



## Metropolitan Hilarion's speech at the Library of the US Congress

I would like to thank the Librarian of the Congress, Dr. James Billington, for providing me with this opportunity to share my thoughts about Russian spirituality: its particularity and its universality. It is especially symbolic that we are engaged with this theme within the walls of the Library of the Congress, for here so many books on Russian history and culture are preserved.

For the first part of my address, after which we could share opinions, I will identify three distinctive features which form the bases of Russian spirituality. These are beauty, concern for the creation and the sense of community. I shall then try to show how these features, as expressions of Christian faith, have influenced Russian culture as a whole.

To begin with I would like to emphasize that Russian spirituality is not a museum piece, not a dead heritage, but the basis for the life of the nations in the pastoral care of the Moscow Patriarchate. It includes the spiritual, historical and cultural legacy of our nations. Russian spirituality is a particular genotype cultivated by the Russian world.

### Beauty

The sense of beauty is inseparable from spiritual life in Christ and a feeling for the beautiful is an organic part of Russian spirituality. Through beauty when closely connected to art, man comes to know God. In *The Story of the Passing Years*, we read that it was the beauty of the Byzantine liturgy that led the holy Prince Vladimir to choose the Orthodox faith. 'We did not know where we were – in heaven or on earth'. This is how his envoys to Constantinople described the beauty and sublimity of the Orthodox liturgy. Some writers go so far as to say that art is a sacred mission because true art is in some way the Word of God, or to be more precise, divine revelation given to human dwellers in this created world.

Sacred beauty, not simply religious aesthetics, finds its expression in Russian iconographic art, which thrived in many centres – Novgorod, Tver and, of course, Moscow. Correspondingly, beauty in church singing lies in its ability to reflect the celestial liturgies. Hence, the sense of beauty in Russian spirituality, expressed primarily in liturgy, is of no small significance.

### The creation

The second distinctive feature of Russian spirituality is its intimacy with nature, with the creation. The

beauty of the universe directs us to a knowledge of the living God. Accordingly, knowledge of God helps us to discover the beauty of the world, which is itself a revelation. In his master work, *The Brothers Karamazov*, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, through the lips of Staretz Zosima, stresses this intimacy: 'Love the whole creation of God, each and every grain of sand. Love every tiny leaf, every ray from God. Love animals, love plants, love every thing. If you love every thing you will perceive the mystery of God in things'.

But communication with the created world is not limited to mere private contemplation. On the contrary spiritual experience has been known to culminate in reconciliation with nature, equivalent to a mysterious restoration of humanity's paradisaal state. Sts Sergius of Radonezh and Seraphim of Sarov both of whom lived in close contact with wild animals, testify to this solidarity with nature. St. Silouan, on the other hand, asserted that while all creation is at the service of man, he is obliged to care for every creature. In this understanding, any harm inflicted upon nature by man is contrary to the law of grace. The experience of holy fathers, such as these three, tells that we can change the world around us only by changing our own inner world. St. Maximus the Confessor affirmed that man could turn the earth into a paradise if only he held paradise within him. Because mankind's sinfulness was catastrophic for humanity and for all creation, the entire creation, not only man, must be transformed. Through spiritual effort humans can contribute to the transfiguration of the material world and of the cosmos as a whole. Thus, in Russian theological thought, the salvation of persons is inseparable from the salvation of the entire created order. The philosopher Berdyaev expressed this eloquently when he wrote: 'The way of my salvation includes the love of animals and plants, of every blade of grass, of rivers and seas, mountains and fields. Through it I and the whole world are saved'.

## Community

The third element of Russian spirituality is concern for the community. Over the centuries, foreign travellers to Russia have been singularly impressed by the nation's sense of community. In Russian villages, the one often very remote from the other, this spirit of community was nurtured. Accounting for this special feature, Russian sages did not see it in terms of Aristotle's principle of the polis, that is to say, the social aspect of human individuality, but from the fact that we are 'persons' created in the image of God, the Holy Trinity. And we can only express or bear witness to our personhood when we are in communion with other persons.

This sense of community is integral to Russian spirituality. Dostoyevsky, again in *The Brothers Karamazov*, declares, 'Everyone is responsible for all'. Even the sacred art on Russian iconostases reflect community with their images of the fellowship of saints. In the Deisis tier, Christ is depicted together with the Mother of God and John the Baptist, while other panels depict Old and New Testament figures grouped together.

The social aspect of human perfection is developed in the works of the Slavophile philosophers who introduced the notion of *sobornost*. *Sobor* means council but the idea of *sobornost* is much broader. In its most general sense, Khomyakov describes *sobornost* as 'unity in diversity', a perception that has both ecclesiological and anthropological implications. Indeed, for the Slavophiles, human nature created in the image of the Triune God is essentially conciliar.

The apprehension of community as unity in diversity finds expression in the church's earnest attempts at transforming society at large. Eastern Christianity is sometimes accused of having little interest in social issues. But on the contrary, Russian devotion is characterised by the considerable attention it gives to charitable and social work. Even monastic communities in Russia, notwithstanding their orientation towards inner contemplation, never preclude but indeed presume social service. Evidence for this is the tangible activity undertaken by many monastics. One prominent example was the saintly abbot Joseph of Volokolamsk, whose monastery provided asylum for thousands of destitute and ill people. Social care, therefore, remained an uninterrupted leitmotif in Russian religious consciousness, especially in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The adoption in 2000 of the Russian Orthodox Church's *Basic Social Concepts* lies in the mainstream of the Russian theological tradition.

The special relationship between Christianity and culture

Beauty, concern for the creation and community spirit are distinctive features not only of Russian spiritual traditions but also of Russian culture in its wider sense. Taken as a whole, one may aptly speak of the phenomenon known as 'Holy Russia'.

Up until the time of Emperor Peter I, secular culture was virtually absent in Russia: any popular cultural life was concentrated around the Church. But after the Petrine era, secular literature, poetry, art and music were cultivated, culminating to a high point during in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Despite its severance from the Church, Russian culture nevertheless preserved a powerful religio-spiritual dimension that, until the 1917 Revolution, retained a living contact with church tradition. After the debacle, when access to the treasures of Orthodox spirituality was closed, the works of Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Tchaikovsky and other great writers, poets and composers became the sole source of knowledge about faith, God, the Gospel, theology and prayer. Throughout the seventy years of unmitigated Godless atheism, Russian culture held fast to Orthodox tradition, sustaining it in the minds and hearts of the people. It remained the good news for millions of people whose roots had perversely been torn from their roots by the Soviet regime.

Allow me to provide a few examples of how Russian culture was influenced by Orthodoxy, with special reference to literature, music and painting.

Nineteenth century Russian writing, whether fiction or non-fiction, is rightly considered to be a priceless treasure of world literature. Unlike the West at that time, Russian culture was closely allied to Christian tradition. Berdyaev wrote that all 19<sup>th</sup> century literature 'was possessed' by Christian themes. This affiliation is especially noticeable in the writings of the great Russian poets: Pushkin and Lermontov; and the authors Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Leskov, and Chekhov, all of whose names have been inscribed in gold lettering not only in the annals of world literature but also in those of the Orthodox Church. These masters wrote in an age when a growing number of the intelligentsia were turning away from the Church. Pushkin, following a period of doubt and even rejection of the faith, penned beautiful words about Christianity, as in his *Prophet* verses. These initiated a correspondence on the subject of poetry with Metropolitan Philaret of Moscow. Poems of Michael Lermontov given the rubric 'Prayer' reveal a profound spiritual.

Musical compositions by Glinka, Borodin, Mussorgsky, Tchaikovsky, Rimsky-Korsakov, and Rachmaninov are equally imbued with religious conviction. Many of them composed sacred choral music, such as Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov, whose Liturgies were intended for the ecclesial use.

We also find the influence of Orthodox spirituality in 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian painting, particularly in canvases by Vasnetsov, Nesterov, and Kramskoy.

This picture would not be complete without mentioning the celebrated 19<sup>th</sup> century philosophers of Russia, who, regardless of their attitude to the Church, were inspired by a discerning religious interest. I call to mind the works of Khomyakov, the Trubetskoy brothers, Solovyev, and Berdyaev, who reflected on such matters as freedom of faith, conciliarity, the cosmos, aesthetics, history, eschatology, and social justice.

This overriding religious outlook and search for God was reflected abundantly in Russian culture which also had mastered and availed itself of the Orthodox heritage of Greek Fathers.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to reiterate that beauty, concern for the creation, community spirit, conciliarity, and the bond between spirituality and culture are characteristics of 'Holy Russia'. They have not lost their relevance even in our times.

Anton Kartashev wrote that 'the old literature, rich also in church-patriotic works, did not know of the term "Holy Russia" until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. It is a fruit of the grass-root creativity. It was born and preserved in the unwritten folk tradition'.

The term 'Holy Russia,' therefore, is a calling of the Russian people, their civil self-identification, which forms the basis for mutually enriching dialogue with other cultures and peoples.

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