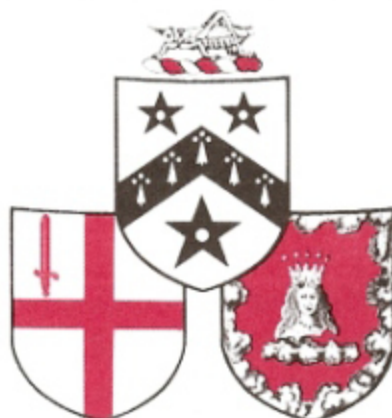


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Gresham Special Lecture

Russian Orthodox Church Life Today - The Second Millenium

delivered by

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The extensiveness of the suggested theme prompts me to narrow it in order to remain in reasonable time limits of my presentation. This is why I would prefer to elaborate the issue of Christian influence on the Russian literature and through the literature on the public life and political thinking of our times.

The 19th century is one of the most remarkable in the cultural life of Russia, this is the time of the flourishing of philosophy and art, but first of all this is the golden century of the Russian literature: with all its Peter's westernized origins and seeming separation from popular and orthodox roots it has been in essence not only an authentic and deeply Russian literature, but first of all a Christian literature which in many aspects has been orthodox. When we think about the Russian literature, we are to recognize that Peter's rapprochement with the West has been not only unavoidable, but also necessary. Only through this free meeting with the world, Russia became itself, reaching its full measure. Moreover Russia has found here its vocation to overcome the gap between the "East" and the "West" which started in the Middle Ages and is the main sin of the Christian world. The great Russian literature presented itself as the result of the internal reconciliation of the eastern and western, which could not take place without being incorporated into the general history of Christianity and humanity. The Russian literature was born from a "western inoculation", started from the "imitation" of the western literature, but only ceasing to be "western" or "eastern" it became the great world literature.

The more it became simply Russian, the more evidently its Christian roots were revealed. The man presented by this literature, is Christian not in a sense of his affiliation to the Church and even not in a sense of moral perfection, but in the sense of values which are decisive for him. We cannot avoid the deep surprise that in a very short period of time the Russian literature reached its internal maturity and independence; less than a century after Peter's rupture of Russian culture, traditions and language Russia responded with Pushkin to this phenomenon. It is not accidentally that G.P. Fedotov called his "Captain's Daughter" the most Christian work in the world of literature.

The Russian literature of the 19th century seemed to be the result of an intense creative work of the Russian self-consciousness, which started to form immediately after the adoption of Christianity by Russia.

The Kiev Russia adopted Christianity in its Byzantine orthodox form, on the one hand, and on the other - in a Slavonic translation. This ambiguity - the Byzantine Orthodoxy in Slavonic, and not in Greek - incorporates the root and the source of what can be called with some reserves a national ideology of Kiev Russia and later, the Kingdom of Moscow. This ambiguity comprises the universal and the national, and this feature determines the whole development of the Russian religious-national thinking, or the Russian national consciousness. Through Byzantium Russia was incorporated into the world history and became part of the Christian world, but thanks to the heritage of St. Cyril and Methodius it received in this Christian world its own identity, not only without being dissolved in this world, but becoming a kind of a factor of its history. From its Baptism Russia starts to reflect on itself,

on its historical and religious vocation, and this thread runs all through the Russian history.

In Ancient Russia the idea of a special standing of the Russian nation as a nation honoured by the orthodox faith, has been developed already in the first century after the adoption of Christianity. At that time the opinion started to form that after granting Orthodoxy to the Russian land, the Lord would require for this a special responsibility from the Russian nation.

In his "Praise of Prince Vladimir" metropolitan Ilarion, the first Russian who led the young Russian Church, approves the equality of Russia and Byzantium. This piece of Russian literature can be legitimately called the first document of the arising national thought. After praising Vladimir for his illumination of the people by the Christian faith, metropolitan Ilarion in his "Praise" turns to what can be called the initial paradox of the religious history of Russia. For this he uses the parable of Jesus Christ about the labourers called upon to work in the eleventh hour, but rewarded equally with the labourers who worked from the first hour. The idea of Ilarion is simple: we came to Christ in the last hours, but this late arrival became the beginning of the new flourishing of Christian faith shining in Kiev. These words should be interpreted in the context of Byzantine historiosophy, according to which the world history as the realization of the divine plane, culminates in Byzantium, i.e. a world Christian empire called upon to unite in itself all Christian nations. Approving the identity and the newness of Kiev Christianity and Christian statehood, metropolitan Ilarion responded exactly to this Byzantine ideology with his mysterious words and images.

The idea that Russia received from God a special standing, can be perceived in the whole intellectual history of the Kiev and Moscow periods. These features would not receive such a determined and sharp form, if the consolidation of Moscow would not coincide with the fall of Byzantium and the Golden Horde. In the second part of the 15th century this Russian Church patriotism developed into the teaching about a special messianic path of the Russian nation. We find this idea in the "Message on the Eighth Ecumenical Council", in the metropolitan Zosimas's message on the New Paschal Chronology, in the "Tale of the White Cowl". The historiosophical concept receives a new accent in the formula of starets Filofey, who transfers the responsibility for the protection of Orthodoxy from the whole Russian nation to the new capital city of Moscow and the Sovereign of Moscow as the supreme source of power in the orthodox Russia. The Filofey's idea is extremely eschatological: the Russian kingdom will be the last kingdom in history, and with the end of Russia the whole world will end.

While speaking about the messianic-eschatological trends in Russia, it is necessary to stress that those trends had no political, hegemonistic and even imperial character. They were not directed against other countries and nations. They never inspired the Russian foreign policy. Those trends characterize only the spiritual feeling of the people. They bear witness to the great significance attributed in Russia to the protection and consolidation of faith, to the development of public life on the basis of Christian morality.

All this wonderful utopian "poem" on "Moscow - the third Rome" grew up from an ardent thirst to come closer to the incarnation of the Kingdom of God on

Earth. "This has been a certain wonderful myth which grew up from the need to combine the heavenly and the earthly, the divine and the human in a concrete reality. From the depth of mystical realism the Church thinking rose immediately to the reflections on the mystery of history, on the mysterious and sacred aspect of the external historical reality" (S. Zenkovsky, "Russian Old Believers, or Spiritual Movements of the 17th century". Munic, 1970, p.42).

In the 18th century the reforms of Peter the Great started a new period in the history of Russia and the Russian Church. The introduction of western ideas into the Russian national consciousness was carried out rapidly, dynamically and very roughly. The reason and the heart were not ready to digest immediately such an enormous portion of western ideas. With the active europeization the heritage of ancient Russia remained an authentic foundation of the Russian national life first of all thanks to the Orthodoxy.

In the 19th century the leading role in studying the living traditions of the Russian Orthodoxy was taken over by secular thinkers and publicists with a european education, like Alexy Khomiakov, Ivan Kireevsky, Valdimir Soloviov, Nikolay Fedorov, Fedor Dostoevsky. "The Slavophilism was conceived as a philosophy of history, as a philosophy of a common Christian destiny".

The Slavophiles determined the Russian thought as religious par excellence. Thus in the 40s of the 19th century the Russian religious thinking reveals again the ancient historiosophical theme of the vocation of Russia, of its destiny, and this time in a new historical context.

Returning to the great Russian literature of the 19th century, we should notice that in spite of the seeming separation of this literature from the Orthodoxy in its externally ecclesial, everyday and popular form, this very Orthodoxy should be recognized as one of the sources of its depth and spiritual insight proper only to this literature. It seems to us that this cannot be explained only by the attractiveness of religious issues which is proper to many great Russian writers and poets: Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Leskov, Tietchev, etc.

What can be called the Christian inspiration of the Russian literature, is proper to this literature in its integrity, ie. also to the writers who, according to their self-understanding, were not believers, as, for instance, Turgenev, Nekrasov and Chekhov.

If we continue to analyse Georgy Fedotov's words about Pushkin's "Captain's Daughter", we can affirm that there is no special religious feature in this novel. However, each attentive and interested reader is astonished by the quiet light irradiated by this novel which is permeated by a Christian attitude to man and to all the events presented in the novel. We find here everything which later will blossom out in the Russian literature: compassion, pity and the deep concern of the human destiny, the renunciation of a formal prosecution against man according to the law. Each human being - a robber, a traitor, a hero - is not exhausted by his external fate: each of them has a depth, a mystery which is not presented by Pushkin - as it has been done later by Dostoevsky's genius - but is presupposed by him being the natural background of the whole presentation. All the artistic tissue of Pushkin's prose is penetrated by an evident moral inspiration.

In spite of their differences in method and world outlook the Russian writers of the 19th century were united by a certain mutual guarantee of conscience, by the same moral inspiration.

Responding to the question where this inspiration came from, we can answer faultlessly that it came from a hidden Christian root which has fed the Russian consciousness in spite of ruptures and alienations; not absolutely from the official Church with which not all the Russian writers lived in concord, but rather from the contact with the orthodox sensitiveness of the people and the Christian moral values living among people.

The feeling of its own universal, "all-human" character becomes the main nerve of the Russian culture in the last century. This theme is the main inspiration of the works of many Russian writers and, in particular, Dostoevsky. In his speech at the Pushkin's celebrations on June 6, 1880 he spoke about the multilateral Russian national self-consciousness. He saw the spiritual danger in groundlessness, in isolation, in loneliness threatening to tear off from the reality. The isolated freedom turns into obsession and imprisonment by one's own dreams. The writer shows how freedom can induce man into the slavery of ideas and passions. Freedom is just only through love, and the love itself is possible only in freedom, through the love to one's neighbour. For Dostoevsky the witness of the Church was the supreme synthesis. Freedom can be realised only through love and brotherhood, i.e. through the Church as a public ideal, according to V. Soloviev's definition of Dostoevsky's thought. Only in the Church and in Christ people become true brothers, and only here there is no danger of violence and obsession.

Like Gogol and Dostoevsky, Tolstoy linked all his writer's activity to religion, and consecrated all his intense efforts to the search of the religious sense of life. With a religious radicalism deprived of any authority, he raises the question about the value of culture in the face of religion, about the religious sense of culture. This is the same question which tormented Gogol and thrilled deeply Dostoevsky and Vladimir Soloviev. Humanity established numerous relative values which became absolute: science, art, law, economy, policy, technology, progress. Lev Tolstoy "crushed" into this thick forest, according to the expression of Archpriest Sergy Bulgakov. The interest of Lev Tolstoy to the personal conscience and responsibility of each human being, the need to feel one's own personality, free and responsible before God, has been another merit of the writer. While speaking about Tolstoy's teaching of the non-resistance to evil by force, S.L. Frank who rejects the practical Tolstoy conclusions from this principle, evaluated the very spirit of this teaching as a purely religious truth. According to Frank, this formula separates with an unsurmountable gap the religious understanding of the good from its positive and utilitarian understanding; this religious understanding is nothing else but an appeal to recognise the personal and at the same time the divine nature of the good.

N.S. Leskov occupies a special place in the Russian literature of the last century. An astonishing stability has been the main feature of the whole world outlook of Leskov. From his childhood Leskov knew deeply the people's everyday life; then he devotes himself to commercial activity, and during several years he travels through Russia. He draws his impressions rather from the living reality than from books. Maybe less than any other writer, he can be called a man of book-science. The main thought of Leskov as well

as his great contemporaries, is devoted to the destinies of Russia. The absence of antithesis between a thinking and an acting hero, so typical for many Russian writers of that period, is a special feature of Leskov's artistic method. His heroes do not face the complicated problem of turning from the thought to the action. Among his heroes from all the classes of the society pre-dominate those who are full of active love toward their neighbours, of compassion, of readiness to self-sacrifice in favour of their suffering brothers, who are noble and lofty creatures. The writer himself is in a constant search of the eternal truth.

The burning need of the soul engendered Leskov's famous series of stories and legends about the just man, i.e. the positive type of Russian people. Usually the Leskov's types are ordinary people holding insignificant positions. The writer shows "what even the most ordinary man can do for his neighbour, when he wants to help him" ("Pygmy"), "to what an unexpected act of bold fearlessness" he is able to rise in peculiar moments ("The Lone Thinker"). Leskov transfers the theme of piety of the Byzantine legends into universal dimensions. The writer's dream of the universal harmony, the Kingdom of the Good and Light, receives its further development in parables about robbers, fornicatrices and buffoons of the first Christian centuries. In his notice "On heroes and just men" Leskov wrote: "It is much more difficult to live a long life, from day to day, without lies, deception and slyness, without grieving one's neighbour and judging the enemy with prejudice, than to throw oneself into the abyss, or to receive a bundle of bayonets in the chest ... The valour only is an unreliable protection of the State. But "people rejoice when the just multiply". According to the writer, these people are stronger in promoting history, although they remain aside from the main historical movement. With an artistism, proper to him, Leskov presents in his books the image of the Gospel Christ: according to the understanding of the Russian people, he is not a Pantocrator and King of the Byzantine mosaics, but an indigent and crucified Teacher defeating evil through patience and mercy. One of Leskov's heroes says: "More than any other images of the Divine I love our Russian God who builds up his dwelling "in the bosom". We received him not in a splendid byzantinism, not in the smoke of incense, but he is our own, simply walking everywhere" ("At the World's End").

In Leskov's works the theme of the just is solved with a high patriotic note of the spiritual valour of the Russian people, of the belief in his enormous possibilities and the great predestination of Russia.

The significance of the Russian literature of the last century for our days is not exhausted by its high artistic level and prophetic vision. For our contemporaries it is one of the channels linking us with the living Christian tradition. The interest to the solution of problems of philosophical character, of general issues of the existence of nature and the human society has not ceased in the Russian literature of the 20th century. In this respect the contemporary Russian literature continues to develop the ancient national tradition.

We can notice two main trends in this development: First of all, the lyrical-philosophical trend, represented in the prose by M. Prishvin, and today most brilliantly by V. Astafyev, and in the poetry - by A. Akhmatova, B. Pasternak.

Secondly, the epic-philosophical trend, personified by L. Leonov, A. Platonov, M. Bulgakov and a series of contemporary artists of the next generation: Ch. Aytmatov, S. Salygin, V. Rasputin.

The power of the spiritual and the power of the physical, what is the true vocation of the man, the sense of his life - these and many other questions V. Rasputin tries to answer in his works. The heroine of his novel "The Last Time Limit" instinctively strives after the beauty accepting its importance for the transformation and purification of the soul. The feeling of beauty, including the conscience, the mercy to people and the nature are the main nerve of the writer's searchings. The main for the writer is "to try the man through the soul". The object of his concern is not only the disrapture of the human soul and its integrity, but also the place of man within the environment, the problem of the correlation between what is called the scientific progress, and a naive, originally popular idea of the nature as the forefather of all existing. These ideas are also reflected in the public writer's activity which is a continuation of his artistic activity. The writer speaks about the need to elaborate a new moral imperative, to which all activities in today's time of scientific development should be subordinated. Without due consideration to ethic aspects of the scientific activity is anti-human.

Man and nature, the technological and agricultural civilization, ecology and issues of cultural tradition are the main problems for Rasputin, Astafyev, Belov and Shukshin.

According to Rasputin, the Russian classics have been his main teacher. The writer considers that Dostoevsky's influence has been decisive for his works, but at the same time he experienced the growing influence of the high instructive prose of the ancient Russian literature, from the "Word on Law and Grace" and till the Archpriest Avvkum's biography. The notion of "moral preaching" is very close to V. Rasputin. In his own practice this high goal based upon the sources of national culture, is supplemented with a confessional foundation.

Ch. Aytmatov introduces the contemporary events presented in his novel "Executioner's Block", into the coordinates of Gospel history, correlates them with the unshakable laws of human existence, attributes to today's events a special significance which can be called eschatological. Quite particular events presented in the novel, receive a symbolic sense, features of a stern warning to the whole humanity about the menacing world catastrophe, provoked by the apostasy of the contemporary man, by the oblivion of fundamental and obligatory norms of human life and morality, of principles of mutual relations and attitude to the nature.

The search of the sense and law of life, the aspiration to understand the eternal issues of the existence pre-occupy the best artists of our time. These eminent prose-writers of our times, and not the professional philosophers, raise deep philosophical issues, and today we feel very sharply the urgent need to solve them.

I should devote some special words to the influence of the literature itself, as well as through the theatre, cinema and publications, on today's public psychology and frame of mind in my country. This influence has been decisive in the formation of the atmosphere which engendered the new

thinking. Of course, the new thinking is determined by a concrete economical and socio-political situation in the USSR and in the whole world. It would be erroneous to forget those horizontal factors. But besides horizontal factors there were also vertical factors, and among them - the interest to moral issues. The "glasnost" helped to reveal the evident inter-relations between the human morality and some social problems. It is interesting to notice that the new thinking, being a political thinking, declares the inter-dependence between the morality and the perfection of public relations. This thinking proclaims in politics the absolute priority of all-human, and not particular values; in this sense it is an ethical concept. This concept is linked through succession to the main trends of the Russian literature. The ethics of the new thinking are oriented to the same system of values as the Russian literature, at least in the person of its most eminent representatives. This is why it is not accidental that the intellectuals, and especially the writers, were the first to respond to the restructuration ("perestroyka") and are today in many aspects its moving force. The Russian literature has been always fed from Christian roots, and through this literature the contemporary literature is fed from the same roots. Thus the Christian ideal, promoted by the Orthodox Church among people during this millenium, did not disappear with the disappearance of the official leading role of the Church in our society, this ideal was kept in our culture and continues to influence the minds and hearts of people. The new thinking is not linked formally to Christianity, as some eminent Russian writers had no formal links with the Church. But this thinking, born in a historical context and formed with the participation of the Russian culture, has absorbed moral criteria and values of this culture, and these criteria and values are Christian*. In this sense the new thinking, the restructuration ("perestroyka") and "glasnost" in the USSR are accepted as a peculiar monument to the millenial existence of Christianity in my country.

* In the language of the new thinking this is called "all-human morality", "humanitarian all-human values". M.S. Gorbachev, Speech at the official meeting devoted to the delivery of Lenin's Order and the "Golden Star" medal to the City of Murmansk. "Pravda", Oct. 1, 1987.

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