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A table of contents for *Scottish Bulletin of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

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## **Russia – Between Past and Future\***

FR VENIAMIN NOVIK

Russian thought has always had a penchant for historiosophy. The most important question it faces today is the question of how the Russian catastrophe of this century was possible. After what has happened to Russia, simply to go on talking about 'Holy Rus', even with reservations such as 'despite everything the Orthodox ideal still lives on in the soul of the people', is unconvincing, even though it may be that this ideal actually does live on. In the words of G. P. Fedotov, the twentieth century has rendered everything written in the previous century naive (except, I might add, the writings of Dostoyevsky). Without broad popular support, if the mass of the people had been generally passive, the all-Russian pogrom could not of course have taken place. It was as if there burst forth some kind of suppressed hatred towards all spirituality, which had become the privilege of the elite, as a result of a deep inner split in Russian society, a split that had taken on a clearly identifiable form from the time of the reforms of Peter the Great. Now we scrutinise Russian history differently, trying to pinpoint exactly when all this began: was it during the struggle between the Josephites and the Non-Possessors, the *oprichnina* of Ivan the Terrible, the Time of Troubles, under Patriarch Nikon or the revolts of Razin and Pugachev, when they killed priests, women and children? Every nation's history is dramatic, but here the explosion took place, as it were, at a much deeper level. If one had to describe the spiritual condition of Russia in one word, that word would be 'schism', a deep inner schism of Russian society, and one that pierces every Russian who has lost his identity. The impetuosity of the Karamazovs became, with Lenin, a clear-cut definition about power that is 'not limited by anything else, not by any laws or regulations, but relies on violence'. 'Steal what has been stolen' was how it manifested itself. The monstrous, primeval cruelty that accompanied all this frenzy pointed to some kind of metaphysical hysteria in the soul of the people, indicating that it was possessed.

With the 1917 revolution there began a new kind of era, an 'era of iron and concrete' in which there was no longer any room for the old Russian Orthodox way of life, even with all its imperfections. Life took on a new quality: what was common to all achieved overwhelming dominance over what was individual. As compensation for the loss of the deity, there arose an unrestrained activism, even titanism, reshaping the world. The individual as a 'private person' was irrevocably doomed. N. A. Berdayev noted the appearance of a cruel new anthropological type prevailing in the life of society, every part of which was permeated with violence, both obvious and hidden. The cliché about the special spirituality of the Russian is clearly out of date. At the same time it cannot be said that everything has become totally evil. The ideals proclaimed verbally, despite

\*This article is a translation of 'Rossiya – mezhdru proshlym i budushchim', *Stolitsa*, no. 46–7, 1991, pp. 72–5.

all the underlying falsehood of the system, were on the whole positive and humanitarian. There were even individual outbursts of enthusiasm. At the same time these proclaimed ideals, which were supposed to be realised some time in the future, were considered the most important thing, and all hardships as something secondary. This generated an infinite endurance in the people during the difficulties of life. A Russian is prepared to sacrifice almost all the everyday aspects of life for the sake of an ideal in which he believes; and the ideals, as I said before, were on the whole humane and had a Christian basis. A monstrous exchange took place: an outwardly similar surrogate was substituted for Christianity. Instead of the Kingdom of God, people started talking about the 'bright future'; the proletariat was proclaimed the new chosen people; the Russian idea of *sobornost'* found its terrible double in enforced collectivism.

This was essentially a religious programme of salvation, demanding human sacrifice and the unrelenting search for enemies. It is difficult to believe that evil goals were set deliberately, but once the path had been chosen, with inexorable logic it required more and more evil deeds. Whole generations, particularly during and after the war (1941–5), lived honest lives through difficult times, enduring all adversities, and it is these people – those of them who survived – who still believe in socialism. If only all were like them. But there also had to be those who operated the Gulag Archipelago. Even today it is not always possible to mention freedom and the dignity of the individual without the risk of being accused of anarchic egoism.

Many people who in all other respects were quite decent human beings remained silent when some dissident or other was being beaten up, or someone who in some way or other did not fit in with the system. They considered – and some people here and there still consider – that this small minus was necessary for some sort of great plus in the future. But the danger of any ideal lies precisely in its generalised character, which inevitably leads to a disregard for the specific. People who are gripped by certain ideals – or more accurately by a certain ideology – cease to have an adequate grasp of reality. Facts in general cease to mean anything. Thus the huge human and material losses suffered by Russia along the path to communism still fail to make some people think again about the truth of the very idea of communism, since the idea itself in abstraction, separated from the path towards it, appears alluring; and even a critic of communism such as Berdyayev saw something positive in it. This is not difficult to understand, incidentally, since Berdyayev was not a sociological but a metaphysical thinker, and accordingly saw communism in the light of *sobornost'* (conciliarity). It is in fact impossible to distinguish factors of prime importance from those of secondary importance, and all the more so when everything is in motion. What appears today to be insignificant may tomorrow become the dominant factor, and vice versa. To make such distinctions would have required spiritual vision, which was in short supply. The dialectic of the private and the public – and in the social sphere, of the individual and society – posed difficult problems for the rationalistic approach, with its inevitable tendency to seek a complete definition of all aspects of the life of society. The important thing, of course, is not to produce a speculative definition of the relationship between the public and the private, but to grasp their true unity; and in doing so it is necessary to determine what level of violence – or, more exactly, coercion – is necessary and unavoidable in order to guarantee the rule of law in a given state.

To a significant degree, ideals are responsible for the path needed to attain them. Rationalistic, materialistic monism, which was at the heart of the new worldview, led to an attempt to treat life as wholly determinable. In the process the apophatic approach of religion was crudely denigrated, and the result was social utopianism,

which in the words of S. L. Frank is the main heresy of the twentieth century. Unfortunately, however, utopias are sometimes realised, killing life itself in the process.

The objection might be raised that Christianity too is a utopia, an unrealisable ideal. This is not the case; it is in fact utterly realistic. At the moment, however, this is not the important issue as far as we are concerned. One thing is certain: Christianity regards violence as something essentially alien. Meanwhile a non-religious worldview is unable to determine a level of necessary violence: to do so is inevitably to be in error, for there are no criteria. It was not the idea of communism that proved false, it was the absolutisation of this idea; the absolutisation of any idea must prove false. Here lies the limitation of any ideology. How did it happen that an antihistorical, abstract idea about building society anew prevailed, when all it produced among the lower levels of society was a pogrom? Were there any preconditions for this situation? Profound ideas about the special nature of the Russian soul were expressed by Fr P. Florensky, N. A. Berdyayev, V. V. Rozanov, S. L. Frank and others. Let us look at what they have to say, paying particular attention to their observations relating to the question posed earlier: how could all this have been possible?

According to Pavel Florensky, the Russian people did not attain Orthodoxy and Orthodox culture through suffering: they were acquired too lightly, and as a result certain weak points developed which sooner or later had to give way. Berdyayev talks about the paradoxical nature of the Russian soul, about its tendency to maximalism, which produces a nihilistic or apocalyptic approach to life, an antipathy to anything 'in the middle' (*sredinny*), and to form as such. G. P. Fedotov also writes about the polarity of the Russian soul. Rozanov makes some subtle observations to the effect that the secret of the Russian's character is that he lacks respect for himself; that a Russian himself is not devoid of content, but Russian society is; that a Russian does not care about property. Statements like these of course depend to a large extent on interpretation of degrees of significance, and they are not uncontroversial. Much has been written about the 'feminine' nature of the Russian soul, its inability to organise itself. I need hardly say that these descriptions do not claim to be complete, and the views I have quoted would today appear to be one-sided. Attempts have also been made to explain the Russian character with reference to the particular geography of Russia; but it is obvious that the peculiarities of national character are no more to be explained by the Russian landscape than by any other. It is also difficult to proceed from an understanding of the Russian soul at the individual level to the level of society as a whole, to an understanding of the soul of a nation which has created the largest state in the world and has given birth to the titan of socialism, which cannot in any way be called 'feminine'. The laws governing the mind and life of an individual may be very different from the laws governing the development of society – a fact that has often been overlooked by Russian thinkers.

A whole research project could be devoted to the question of Russian atheism, which is frequently regarded as something that arose by chance, as some sort of temporary delusion. On this subject Russian thinkers have had some harsh things to say. Thus in 1918 Berdyayev wrote that questions have to be asked about the particular piety of the Russian people. It is true that the famous Russian maximalism does not necessarily have to have a religious character, although this could not be said, for example, about the sense of justice which is deeply rooted in Russians. Alongside the concept of the Russian people as Christ-bearers there is the well-known idea of one of Dostoyevsky's heroes about the Russian tendency towards atheism. It has also been said that a Russian's psychological nature, with all its instability, takes precedence over

the courageous life of the soul and that he places excessive trust in what is psychologically evident and in his own direct perceptions and feelings about life. Paradoxically, this goes along in Russian philosophy with an absence of concern for psychology: this is a philosophy which for all its concern for social matters tends towards an ontological way of thinking. Of course, it is not our task here to pass judgment on the Russian people, but without giving consideration to the matters we have been raising it is impossible to attempt to understand the contemporary situation in Russia. Any opinion is inevitably linked with a tendency to evaluate; it is virtually impossible to avoid this.

All in all, it appears that in old Rus' there were two dominant ideas: the messianic idea; and the idea of communality (*obshchinosť*) with its related concepts about duty, understood in the widest sense. And it must be said that for the era when the nation was being established, and in general for any crisis situation, these two ideas can be very fruitful, increasing the spiritual potential of the people. I am deeply convinced that the expression 'Holy Rus'' did not appear by chance. In Rus' there existed, and still exists, some special quality of spirituality, despite the formless muddle of everyday life. The Russian saints possess that special warmth and universal responsiveness that Dostoyevsky described. Speaking in 1914 at a meeting of a religio-philosophical society, S. N. Bulgakov said that so far Russia had been unable 'to transform herself in the style of the new Europe, for she is unable to acquire any real taste for it, as she can dimly hear a different call, a different command: to desire the distant, the unjoinable, the impossible, the miraculous, to thirst for both heaven and earth, to languish with a holy languor.'

It is easy enough to say now that all this did not save Russia from catastrophe, that in Rus' there were no properly worked out Christian structures for state and society. But if one does not inwardly reconcile oneself with the tragedy, it is possible to say that perhaps all is not over yet, that Rus' really has ascended Calvary, and that the transfiguration is yet to come. Perhaps the Russian tragedy has prevented or will yet prevent other even greater tragedies. The tragedy occurred when spirituality was introduced by coercion under the name of 'consciousness'; when one of the necessary conditions for spiritual development was violated – that of freedom.

In fact, the Christian ideal comprehends not only people's personal life, but all spheres of existence. When it is externally preserved but inwardly emasculated, however, this very ideal leads to the loss of immunity to violence and to the replacement of all values with their counterfeits. Messianism and communality were transformed into a kind of communist globalism, waging unremitting war against existence as such. Russian consciousness keeps an intent watch on life for fear of the Antichrist, but on this occasion it failed to notice the change. The Orthodox tsardom was replaced by atheist totalitarianism. There was no longer any discussion of the individual, so grandiose were the tasks that had been set. But it was precisely this question of human individuality that proved to be the little hole through which almost all the contents of the new Moloch slipped out. The collapse was inevitable: the attempt to determine the whole of human life actually killed it. When a man has been put in the position of a slave or a hired worker, you cannot demand from him the civic good deeds without which no civilised state can exist, no laws can function.

In extreme situations, when there was a threat to the very existence of the state, people began to behave as good citizens, but in times of peace there was not sufficient goodwill – life was too vapid and boring. The totalitarian state had produced a paternalistic-infantile type of mentality. People had been effectively excluded from socio-political life and simply waited for orders from above. The very word 'politics'

instilled fear. Fear and apathy permeated the whole of society. Revolts by individuals here and there did not change anything and did not evoke any popular sympathy. A few people stoically fulfilling their obligations did not change the general picture. It was in these conditions that a revival of social awareness took place and *perestroika* began; and this was not through pressure from below, but from above, which in itself is very strange, since those at the top, as it later turned out, had long since lost any sense of reality. It would be superficial to consider everything that had happened in Russia simply as a mistake, some kind of delusion that must sooner or later be dispelled; there is too much of the past which points forward to what happened in the twentieth century. One could argue that the fundamental cause of what happened was the lack of respect for the human individual that Rozanov talks about. But the question of individuality is a religious one, and is really only resolved in Christianity, which teaches that man is the image and likeness of God. Only God is higher than man; man is called to become like God, and cannot be the means to any end.

The collapse of the Russian monarchy, of a traditional way of life still firmly rooted in the land and of social customs shaped by Russian Orthodoxy means that it is now necessary to seek a more precise definition of the Orthodox worldview, which clearly cannot remain as it was. The link between Orthodoxy and a specific historical, social and cultural framework, and indeed Russian nationality, is not an absolute one, as history itself has proved. One paradigm of contemporary political thought is democracy, which corresponds to the raising of individual potential. The age of sacralised monarchies is slipping irrevocably into the past, and after the collapse of totalitarian communism Russia must grasp the new socio-political reality. Many outstanding Orthodox ascetics were supporters of the Orthodox monarchy, as representing a sort of reflection of the Kingdom of God on earth, but we now have historical experience that was not available to them; and in any case doctrines of Orthodox monarchy cannot be erected into dogma. It is now clear that a return to an Orthodox monarchy is impossible – although this does not, of course, rule out faith in an Orthodox monarchy as the ideal. It turned out that in the social order a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush, although those people who understand spirituality and church life in an individualistic way may be alienated from social life and from politics. A state based on law, as V. S. Solov'yev points out, is called on not to turn life into paradise, but to prevent it from turning into hell. It is clear that a law-based state of the kind that people are now talking about can only be a desacralised one, and this fact requires religious reflection. We cannot simply return to the former sacralised forms of existence, which cannot be created by human hands alone. Democracy, the essence of which is not to be found in debilitating anarchy or in the right of the majority, but in the defence of the individual, sometimes appears to the Russian as something formal, empty, petty, a sort of prearranged game, a fraudulent device to seize power; and there are in fact grounds for suspicions of this kind. It is a fact that totalitarianism often follows a debilitating democracy; but of course there can be different sorts of democracies. It is surely worth considering whether democracy, with its negative character, could be the political parallel to apophatic theology. For the social form provided by democracy can be filled with the religious, but not necessarily the political, content of a pseudosacralised totalitarian system. As an example of new Orthodox thinking, we could take St Nil Sorsky, who recognised the conditional nature of specific social structures, and who was forbearing towards heretics, distinguishing between the man, made in the image and likeness of God, and his convictions. It is now clear that the role of the democratic order has not been fully evaluated by Russian thinkers: although Solov'yev was already indicating that the

individual is the starting point of the Orthodox state, he did not dwell on this fact. Because of its formal character, democracy cannot of course itself be the goal of a given society, but only the necessary condition for its development. Without a spiritual foundation, the democratic attitude can turn, in the caustic words of L. P. Karsavin, into necrophilia, or, according to Konstantin Leont'yev, lead to 'secondary simplification'. But the totalitarian state can turn into the kingdom of the Antichrist. Today the struggle between the conservatives, who see democracy as the emasculation of ideals, and the democrats, who see a totalitarian state as a prison, is the stuff of everyday life. God grant that in this struggle there may not be the usual winners and losers: and there will not be, if we can at last learn to distinguish among the different levels of existence – spiritual, social, political and even economic – while understanding how they are all related. And we must at last learn not to identify the individual with his worldview.

Russian consciousness has lived through nihilism, the bolshevik apocalypse, titanic schemes to reshape the world, atheism, the hell of the gulag, the sickness of stagnation and the frenzy of *perestroika*, and is painfully trying to eliminate recurrences of an archaic communalism which crushes the individual. It still has to develop a critical attitude to its own intuition, to what appears to be psychologically self-evident and to a primeval concept of justice. Today nothing is self-evident. In this respect the traditional criticism by Russian thinkers of Kant, who made clear distinctions between different levels of existence, no longer appears uncontroversial. Russians must grasp not only the meaning of salvation, but also the meaning of life, the metaphysical significance of the location 'in the middle' (*sredinnost'*) of culture, of law, of forms of social life, which again we can do only through Christianity. For it is in the risen Saviour that the temporal inherits the eternal. From a philosophical point of view, Christianity provides a general basis for a proper comprehension of the inter-relationship between all metaphysical realities. In Christianity the absolute permeates the relative and the specific; eternity is understood not so much in the quantitative sense of endless length, as in the sense of the qualitative richness of existence. Thus it is precisely Christianity which reveals the meaning of life as life. We still need to eliminate the messianic consciousness, to overcome indifference towards social life and politics, to grasp the significance not only of the individual, but of individuality with its rights, without which no worthwhile civic society is possible. In old Rus' forms of personal asceticism and holiness were worked out, but we still do not have stable forms of social existence, and society as such cannot be holy. Here we might remember how K. Leont'yev extolled holiness and criticised honesty. Today there is an urgent need to develop one virtue which is 'in the middle' – honesty. You cannot approach holiness without coming through honesty, although the latter is really a pre-Christian virtue. A Christian will not necessarily become a saint, but he must transcend secular virtues. One can always sacrifice the rights of others. If the concept of a right is very difficult to understand from a religious point of view, the fact that another person's rights or freedoms may not be violated is clearer when viewed from a spiritual perspective. We still have to comprehend our own religious, cultural and social identity, our personal responsibility, we still have to walk courageously along the path into the depths, the path of the spirit – and it is spirit which is still lacking in both the 'democrats' and the 'patriots'. The 'democrats' tend to deny any positive value in Russia's historical experience and to see there only negative value. The 'patriots' are not in a position to comprehend the Russian catastrophe. The supreme values, strictly speaking, cannot be objectivised, and the infantile temptation to grasp after idols, even the most lofty ones, still remains.

Orthodoxy is capable of testifying to the value of existence and its supreme goal, although both our past and our present often transmit its voice to us in a distorted form.

(Translated from the Russian by Kathy Carter)