels by Bondarev and Alekseyev are two cases in point. Both make reference to the tradition and culture of the Old Believers, the traditionalist sectarians who broke away from the Orthodox Church in 1666, when the Patriarch Nikon introduced a set of liturgical reforms making Russian practice conform with that of the Greek church of the day.

The Old Believers in Contemporary Literature

The Old Believers appear to hold special interest for a number of modern Soviet writers, possibly, as Mary Seton-Watson reasonably suggests, as an offshoot of the 1970s fashion for nostalgic depictions of Russian village life (now on its way "out"), or because this was a group which has found ways of successfully withstanding the state for over three hundred years. There is a further point worth noting, though. The attitude of the Soviet authorities to the Old Believers — a sect living in a kind of permanent internal exile, but not opposed to the present regime as such — was ever ambiguous.³ In the 1920s and early 1930s, Lenin's friend the historian M. N. Pokrovsky referred to them as a "people's church", essentially democratic in character, unlike the official state church which exploited the people. The saint and martyr most venerated by the Old Believers, the Archpriest Avvakum (who appears in Bondarev's novel *The Game*), has never been subjected to Soviet iconoclasm. His autobiography and comments on the Bible were published with a not unfavourable introduction even in 1934 — a time when no other religious literature was published in the Soviet Union.

The appearance of the Old Believers in recent literature is therefore less controversial than it might seem. They represent a group which has long resisted the monopoly of state power, it is true, but they also serve as witness to the existence of a purely Russian form of religious culture which has successfully withstood the pressures of foreign influence. Their strength — Bondarev and Alekseyev seem to suggest

³The Old Believers' objection is to the sinful world which three hundred years ago abandoned the true Orthodox faith and fell prey to the powers of evil. In their eyes all events since then have been but a consequence of that parting of the ways. See Walter Kolarz, *Religion in the Soviet Union* (London, 1961), pp. 129-30

— lies in a refusal to compromise with the authorities over the corruption of their beliefs and their way of life. As Bondarev's hero, Krymov, contemplates the statue of the Archpriest Avvakum, he muses on the world today: "If there no longer exists such energy, such spirit . . . as that of the steadfast Archpriest Avvakum, then civilisation must come to an end . . . One day someone will fly over the empty earth and see only the dark stains of a human life grown cold . . . We lack faith in ourselves . . ." ⁴ The threat to civilisation, Bondarev suggests, comes largely from the Western consumerism which has invaded the Soviet way of life, and from the blind or irresponsible drive for technological progress. But, Krymov believes, hope may lie in his own country:

Russia is the most astonishing country. There is none other like it in the whole of Nature. And if anything can save a lost civilisation, it will again be Russia. Just as it was in the Second World War . . . Perhaps Russia has the conscience of the world written into her lot. Perhaps . . . this is something America has not been given. There, degeneracy of spirit has triumphed. There a contract with the devil has been signed. ⁵

Yuri Bondarev is one of the more militantly nationalistic authors writing in the Soviet Union today. His work is published in large print-runs and his novels have been staged in Moscow. Sergei Alekseyev is a younger and less widely known member of the same school. His novel *The Word* introduces another element into a picture of world history not dissimilar to that drawn by Bondarev.

Alekseyev's Old Believers are a group of eccentric and at times fanatical custodians of the treasures of Russia's past. They have in their possession a hoard of ancient books, but are apparently naive enough to be subjected to exploitation by émigré Russians in an internationally coordinated racket to suck the Soviet Union dry of its cultural heritage. The books are regularly smuggled out to the West, and it falls to Alekseyev's heroes to help save them. Intriguingly enough, the prize manuscript thought to be in their hands is a "Song to the Russian Land" written by a pre-Christian priest and poet, which gives evidence of a developed literature in existence before the conversion of Rus' in the tenth century. In a series of historical flashbacks, it becomes clear that far from being the dawn of Russian civilisation, Prince Vladimir's conversion and the enforced Christianisation of his people was the first of several cultural invasions which, over the centuries, corrupted a language and a culture that had been truly indigenous to the Russian land. Another of these invasions was

⁴Y. Bondarev, "Igra" (*Novy mir*, 1985 No. 1, p. 57.)

⁵*Ibid.*, p. 72.

Nikon's adaptation of the church liturgy in the 17th century. Since then, Alekseyev suggests, the church, as an arm of the state, has been rich, powerful and a threat to the moral health of its own people. "It teaches people to be beggars", one character remarks.

So the interest shown by writers in the Old Believers is not without an ideological element. It seems to be characteristic of authors with nationalist sympathies, seeking to promote evidence of the continuing existence of a tradition that is wholly and unyieldingly Russian, and to which modern Russia might look for confirmation of its identity, its spiritual authority and its strength.

Godbuilders

An even more complex and confusing feature of some recent Soviet writing is the introduction of Christian ideas, and even scenes from the Gospel, with a view to promoting a kind of "alternative" religion which could help make Soviet society function properly. Aitmatov's novel *The Scaffold* is a case in point. The religious elements to which Mary Seton-Watson points actually serve to bear the a-religious message that in order to improve the standard of social ethics it may be useful to create or "build" a god. A rediscovery of religious culture and of the principle of faith, Aitmatov suggests, could help to give necessary guidance to Soviet society today.

The main theme of this somewhat convoluted novel is the abuse of collective unity, in the natural environment and in society. The central section of the work describes the sacrificial struggle of an ex-seminarian, Avdy Kallistratov, with corruption, drug-pushing and the overall breakdown of community — public issues much in vogue since the *perestroika* drive began. Interestingly enough, Kallistratov's views on religion bear a considerable resemblance to those expressed by Maxim Gor'ky and Anatoly Lunacharsky, the main proponents of the "godbuilding" theory. The essential features of their thinking were as follows. There exists no God outside man. It is up to men, collectively, to "build" their god in the community: to fuse their energies as individuals with those of the group, to cease to be concerned with their personal interests and to focus their creative potential on the formation of an ideal society. Once this has been done, the collective god will have been created, with everyone left happy and fulfilled and free of the burden of his isolation as an individual.⁶

⁶The main works to be consulted are A. Lunacharsky, *Religiya i sotsializm*, 1908 and 1911; M. Gor'ky, *Ispoved'*, 1908.

Aitmatov's hero has very similar ideas. He regards the religious impulse as a "vast delusion", but wants to resurrect the idea of God in society in order to improve life's quality. God is a feature of human consciousness, he believes, and a reflection of the best elements in the human personality as it aspires to affirm its freedom from social repression. Once fully acknowledged, this deity will be reflected in human action and have a revolutionary effect on the world. Then social evils will be overcome.

There is a scene in the novel where Avdy Kallistratov has a visionary dream of the confrontation between Christ and Pontius Pilate. This has awoken considerable controversy among critics both Soviet and Western, but surprisingly little attention has been paid to the parallels between the ideas expressed by Aitmatov's Christ and those of Lunacharsky or Gor'ky. God and man are to be identified, Christ says in *The Scaffold*. All men collectively are the image of god on earth, embracing the sum total of human actions and aspirations. He calls this godhead "the god of tomorrow" and declares that his nature, whether he is to be fair or foul, depends entirely upon man. As a result of his suffering, Christ says, human consciousness will be helped to evolve towards its fullest potential, which is the godhead.

This interpretation of God as the projection of an elevated state of consciousness and fulfilment is very much in line with the thinking of the original godbuilders: "God is humanity in its highest potential . . ." Lunacharsky wrote. "Let us then love the potentials of mankind, our potentials, and represent them in a garland of glory in order to love them ever more."⁷

One can only speculate on whether the parallels between Avdy Kallistratov's beliefs and those of Lunacharsky are intended or unconscious. It must suffice to say that they exist and have already been noted, if not in the official Soviet press, then at least in an anonymous article published in an early issue of the *samizdat* publication *Bulletin of Christian Community* edited by Alexander Ogorodnikov.⁸

Vladimir Tendryakov's novel *An Attack on Mirages*, though less directly a reflection of the godbuilding philosophy, has a similar flavour. If Tendryakov omits to propose that an idol should be offered to the world to inject it with mystical enthusiasm and tap collective energy, he does emphasise the need to find faith, encourage social cohesion and promote a moral mood in which the self is placed in a position secondary to the collective, and in which the good of the

⁷Dimitry Pospelovsky, *A History of Marxist-Leninist Atheism and Soviet Anti-Religious Policies* (London, 1987), p. 94.

⁸"Blagiye namereniya," *Byulleten'khristianskoi obshchestvennosti*, 1987 No. 1-2, pp. 271-79.

collective is established as the supreme value.

The plot, which Mary Seton-Watson has summarised, is a little far-fetched, but it does raise some interesting issues, not least the problem of historical determinism. Having completed his experiment with history, the hero, Grebin, concludes that Christianity as a social movement was inevitable. Christ preached a poetic kind of liberation to the mass of the downtrodden who "built" him into a god, and who resurrected him after his death to reflect the state of their developing revolutionary consciousness and their urge to unity.⁹ Christ and St Paul, Grebin concludes, were formed by the forces of history and their moral strength was a reflection of the collective consciousness, of their times. In subordinating themselves to this collective consciousness they became carriers of the historical mission of the progressive class at that period in history and, in Lunacharskian terms, "godbuilders".

Grebin then considers the theoretical possibility of inventing a social mechanism for building good people — something which has so far escaped social scientists and left historically unresolved the problem of how a society may be successfully and humanely run. Grebin's thinking and observations take him to a number of controversial conclusions. He establishes that the Utopian principle, rigid economic planning and Marxism-Leninism are inadequate. The only positive principle which could help reverse the "loss of community spirit" (*razobshchennost'*)¹⁰ in modern society, Grebin finds through bitter personal experience, is philanthropy, disinterested kindness, the principle which Christ taught, and which, Grebin believes, evolutionary and social history have proved to be the firmest and only permanent value.

Alongside philanthropy, the novel also shows, faith and hope stand as other motivating principles in life: faith to sustain creative activity and hope in a brighter future for the next generation. In the end Tendryakov offers faith, hope and charity — the three essential moral tenets put forward by St Paul — as the key to a successful life without God, which could help to make a divided society whole again. Not godbuilding in the strictest sense perhaps, because Lunacharsky's emphasis on injecting the masses with religious enthusiasm is absent, but none the less a moral theory which treats religion as an effective source of ethical principles with the power to draw the social collective into a coherent whole.

It is too early still to judge the significance of the different forms which religious ideas have been taking in modern Soviet prose. It would be wrong, of course, to dismiss all religious references as

⁹ V. Tendryakov, "Pokusheniye na mirazhi", *Novy mir*, 1987 No. 5, pp. 114-18.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, *Novy mir*, 1987 No. 4, p. 6.

variations on the theme of established Soviet ideology, just as it would be unfair to leave them unexamined. Nevertheless, it is difficult to deny that in some recent writing, religious references have shown ways in which Christian culture, philosophy and history can be appropriated by ideology to establish cultural identity and to promote a set of ethical values for reference, with a view to making Soviet society stronger and more stable.