

A 'religious intelligentsia' in present-day Russia? Towards responsibility and engaged reflection

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THIS PAPER was written on the premise that in the present conditions of Russian society there is a constructive role for a 'religious intelligentsia' to play. I take it that Russian society today is very plainly in need of sustained, critical and well-articulated reflection regarding the place of religion, religious and social values in the modern world. Seventy-four years of officially imposed atheism and a further decade or so of complete ideological open-endedness have given rise to much disorientation. In the experience of religious believers and non-believers alike, within religious communities and beyond them, the plurality of religious beliefs is itself a very new factor, and it has proved far from easy for people to adjust to it or fully to work through the implications of this plurality of beliefs. Throughout present-day Russia, in the media and in everyday life, people are exposed to a bewildering variety of creeds, only some of these being explicitly religious creeds aligned to traditionally understood church structures and institutions. Other creeds are either pseudo-religious or else avowedly secular. On a positive reading of this situation, Russian citizens are now free to exercise choice, so that even in the sphere of worldviews they are afforded 'the freedom of the marketplace' and, it is said, this amounts to religious pluralism. A negative reading of the situation is that the very plurality of creeds and available 'choices' has harmful effects: firstly, all sense of cohesive tradition is lost and, secondly, individuals incline towards a confusing eclecticism.¹

Commentators such as Nikolaj Gavrušin and Marija Kondrat'eva, both of whom I interviewed in Moscow in June 2002, speak of the marginalization of the 'religious intelligentsia', adding

¹ Philip Gudgeon, 1991, The soul of Russia, *The Tablet*, 30 November 1991, pp. 1467-70, esp. 1468-9; see also K. Каарнайнен & Д. Фурман, 1997, Верующие, атеисты и прочие (Эволюция российской религиозности), *Вопросы философии* 1997: 6, 35-52, at 39: 'In Russia it is not religion that is victorious over atheism. Rather, religion and atheism are both eclipsed by the growth of vagueness and eclecticism in the realm of worldviews and ideas'. For the above English-language citation, see Aleksandr Filonenko in *Religion, State & Society* 17: i (1999), 59-71, at 60.

that few people who might be deemed to belong to this intelligentsia have any sense of belonging to an identifiable community or having a clear common purpose. Rather, on their account, there are a number of prominent individuals such as Sergej Averincev, Sergej Choružij and Grigorij Pomeranc who—when all is said and done—carry on their work in conditions of relative isolation. Their respective reputations are established and assured, and they have their readers, of course, but there is little evidence to suggest that they operate at the centre of a self-identifying community of people sharing religiously oriented values or a common ethical stance. Kondrat'eva specifically regretted the absence of a feeling of mutual responsibility: she noted that academics went on strike to protest against the scandalously low level of their own salaries—very justifiably, of course—but showed little other sign of activism or social engagement, such as public intervention on behalf of students, pensioners, prisoners, war veterans, invalids or the handicapped.

In the eyes of many commentators Sergej Choružij, mathematician, author of books and numerous articles on religious philosophy² and translator of James Joyce's *Ulysses* into Russian, could justifiably be viewed as a member of the intelligentsia (*intelligent* in Russian). He could even be deemed to be one of the most high-profile and well-known examples of the type, someone whom other intelligent people acknowledge as a source of ideas with which to engage. However, Choružij himself denies the continued existence of an intelligentsia in today's Russia. And, he adds, if there is no longer any intelligentsia as such, it follows that there cannot be a 'religious intelligentsia' either.³

So, we are faced with an apparent lack of a community which actively regards itself as an intelligentsia. Choružij considers that in present-day Russia certain criteria traditionally associated with the very term 'intelligentsia' are simply lacking. Specifically, he cites the absence of an ethical position and the present lack of a need to operate 'in opposition'. The kind of ideological 'opposition' to officialdom which Soviet conditions required is no longer necessary, admirable as it was when practised by such figures as Anatolij Levitin-Krasnov, Aleksandr Ogorodnikov and Vladimir Pores, to give but three examples. Present conditions in Russia do not pose challenges

² See, for example, С. С. Хоружий, 1994, *После перерыва: пути русской философии*, Санкт Петербург.

³ In e-mail correspondence with the present author, July 2002.

of quite that kind, and they make for fundamentally more modest aspirations among *intelligenty*. Or, it must be asked, do present conditions even undermine aspirations altogether?

I need to mention a particular feature of Russia's intelligentsia traditions which is relevant to our discussion, that is, the 'enlightening' or educating role of *intelligenty*. During the nineteenth century and at least the early part of the twentieth century it was standard for members of the intelligentsia to see themselves as 'enlighteners', (*prosvetiteli* in Russian); they felt responsible, morally responsible, for enlightening the people with regard to their rights, to the political and social situation in Russia, the women's issue, the nature of revolution and like issues. They readily assumed the task of social criticism and articulated people's hopes for change in Russia. Their success in meeting the demands of this educational role was variously interpreted in different layers of society, but the conscious assumption of the role can hardly be doubted. This was especially clear in the 1870s, the decade of Russian Populism. In today's conditions the question arises : is the notion of an intelligentsia with a teaching role and a conscious understanding of themselves as 'enlighteners' completely obsolete and 'beside the point'? I suspect that Sergej Choružij or Nikolaj Gavrijušin would regard such a description of their role as highly presumptuous if coming from themselves and embarrassing if offered by others.

Nevertheless, the very tradition of *intelligenty* regarding themselves in these terms may still be relevant, in the following sense. It may be the case that for Russia's *intelligenty* their tradition and their former self-perception have themselves come to constitute a burden or potential trap. This is suggested in a perceptive paper by the Dutch philosopher Evert van der Zweerde, delivered in Leeds in 1994 and published in 1996.⁴ Van der Zweerde argues that if civil society in Russia is to be allowed to develop, truly to develop, 'from below', then the intelligentsia must consciously refrain from its traditional 'enlightening' role. It must resist the understandably strong temptation to impose 'from above' one or other social blueprint on the newly emerging 'post-Soviet' society.

Van der Zweerde's point regarding the burden of the intelligentsia's past self-perception certainly deserves to be taken seriously. It relates directly to the health and future well-being of Rus-

⁴ Evert van der Zweerde, 1996, Civil society and ideology: a matter of freedom, *Studies in East European Thought* 48:2-4,171-205, see esp. 192-200.

-sian society. The point I wish to make, here, is that the intelligentsia, for all its need to refrain from its traditional role as 'educator' or 'enlightener' of the people 'from above', could still usefully apply itself to the analysis of a whole cluster of problems in the sphere of religious values, social values and the contemporary world. I stress that what is required is a competent articulation of the problems and the finding or creating of a language adequate to that task. Here I do little more than echo the words of Dr Aleksej Bodrov, formerly Executive Director of the Aleksandr Men' Open Orthodox University and now Rector of the St Andrew's Biblical-Theological Institute in Moscow. Throughout the 1990s Bodrov consistently stressed the need for a language and terminology adequate to the task of expressing the engagement of religion and the modern world with one another. He views his own work as providing 'an education that is rooted in the Orthodox tradition and which also takes into account the development of modern society and science'.⁵ Even today such work still requires the creation of a language for the kind of dialogue in which church and society need to engage.⁶

We should consider the following areas of religious life where sustained reflection and the articulation of problems are needed:

- Church-state relations in Russia in particular and in the Orthodox world generally;
- inter-faith relations, the nature and status of ecumenism (its problematic nature for the Orthodox Church), and issues surrounding the World Council of Churches;
- secularization and its effects;⁷
- the nature of patriotism and of nationalism;
- fundamentalism, extremism and military intervention in Chechnya;
- issues relating to law and to the interface between law and religion, which, in their turn, lead to issues of citizenship, social obligations and personal answerability of the individual;

⁵ Aleksej Bodrov, 1994, The Open Orthodox University, *Religion, State & Society* 22:2, 199-204, at 200.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See ideas in this area offered by Konstantin Ivanov, President of the St Petersburg-based educational charity Open Christianity (Открытое христианство), which was specially active during the 1990s: Константин Иванов, 1992, Что такое культура?, in: *Горизонты культуры*, Санкт-Петербург, 189-214.

- the Russian Orthodox Church's Social Doctrine, drawn up in summer 2000 by its Council of Bishops;
- issues surrounding the language of liturgical worship in the Orthodox Church and arguments for adopting modern Russian in place of Church Slavonic or preserving Church Slavonic;
- the nature of lay activism, where that exists, relations between laity and clergy, existing and potential roles for laity;
- charitable activity: priorities, responsibility, opportunities, initiatives and problems;⁸
- priorities in secular and in religious education;
- issues surrounding family life, including health and social care issues (HIV/AIDS prevention and education) and their religious dimension;
- medical ethics issues, genetic intervention, cloning and religious objections to these;
- prison reform and pastoral care for prisoners.⁹

This list of subjects needing sustained reflection, engagement and analysis could, of course, be longer or have a different emphasis, but I trust that it will not appear randomly composed. With virtually all these subjects it is clear that the religious implications are many and complex, and it is obvious that they need to be confronted. This is particularly so in the case of the very rapidly changing terrain of medical ethics, genetic intervention and cloning. Another topic needing serious consideration in present-day Russia is, of course, **HIV/ AIDS** awareness, education and prevention. Here health and education issues overlap with ethical issues and pose questions that are extremely challenging for committed religious believers, especially for those with a traditional cast of mind.

⁸ See the collection of articles on Orthodox theology and charity published by the Higher School of Religion and Philosophy, St Petersburg, under the title *Православное богословие и благотворительность (диакония)*, as vol. 3 (1996) in the series of that School's 'Works' (*Труды*). This collection contains two noteworthy articles by Fr Theo van der Voort, who has been especially active in the administration and distribution of aid in Russia, under the aegis of the organization Aid to the Church in Need.

⁹ Questions of prison reform in Russia have consistently headed the agenda of Valerij Abramkin, but without a specifically religious frame of reference.

Indeed, it is worth reflecting, briefly, on the debate about how best to combat the spread of HIV/AIDS and, further, to note who in Russia is participating in that particular debate. Interestingly, it is on this precise topic that religious leaders of the Orthodox Christian, the Jewish and Muslim communities have found agreement. Both at a national level and in provincial cities religious leaders of those communities have come together and drawn up public statements deploring the spread of AIDS and, in some cases, strongly resisting the kind of preventive measures and education programmes being promoted by the medical profession and specialist organizations. These statements are issued by religious leaders who are genuinely alarmed by the critical situation in their own country, but, by and large, the language of those statements is far too obviously the language of a fundamentally conservative reaction to the problem and far too obviously the language of officialdom. The debate needs a more obvious and high-profile contribution from liberal and other voices, from those who really take seriously and respect people's religious commitments, but at the same time are open to at least discussing preventive measures which it has never previously seemed necessary to consider.

Two further observations on this topic are pertinent. In 2001, in Cambridge, at the annual conference of the British Association of Slavonic and East European Studies, Emily Richardson, a postgraduate research student from the University of Birmingham, reported on the introduction of a 'needle exchange programme' (*pro-gramma obmena spricev*) for drug addicts in certain provincial cities in Russia. It should be noted, here, that such programmes, first introduced through a pilot scheme in Edinburgh, remain controversial in Britain, but in Russia they certainly evoke unease and suspicion. In her Cambridge paper Richardson summarised some of the points debated within the medical profession in the Russian cities which featured in her study. Questioned about the reaction of the Orthodox Church in those cities, she noted an absence of public statements, though she admitted that she had not gone out of her way to look for reactions from that quarter. It was not the chosen focus of her research. My second observation is that in November 2001 (and again in 2002) the very issue of 'needle exchange programmes' was covered extensively in *Pravoslavnaia gazeta*, the diocesan newspaper of Ekaterinburg.¹⁰ The overall response to these programmes was critical and 'conservative', but what, to my mind, was significant, was the extent of the coverage. Uncomfortable and potentially threaten-

¹⁰ See: Не все средства хороши для борьбы со злом, *Православная газета* (Orthodox Diocese of Ekaterinburg) no. 172 (2001:31), 1, 12-13; see also *Православная газета* no. 181 (2002:4), 13.

-ing as the topic must have seemed to local churchmen, it was not passed over in silence. And the topic, once covered in the pages of the most prominent religious newspaper of the region, could elicit responses from the public. This, to me, seems one instance where, for everybody's sake, public discourse in Russia needs to be widened and enriched, and where engaged and well-informed religious believers could make a positive contribution. It would seem a wholly appropriate area of engagement for a 'religious intelligentsia' today.

Finally, I wish to underline the fact that Russia actually possesses a very rich resource, namely an enormous number of scientists, mathematicians and technicians who, during the Soviet period, entered those subject areas specifically in order to reduce their own exposure to Marxist-Leninist ideology, and who have, since then, turned their attention mainly to the humanities, including the fields of philosophy and theology. (They can be further identified through their active involvement in various educational and cultural initiatives and, in some cases at least, through their active engagement as lay members of the Orthodox Church or another Church). Examples include Aleksej Bodrov (mentioned previously), Aleksej Cernjakov and Natalija Pečerskaja of the Higher School of Religion and Philosophy in St Petersburg, the Buddhologist Andrej Terent'ev, also based in St Petersburg, and the journalist Maksim Ševčenko, former Editor of *Nezavisimaja gazeta's* supplement on religion, *NG-Religii*. In this context I also mention a young ex-physicist, Dr Aleksandr Filonenko, who now lectures in philosophy, theology and cultural studies. Though he lives and mostly works in Ukraine rather than in Russia, he is Russian by birth and, to my mind, is very much oriented towards Russia and its culture. His outlook reflects intelligentsia values and preoccupations, and he operates at the centre of a lively circle of philosophers, sociologists and others in Char'kov.

In the course of my own contact with such people I am struck by the incisiveness of their cultural analysis. In many cases it is their methodological rigour and clarity which come through, their readiness to 'go back to first principles', and also their ability to draw metaphors and analogies from a very broad range of disciplines. All these much-honed skills and qualities, developed in the course of their scientific work, equip them eminently well for a thorough analysis of *Homo religiosus* and of the social setting for religious

belief and practice.¹¹ Add to this their great readiness to engage seriously with the religious dimensions of culture. The ideas and writings of this identifiable set of people constitute a singularly sustained effort of reflection on religious and religious-related issues. It was already present, in small pockets, in the 1950s and 1970s, growing enormously in and since the time of perestrojka. This effort of reflection involves many people, people who engage in polemics with one another or draw on each other's thinking and, in turn, help to shape the thinking of yet others. I suggest that, however much commentators on the current scene in Russia may call into question the very existence of an intelligentsia, this instance of sustained reflection among former scientists, mathematicians and technicians very definitely merits our attention. It is a phenomenon which gives us some reason to hope that in Russia public discourse on religion and social values will become more firmly grounded than before. Whether this will impinge in any positive way on the minds of Russia's politicians and decision-makers is a completely open question. We may be forced to conclude, rather soberly, that it is very unlikely to do so, in which case we shall need to concede that the concerns articulated by this religiously minded sub-set of the intelligentsia are indeed marginal. However, those who engage in cultural analysis should not be too quick to play down the significance of this phenomenon.¹² Even without the recognition and endorsement of the country's politicians, it may still provide some way of assessing the health of Russian society today.

¹¹ See Sutton, Jonathan, 2000, The problematic status of the Russian tradition in religious philosophy, *New Blackfriars* 81, 536-41, esp. 540-1.

¹² A noteworthy and now much-acclaimed study of the secular intelligentsia was undertaken by Boris Kagarlickij and translated into English by Brian Pearce: Boris Kagarlickij, 1988, *The Thinking Reed: Intellectuals and the Soviet State from 1917 to the Present*, London ■ New York. The chapter on Chruščev's 'Thaw' and the polemics of that period is especially illuminating (pp. 128-87). Similarly helpful are Peter Duncan's two chapters on the polemics of the Brežnev years: P. Duncan JS, 2000, *Russian Messianism: Third Rome, Revolution, Communism and After*, London, and also Nicolai Petro on the views of Academician Dmitrij Lichačev, in: N. Petro, 1995, *The Rebirth of Russian Democracy: an Interpretation of Political Culture*, Harvard. Stanislav Džimbinov writes persuasively about the outstanding cultural contribution of the scholar Sergej Averincev, whose work since the 1960s has expressed many of the concerns that it would be natural to associate with a 'religious intelligentsia' (see S. Džimbinov, 1994, The return of Russian philosophy, in: James Scanlan (ed), *Russian Thought After Communism: the Recovery of a Philosophical Heritage (Essays in Honour of Professor George Kline)*, New York, 11-22, esp. 17-20). A decidedly more journalistic approach to the subject of the Russian intelligentsia was adopted by Masha Gessen in her 1997 book of interviews entitled *Dead Again: the Russian Intelligentsia After Communism*, London • New York.