

Religious Themes in Recent Soviet Literature

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“Mankind cannot do without the image of Jesus Christ. He is the most powerful and exalted symbol of voluntary self-sacrifice. In rejecting Jesus Christ we lose our moral criteria — and then, to use Dostoyevsky’s words, ‘everything is permissible.’” This statement comes from an interview given by the leading Soviet writer Chingiz Aitmatov to the Finnish newspaper *Hufvudstadsbladet* last August. Aitmatov was discussing his latest novel, *The Scaffold (Plakha)*,¹ the subject-matter of which is surprising, coming as it does from the pen of an avowedly atheist author. His hero is a young Christian who is shown sacrificing his life in a vain struggle against the forces of evil, and who sees himself as the figure of a modern God-martyr. Moreover the novel includes a long imaginary dialogue between Christ and Pontius Pilate on the eve of the Crucifixion, in which Christ expounds his aim of gradually rooting out evil from the minds of men.

As was to be expected, Aitmatov has been much criticised in the Soviet press for the religious elements in his novel. In reply he has repeatedly affirmed both his own atheism and his conviction that the image of Christ is one which ought to be held up to today’s young people, to inspire them in their search for new solutions to life’s problems. He told an interviewer from *Druzhba narodov*:

The legendary figure of Christ, which was very likely invented by men, is still a living figure to us today, one which teaches us a lofty and unforgettable lesson of personal courage and nobility. After Christ there were great men in all walks of life . . . but Jesus has outlived them all, appealing equally to men of the second and the twentieth centuries.²

Several Soviet commentators have drawn attention to the similarity between Aitmatov’s Christ-Pilate dialogue and the dialogue featured in Mikhail Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita*. Aitmatov has denied

¹“*Plakha*”, *Novy mir*, 1986 Nos. 6, 8, 9.

²*Druzhba narodov*, 1987 No. 2.

that he was imitating or trying to improve upon Bulgakov's version: he regards the story of Christ's crucifixion as a universal legend, which any writer is entitled to make use of, and in any case the emphasis in his version of the story is not the same as in Bulgakov's. A comparison of the two books shows a considerable difference in the approach of the two writers: Bulgakov shows a good deal of sympathy for Pilate and allows him to overshadow his prisoner, while Aitmatov has tried (in his own words) "to return Jesus to the centre of the picture". For both writers, Christ is the personification of the Good: but in Bulgakov's version Christ's belief in the essential goodness of men, and his rejection of the need for any kind of worldly authority, are seen through the eyes of Pilate — to whom the belief seems hopelessly Utopian, while the rejection seems dangerously revolutionary. Aitmatov's Christ, on the other hand, voices Aitmatov's own views, expressed in his warning calls on behalf of the world peace movement: "The love of power . . . is the worst of all forms of evil . . . The peoples will perish in their struggle for dominion, they will exterminate one another root and branch . . . The end of the world will come not from God and not from natural catastrophes, but from the hatred of men for men." Aitmatov makes Pilate voice the negative view that men are animals to whom wars are natural and that only strong rulers using force can restrain them. Christ replies that there is another sort of force, the force of the Good, which will finally be victorious. This seems a reflection of Aitmatov's own rather desperate belief in the possibility of averting a final world nuclear disaster.

The Christ-Pilate dialogue was intended to be the key passage in *The Scaffold*. The main story-line of the novel concerns the Christian hero's struggle against evil men engaged in drug-pushing and in destroying nature. He preaches to them, unwisely and to no avail, and the book ends with him crucified on a saksaul tree in the Kazakhstan savannah, after he repeatedly refuses to deny the existence of God. Yet his example of self-sacrifice is clearly meant to inspire young Soviet readers, and so are his arguments with his persecutors, which are shown contrasted with Christ's imagined argument with Pilate. Whatever Aitmatov's intention in including this dialogue in the novel, its appearance in print is a remarkable illustration of the recent relaxation of censorship.

But it is not only in Aitmatov's writings that readers can find references to Christian beliefs. The latest novel by Vladimir Tendryakov for instance, published posthumously this year,³ is full of arguments for and against the Christian religion. The novel is entitled *An Attack on Mirages (Pokusheniye na mirazhi)*: the mirages are false images of the future, which mankind must learn to reject, since they

³"*Pokusheniye na mirazhi*", *Novy mir*, 1987 Nos. 4-5.

are holding up the development of history by holding out false hopes that a society governed by reason will arrive of its own, without requiring any human efforts.

Tendryakov's own working title for this book was *The Gospel according to the Computer*. The hero is a senior physicist, who together with some young colleagues feeds all known data about the birth of Christianity into a computer, in the hope that it will come up with the model of an Apostle for contemporary men to follow. But although they feed the computer with false information about Christ's early death (supposedly, he was stoned by a mob egged on by the High Priest, Sadok), the machine resurrects him and produces the image of a Christ-like prophet. Tendryakov's physicist hero had been hoping for the description of an Apostle more like Paul, whom he considers a better leader-figure than Christ. Paul in his opinion was more practical: he preached submission to authority and the gradual transformation of bad societies — whereas Christ promised heaven to the poor and did not intend to let the rich in to share in it. Tendryakov's hero is tormented by the contradictions he finds in the Scriptures: for instance, between Christ's command to take no thought for the morrow, and Paul's teaching that he who does not work does not eat. By the end of the novel, however, he comes to the conclusion that Christ and Paul were complementary, and that both of them were necessary in order that Christianity could be launched as a movement in which the outlooks of the members could differ widely. Intellectuals able to think for themselves could follow Paul, while Christ's mass support would come from the non-thinking, downtrodden poor. But although he can rationalise the success of Christianity in this way, the physicist gets no joy from his computer experiment: the machine comes up with a Christ-like leader-figure, but fails to produce any logical reason why men following such a figure should not yet have been able to create a good society on earth.

The arguments between this hero and his scientific colleagues are illustrated with dozens of New Testament quotations, and it is perhaps not surprising that Tendryakov's book, although submitted to *Novy mir* in 1982, had to wait for a change in the climate to get into print, three years after the author's death. But if one looks at his earlier writings, all of which raise moral issues, one can see an interesting evolution in the views on religion of this Soviet author. He started from the standard atheist's viewpoint, that religion appeals only to the most ignorant elements in Soviet society. This is the theme of his story *The Miraculous Icon (Chudotvornaya)* (1958),⁴ where a 12-year-old village boy finds an icon in the local river. This provokes an explosion of religious fervour of the most superstitious kind from the boy's "Chudotvornaya", *Znamya*, 1958 No. 5.

grandmother and her illiterate cronies. They keep the boy home from school, force him to pray to the icon on behalf of the sick, and make his life such a misery that he runs away from home and tries to drown himself. He is saved by the local schoolteacher, and the story ends with the local party boss expressing his confidence that as the rural standard of life and the level of literacy rise, so the number of believers will drop.

Eleven years later, however, Tendryakov wrote the story *On Apostolic Business (Apostol'skaya komandirovka)*⁵ in which he seems to be acknowledging that the party official's confidence was misplaced. His hero is a young scientist, living a comfortable Moscow life, who is so tormented by the eternal questions — why was I born? what is truth? — that he buys a copy of the Bible, learns the Lord's Prayer, decides that he is a believer, and then drops out of Soviet society. He goes to work on a *kolkhoz* in a remote Siberian village, where he hopes to find a simple form of faith. But he has conflicts with the local atheist officials, with the bigoted elderly believers, and with a young local priest who insists on the literal truth of holy writ. After a few months of argument, he goes back to Moscow, having worked out a new principle of life: the only important goal must be harmony between men, and the only commandment — Love thy neighbour!

This belief in the power of brotherly love crops up again in Tendryakov's writing eight years later, in the story *The Eclipse (Zatmeniye)* (1977).⁶ One of the main characters here is a bearded drop-out, Gosha, who rejects Soviet society and lives on charity. He bewitches the heroine Maya, a beautiful girl with an adoring but dull scientist husband, who is in revolt against the materialism of her friends and relatives. Tendryakov makes it clear that he disapproves of Gosha, whom Maya sees as a modern Don Quixote while to her husband he is just an anti-social element. Apart from Maya, Gosha's converts are all elderly people who have suffered much in life, often women who have lost their men. Tendryakov struggles to find the reason why a young woman who had everything should want to live with a sponger like Gosha: his puzzlement comes clearly through in the story — just as it does in his last work, *An Attack on Mirages*, when he strives to explain why the figure of an illogical, poetical Jewish prophet should still, after 2,000 years, attract men more than does that of his practical but prosaic chief Apostle.

Another example of a fictional character trying to understand the attraction of religion occurs in Daniil Granin's novel *The Picture*

⁵ "Apostol'skaya komandirovka", *Nauka i religiya*, 1969 Nos. 8-10.

⁶ "Zatmeniye", *Druzhba narodov*, 1977 No. 5.

(*Kartina*).⁷ He describes a local official and party member, Losev, spending a day as a tourist in a strange town with his girlfriend, and dropping in to the cathedral:

It was the first time Losev had been inside a big, working church while a service was going on . . . The proceedings at the altar — the appearances and disappearances of the white-clad servers, the deacon swinging his censer, the procession of young priests in their brocade robes — it all seemed vaguely familiar, and he began remembering words he had never used and did not even know he knew . . . There must be something in all this, he thought: in the smoky gilded faces on the icons, in the resonance within the dome, in his own reflections about the shortness of life here on earth and about what is to follow that life . . .

Although Losev is deeply impressed with the service, he is still fighting back, determined not to give in to the emotional pull of beautiful music backed by Russian historical tradition. His schoolteacher girlfriend Tanya is not so tough, and seems to be on the brink of belief: as they come out of church, she admits that she has been praying along with the congregation — although what to, she does not know. Later in the novel, Losev and Tanya have a long talk with one of the servers from the church, who maintains that the way to religious faith is through doubt, and recommends them to read the Book of Job, about a man who asked God questions. Job seems to represent for Granin (whose early books were about scientists or engineers) the image of the first scientist or philosopher, for whom asking questions is more important than getting any answers.

There are many examples of such questioners in Soviet fiction of the last ten years, and only occasionally have their creators been taken to task. In 1982 the writer Vladimir Soloukhin was reproved by the party magazine *Kommunist* for allowing religious motifs to creep into his writings. He had stated in print that the existence of “a higher, reasonable element” in this world and in the universe is today beyond all possible doubt.⁸ Soloukhin added:

When you see, say, a hut in the forest, you never imagine that it sprang up there on its own, the result of a chance combination of nails, planks, logs and so on. You imagine that some human being built the hut . . . Yet some people can believe that our planetary system, which rotates according to exact laws of mathematics, could have arisen on its own!

⁷“*Kartina*”, *Novy mir*, 1980 Nos. 1-2.

⁸“*Kameshki na ladni*”, *Nash sovremennik*, 1981 No. 3.

The angry comment of the *Kommunist* spokesman, Rutkevich,⁹ was that such statements amount to “playing around with the idea of the existence of God”. Soloukhin was apparently able to convince the party authorities that he has always been, and still is, a convinced atheist. But the incident showed clearly that at any rate up till 1982 the authorities cared very much that writers should not be acknowledged believers.

Over the last ten years there has been a remarkable change in the manner in which believers are portrayed in works of fiction. Most of them are shown as simple, elderly people, often illiterate: but unlike the grandmother in Tendryakov’s story about the miraculous icon, they are nowadays usually good people, sympathetically described. The heroine of Georgi Semyonov’s story *The Ring Game (Igra v kolechko)*,¹⁰ for instance, is an old peasant woman with an appalling life-story, who still retains her belief in heaven and who has a dying vision of herself being received there by a Christ-figure. With her husband killed in the war and her only son in prison for theft, she lives alone as the sole inhabitant of a deserted village in the remote forest. Every few weeks she walks to a road, where she catches an overcrowded bus to the nearest village shop. On the last occasion when she does this, the return bus is full up: she spends the night alone in the dark, sitting on the steps in front of the shop with her sack of provisions. In the morning she is found there, dead: but meanwhile she has had this dream:

There was a steep, high staircase in front of her, and she was surprised to find herself easily climbing up the shining steps, up towards a golden-blue, heavenly glow of light. There were people around in bright clothing, who looked kindly at her and smiled encouragement . . . She felt she had known them always — especially one of them, who seemed to be the head man, and who surely must notice her soon . . . She gazed entreatingly at him — until suddenly, smiling a reserved and severe smile, he lifted his eyes to hers . . .

Such an old-fashioned picture of paradise is unique in Soviet literature, as far as I am aware; but old ladies who might have such visions are now being accorded much more respect than in the past. The late novelist Fyodor Abramov for instance, when asked in a television interview what had been the earliest influence on him, replied: my aunt Irinya. She had been an Old Believer, he said: she was only semi-literate, but she brought her nephew up on church literature — the lives of the saints, hymns and the Apocrypha stories.

⁹*Kommunist*, 1982 No. 2.

¹⁰“*Igra v kolechko*”, *Nash sovremennik*, 1982 No. 7.

"Listening to them was my first teaching in goodness and morals", Abramov said.¹¹

The Old Believers seem to have great fascination for many writers, probably as a result of the current wave of nostalgia for the old Russian village life. Dmitri Kuzovlev, for instance, has described in great detail the life of an old peasant carpenter in an Old Believers' village, in a beautiful carved wooden house with unpolished floors, no wallpaper, icons in every room.¹² Sergei Alekseyev recently constructed a whole novel around the search conducted in some Siberian Old Believer villages by a couple of history research students. They are looking for old religious books, which they buy up and send back to the Siberian branch of the Academy of Sciences. The action of the novel takes place in 1961, and the Old Believers are depicted as a few superstitious old women living in remote villages, but preserving their old traditions: they regard the students with great suspicion, as "followers of Nikon" (*Nikonyane*).¹³

The most famous historical Old Believer, Archpriest Avvakum, seems to be becoming something of a cult figure as the first Russian dissident. Yuri Bondarev in his last novel *The Game (Igra)*¹⁴ takes as his hero a middle-aged film director, Krymov, who has lost his motivation in life, while feeling himself weighed down by the traditional guilt complex of the Russian intellectual. At the start of the novel, Krymov recalls his last film, the final scenes of which were shot in the deserted town of Pustozersk in Siberia, where Avvakum was burnt on the Tsar's orders in 1682. The story ends as Krymov dreams of his wife Ol'ga walking towards him dressed as a nun, accompanied by the emaciated figure of Avvakum.

Krymov seems to feel that Avvakum symbolises the individual triumphing in opposition to dictatorship. And this view of the Old Believers as dissidents who stood up for what they believed is shared by a younger fictional heroine, in a novel by Yelena Katasonova¹⁵. As a university lecturer on folklore, she has to organise a summer expedition by a group of her students, who will go out into the field to collect folksongs and stories. She chooses to send them to the Lake Onega area, because she knows that this part of Russia has an old tradition of freedom, evidenced by the fact that the institution of serfdom never spread there, and by the presence of descendants of religious emigres such as the original Old Believers.

It would be too much to expect that seekers after truth in any Soviet novel should find the answers they are looking for in acceptance of the

¹¹ *Neva*, 1984 No. 5.

¹² "Afonin dom", *Nash sovremennik*, 1981 No. 10.

¹³ "Slovo", *Nash sovremennik*, 1985 Nos. 2-4.

¹⁴ "Igra", *Novy mir*, 1985 Nos. 1-2

¹⁵ "Babi vek", *Neva*, 1985 Nos. 7-8.

Christian faith; censorship has certainly been relaxed of late, but the individual's search has still to be shown without a happy ending. However, truth-seekers are no longer shown being converted to communism, and indeed recent fiction is full of characters in all walks of life expressing their disillusion with Soviet society — and sometimes turning to religion as their last hope. The popular dramatist Viktor Rozov for instance, in his play *The Wood-Grouse's Nest* (*Gnezdo glukharya*),¹⁶ makes his tragic heroine the daughter of a top official in the Soviet peace movement. This father has a luxurious Moscow flat with a large collection of old icons, and one day he is horrified to find his daughter, whose marriage is breaking up, on her knees in front of them. She has had a good Soviet upper-class education, so she does not know how to cross herself — but she is praying: "Help me, God, help me".

Not only are truth-seekers and open believers being sympathetically depicted but priests are nowadays shown as human beings, no longer as idle or malicious drunkards. One of the latest examples of *glasnost*' in action is the publication in *Novy mir* of Sergei Kaledin's grim tale of the depths of Soviet society, *The Humble Cemetery* (*Smirennoye kladbishche*).¹⁷ The workers at the cemetery are drunks, old lags, thieves or psychopaths, and the main character is a temporarily reformed alcoholic, nicknamed "Sparrow". He receives a summons to attend a court hearing on a charge of drunken assault, and because he is afraid he may get a prison sentence, he says a formal goodbye to his workmates — and then goes into the cemetery church to find Father Pavel, whom he calls Batya. The priest gives him a blessing although Sparrow is not a believer ("You're all unbelievers — but all the same, a blessing does no harm," he says), and he promises to see that Sparrow's wife and son get his salary if he is sent down. This scene is one of the few examples of decent human behaviour in the story: one is not surprised that Sparrow, in his brutish existence where murder and corpse-robbing are commonplace occurrences, is drawn to the figure of the kindly old Batya. Interestingly, in the postscript to the story by Igor' Vinogradov, the point is made that Sparrow, despite his degradation, clings to the church because this is his only link with Russian spiritual culture, and the only way to give his life a meaning. As the Millennium celebrations approach, it seems that religion's part in the Russian cultural heritage is increasingly being recognised.

Perhaps the last word in this sketch of changing attitudes towards religion in official Soviet literature should go to the historian Vadim Chubinsky, who recently reviewed Aitmatov's novel *The Scaffold*.¹⁸

¹⁶ "Gnezdo glukharya", *Teatr*, 1979 No. 2.

¹⁷ "Smirennoye kladbishche", *Novy mir*, 1987 No. 5.

¹⁸ "I snova o Plakhe", *Neva*, 1987 No. 8.

He commented thus on Aitmatov's choice of a Christian believer for his hero:

A significant (and strangely enough, not diminishing) section of the Soviet population — Christians and Moslems — believe in God, and a smaller section, also not insignificant in numbers, belong to the various cults. These people live and work alongside us, think and suffer and search for the meaning of life, argue amongst themselves; and even those of them who are professional “churchmen” increasingly cooperate with us — for instance, in the peace movement. So is it right for them to be banished from our literature? Common sense replies — no; the very nature of the mission of literature says — no. Now Aitmatov has boldly broken into this virgin soil in literature; this first attempt may be imperfect in some ways, but surely it is worthy of recognition?

If fiction writers follow this advice and include more religious characters and themes in their work, Soviet literature can only benefit.