

# The Phenomenon of Orthodox Bestsellers in Contemporary Russia

by

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A thesis submitted

in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Slavic Languages and Literatures

Department of Modern Languages and Cultural Studies

University of Alberta

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## **Abstract**

This study attempts to provide a literary analysis of some of the most popular contemporary Orthodox bestsellers in an effort to discuss their literary and cultural values and to explain their widespread appeal, focusing on historical, social and political concern that inform the Orthodox book market.

The analysis shows that the popular Orthodox culture in Russian society today tends toward a nationalist, moralist and rather conservative reading of the religion. Christianity is seen not so much as a universal concept, but the essence that defines the historic origin and cultural roots of the Russians. My study confirms a close tie between the 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian messianism and today's popular Orthodox discourses.

Instead of focusing on dogmatic, theological debates, the bestsellers place emphasis on the lived experience of Russian people, showing through the life stories of “real people” how religion is relevant in modern society, how one can engage. The readers' response indicates that average readers focus on the peaceful, optimistic, positive attitude that religion helps one attain in this life rather than the possibility of afterlife that the faith actually promises.

These books portray an Orthodox Church that has actually always been there throughout the Russian history and has always been the nation's greatest treasure and ultimate protection, which is a sharp departure from the tradition of late 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian literature that promoted opposition to institutional religion.

The Orthodox ideal of holiness and treatment of the concept of personality shown in these bestsellers carry distinct medieval message, which are perceived as the perfection that needs to be preserved intact and promoted as it is and any changes or improvements would be undesirable.

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## Introduction

Contemporary Russian literature is inextricably tied to its faith experience. Every popular art form is a reflection of a society that produces it, and the resurgence of religion in post-Soviet Russia took many scholars by surprise. Despite the devastating Soviet campaign against religious institutions, the clergy, and sacred objects and places, which had been meant to eradicate religion, Russian socialist society was never thoroughly secularized. The impetus for this study is a well-known phenomenon in the publishing industry: the popularity of Orthodox literature. By “Orthodox literature,” I mean a broader scope of literary works than merely those marketed exclusively to church-goers and sold in Christian bookshops. The term “Orthodox literature” in this thesis covers both “fiction” and “non-fiction” written from an Orthodox worldview and intended for a broad readership, including belles-lettres, novels, memoirs, short stories, and biographies. In recent years, the number of Orthodox books has increased significantly. In addition to print literature, an abundance of Orthodox websites<sup>i</sup> provide free access to old and new prose works. This literature can be divided into four types:<sup>ii</sup>

- 1) Church literature in a narrow sense: Scripture, the writings of the Church Fathers, prayer books;
- 2) Scholarly literature, such as historical-theological works;
- 3) Publications for educational and missionary purposes, including Orthodox manuals;
- 4) Literary fiction, including poetry and novels, as well as a variety of poems and stories for children.

It is not Bibles or prayer books, but Orthodox fiction, whose sales have exceeded expectations. The term “fiction” here encompasses both fictional imaginative texts and “creative non-fiction” or “non-fiction novels”, because the creative processes involved in writing traditional non-

fictional biography and memoirs are far removed from the processes of writing fiction or poetry.<sup>iii</sup> The line of demarcation between fiction and non-fiction can be blurry.

The popularity of Orthodox fiction did not develop in isolation, but in the context of contemporary Russian culture in general, and Russian literature in particular, which has always been informed by moral concerns and by the national consciousness. Morality and the sense of community are the most salient features of the religious landscape in Russia, and the lived experience of Russians in relation to religion defies easy categorization. Thus, in a sense, analyzing Orthodox popular literature can be especially productive. This study presents an analysis of how the Christian faith is presented in the writing, and how these bestsellers can provide insight into the intellectual and ideological currents within Russian Orthodoxy. I will place the phenomenon of “Orthodox bestsellers” in a context that explains their positive sales figures and their significance in reflecting contemporary Russian culture.

Books that achieve literary acclaim do not necessarily achieve bestseller status. Novels do not sell well on their artistic merits alone, but because they tap into the intellectual and cultural climate of the times and thus appeal to a vast number of people. In addition, having “marketing savvy, industry connections,”<sup>iv</sup> as Brian Hill points out in *The Making of a Bestseller*, is also crucial for a book’s success. Hence, it is important to understand the cultural context of Russian Orthodox literature and the general place the Russian Orthodox Church occupies in society.

Russian history, as a whole, has always been inseparable from Orthodoxy. Every Russian writer or thinker is connected to it to some degree: he either spurns it or is attracted to it.<sup>v</sup> In popular perception, Russia is imbued with the divine; she is a special country destined for something great. Orthodoxy became Russia’s defining creed in Nicholas I’s official ideology uniting faith,

power and nation: “Orthodoxy, autocracy and nationality.” Nineteenth-century Slavophilia, as an expression of national consciousness, attributed all of the virtues of the Russian nation to Orthodoxy. In his 1905 essay “The Soul of Russia,” N. Berdyaev noted: “Russian national thought has been nourished by a sense of Russia’s divinely chosen and God bearing nature.”<sup>vi</sup> As a holy nation, she must have a divine purpose. The idea of Russian messianism and great power was religious-nationalist in nature, and it grew in popularity again in the Soviet samizdat of the 1970s, when broad currents of the national renaissance were passing through many strata of society, as well as in the Soviet official press. All these ideas have found echoes in today’s popular Orthodox literature.

Today, the Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) has not only overcome oppression by the atheist Soviet regime, but has become a noticeable force both politically and culturally, in the very forefront of Russian public life. The Church seeks active forms of incorporation with the state power and assumes the role of the ultimate moral judge of Russian society. In her pivotal work *The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics*, Russian scholar Irina Papkova observes, “after a while, you could not turn on the television without seeing the patriarch or one of his closest subordinates commenting on this or that political and/or social issue.”<sup>vii</sup> Various films, documentaries, and talk shows have constantly emphasized the role of the ROC in the history of the Russian state and society. The mass media widely follows public appearances by the head of state and other statesmen in churches. Most of Russia’s well-known politicians, including those who formerly declared themselves atheists, seem to have become Orthodox.<sup>viii</sup> As Fagan noted in his *Believing in Russia*, in the popular notion of Russian national identity, symbolic belief in Russia and Orthodoxy is perceived as the glue consolidating the nation’s power.<sup>ix</sup>

When it comes to interpreting the communist era and modern Russian history, the Church has its own narrative of the twentieth century that focuses on the hundreds of thousands who suffered for their faith. John P. Burgess says of the relation between Russia's new identity and the in-churching project:

This kind of remembrance is closely linked to in-churching. To atone for the nation's historic sins against the Church, Russians should protect the Church and enter into its life. Fr. Alexander Mazyrin, a leading voice among a younger generation of church historians, sees the twentieth century as the time of the Russian Church's greatest suffering and also glorification. He invokes Tertullian's dictum, 'The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.' Many church leaders further suggest that the blood of the martyrs is also the seed of a new Russia. According to this version of historical remembrance, Russians will experience national renewal today if they honor the Church's great sacrifices under communism. Russia can again become great, but only as a Christian, Orthodox nation.<sup>x</sup>

To promote this interpretation of twentieth-century Russian history, the Church has undertaken a series of mass canonizations of the "New Martyrs and Confessors of Russia":

Almost every parish and monastery in Russia has identified its new martyrs. The Church provides for painting their icons, composing hymns and prayers to them, publishing an official version of their

life stories, and venerating their relics (if the communists left anything behind). On the day of a martyr or confessor's death, the Church includes his or her name in the prayers of the liturgy.<sup>xi</sup>

A.V. Mitrofanova notes that Orthodoxy has become a popular religious ideology at the grassroots level, in which Orthodoxy, laden with political implications, serves as the borderline on the arena of confrontation between “us” and “them,” which is not so much between “the Orthodox” and “the non-Orthodox” as between “patriots” and “democrats.”<sup>xii</sup> The Orthodox patriotic rhetoric has gained public support and infiltrated larger political organizations, thus contributing to a general Orthodoxization of Russian political discourse.

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The emergence and development of the Russian medieval literary canon, which was associated with a high and solemn status,<sup>xiii</sup> was fundamentally influenced by Christianity of Kyivan Rus'. In the early years after the baptism of Rus', the Gospels, liturgical service books, and other religious texts constituted the primary written canon, while non-religious verbal art was excluded from the written record. *Passion and Encomium of Ss. Boris and Gleb the Martyrs* («Сказание и страсть и похвала святую мученику Бориса и Глеба») of the late eleventh century, which combined dramatic action, lyric prayers, and deeply emotional lamentations, was an early example of the nature of the Rus'ian concept of holiness (святость): willing, self-effacing non-resistance in conformity with the suffering of Christ. This ideal provided a template for the Russian concept of holiness. Princes Boris and Gleb, the first saints canonized by the Church, were the sons of Kiev Prince Vladimir, during whose reign in the late tenth century Rus' was baptized; they became the victims of a politically-motivated assassination. The hagiographic



account of their death demonstrated to ancient readers that, although they were not martyred for their faith, their death was a voluntary self-sacrifice that echoed Christ's death on the cross. As George Fedotov notes, the value assigned to non-resistance and articulated in this work is an authentic religious discovery of the newly converted Christians of Rus'.<sup>xiv</sup>

The seventeenth-century autobiography of Avvakum Petrov<sup>1</sup> (*«Житие протопопа Аввакума им самим написанное»*), first published in 1861 in St. Petersburg, is an Early Modern Russian literary work that has delighted generations of readers. Regardless of the actual issues that Avvakum advocated, his fiery commentary and his tragic and moving story were memorable. Its artistic merit makes this text a positive contribution to Orthodox Christian literature, although the idea of a self-written vita might be troubling in the religious sense as it may raise questions of pride. In the eighteenth century, when Russian culture was undergoing a drastic reorientation, traditional Orthodox Christian themes disappeared from mainstream literature, though generalized religious sentiments did remain.

The nineteenth-century Russian literary canon featured profound religious quests, with the religious themes in Gogol's, Dostoevsky's, and Tolstoy's works attracting the most attention. Gogol's works had always featured moralistic hopes, as his laughter was meant to purge human sins. He fully unfolded his moral ambitions in his collection of letters and essays, *Selected Passages from Correspondence with Friends* (*«Выбранные места из переписки с друзьями»*, 1847), in which he explicitly promoted Christianity and defended the Russian social order of his time as something sacred. Religious doubts had long tormented and fascinated Dostoevsky, and in *Crime and Punishment* (*«Преступление и наказание»*, 1866), *The Idiot* (*«Идиот»*, 1868),

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<sup>1</sup> The transliteration system used in this study is the Romanization table approved by the Library of Congress, although in some cases exceptions were made to accommodate well-established forms of transliteration.

*The Devils* («Бесы», 1872) and *The Brothers Karamazov* («Братья Карамазовы», 1880) – the most complicated of all his novels – Christian themes of suffering, redemption, love, and faith are seamlessly integrated into the dramatic world of literary narrative. In his *Confession* («Исповедь», 1880), Leo Tolstoy describes his intense quest for the meaning of life, while *The Three Hermits* («Три старца», 1886) outlines the superiority of unlettered spirituality to formal religion. It was Tolstoy's novel *Resurrection* («Воскресение», 1899) that finally brought the Church's sanction against him for depicting the Orthodox liturgy in a mocking fashion. Significantly, Leo Tolstoy's anti-clericalism and his sharp criticism of Orthodox dogma and ritual are not in the name of secularism, but in that of a new religion, which came to be known as spiritual philosophical trend called "Tolstoyanism". Nikolai S. Leskov stands largely outside of the religious-philosophical quest of his contemporaries, with his work *The Sealed Angel* («Запечатленный ангел», 1873) offering his interpretation of "the people" (народ) and Russian national roots. Leskov sees genuine piety and sincere religious feeling in the Old Believers, which he regarded as the true tradition of the Russian people's natural religiosity. His focus was not on the dogmatic differences between the Old Believers and established Orthodoxy, but with the Old Believers' anachronistic way of life and their living link with the past. The story contains vivid details about their rites, customs, language, and everyday life. In the Old Believers, Leskov finds the manifestation of the chief moral virtues of ordinary Russian people: honest, devout, and hard-working.

David M. Bethea regards religious sensibility (dukhovnost') as the most significant tendency in Russian classical literature as a whole.<sup>xv</sup> In his interpretation, Russian classical literature's function as a social conscience was directly conditioned by its profound Christian moral values:

It has traditionally been literature's job to serve as social conscience: advocate for the downtrodden (peasant, "little man," chinovnik/bureaucrat, factory worker, women and children) and critic of despotic regimes, with their instruments of power (censorship, secret police, court system, labor camps). It is this tendency to give voice to concerns, however partially muffled by censorship and "Aesopian" encodings and circumlocutions, that were incapable of being uttered through other social institutions that has given Russian literature its strong didacticism and sense of moral rectitude.<sup>xvi</sup>

Representing the Russian Orthodox Church's official understanding of the history of classical Russian literature, M. M. Dunaev, professor of Moscow Theological Academy, offers a different view in *Вера в горниле сомнений*, which claims Orthodox religiosity as the essential attribute of Russian literature. Dunaev interprets Dostoevsky's work as a full reaffirmation of traditional Christianity, failing to see his deeply personal and precarious faith; meanwhile, he also criticizes Tolstoy without acknowledging the latter's literary merit.<sup>xvii</sup> Dunaev tends to place the religious in opposition to the social in Russian literature, perhaps as a conscious reaction against the common view in Soviet literary criticism that had significantly overrated the role of the sociopolitical in Russian literature.

Hagiography as a genre played an important role in the development of nineteenth-century Russian literature. Both M. Ziolkowski and M. Morris have discussed the influence of medieval forms of sacred writing, especially hagiography, on later secular works. In *Hagiography and Modern Russian Literature*, Ziolkowski examines the underlying polemical purpose of

hagiography,<sup>xviii</sup> demonstrating that many nineteenth-century works employ hagiographical techniques to make political or social statements, and both politically radical writers and their religiously-minded contemporaries adapted hagiography to express their own thematic interests. Morris attempts to pin down the role asceticism played in modern Russian literature, finding substantial similarities between Christian saints and socialist revolutionaries as strong individuals who choose lives of asceticism and self-restraint. Nineteenth-century Russian revolutionaries such as Rakhmetov or Pavel Vlasov are proud, aloof ascetics, while twentieth-century Soviet socialist heroes such as Dasha Chumalova are strong and decent members of society. Another type of ascetic hero, the misfit, is embodied in the saintly icon-painter Chertkov of Gogol's *The Portrait* («Портрет»), Tolstoy's *Father Sergius* («Отец Сергий»), and Dostoevsky's deranged monk Ferapont from *The Brothers Karamazov* («Братья Карамазовы»). These characters search for spiritual perfection, but all share a sense of isolation and estrangement.<sup>xix</sup> Morris further suggested that the authors consciously conceived these stories as reflection of older works, and the protagonists' ascetic actions mirror the pattern found in medieval prototypes, to which Bethea only agrees that such ascetic, maximalist traits can be found in many characters in Russian literature, and that "saintly behavior can be actively submissive (the "meek" model of the martyred brothers Boris and Gleb) or defiantly subversive (the "holy warrior" model of Aleksandr Nevsky), but what it cannot be is consciously concerned with its own needs as a separate ego with a merely personal mission."<sup>xx</sup> Russian scholar V. V. Lepakhin sees the literary expression of Russian spirituality in Nevsky's emphasis on icons. He explored the art of icon painting, and analyzed representation of icons and "red corners" in a series of nineteenth-century literary works that showed the genuine Russian Orthodox tradition of cherishing and revering

icons that filled the hearts of the faithful with joy and comfort, and punished unrepentant sinners.<sup>xxi</sup>

Orthodox experience in the twentieth century has also attracted scholarly attention, as critics have rediscovered and reinterpreted various aspects of Russian religious tradition. *Sacred Stories: Religion and Spirituality in Modern Russia* (2007), edited by Mark D. Steinberg and Heather J. Coleman, focuses on the rich tradition of spiritual quests in the so-called “Silver Age,” the final decades of the Russian Empire. It examines the revitalization of the Orthodox faith, as well as nonconformist paths of spiritual quest, such as mysticism, spiritualism, theosophy, and “other idealizations of imagination, feeling, and mystical connections between all things,”<sup>xxii</sup> emphasizing “experience” of and “feelings” about the world as a place of mystery and awesome power. It underscores “the sacred principle of the absolute autonomy and value of the individual”<sup>xxiii</sup> expressed by the authors of the journal *Vekhi* as the high accomplishment of Russian religious philosophy. The contributors to the collection demonstrate that the construction and defense of community was central to the sacred stories of religion in the public sphere: “In the minds of many, Orthodoxy and *tserkovnost’* (‘churchness’, i.e., belonging to the ecclesial community of the Russian Orthodox Church) were essential to the definition of Russian nationality... Likewise, many religious minority groups defined themselves as communities of difference (or by the difference others saw in them).”<sup>xxiv</sup> The authors suggest that the religion of the “Silver Age” was infused with the characteristics of the modern age, “with its pervasive ruptures, displacements, and flux, that interpretive boundaries became fraught and uncertain.”<sup>xxv</sup> The volume makes considerable efforts in redefining and reinterpreting religion, discerning the “self” as its core concept, and underscoring the individual’s feelings and needs of the ideal of “an elevated self and community empowered by the sacred force of feeling, speech and word.”<sup>xxvi</sup>

This interpretation marginalizes the place of the institutional establishment of the Church, focusing on the interior of the individual self; at the same time, it pushes the religious ever closer to morality, blurring boundaries. This could perhaps be seen as a challenge between modernity and the Christian spirit; however, such a sense of blurred and fluid boundaries and marginalized institutional religion is not present in the contemporary Russian religious experience that is reflected in the works discussed in this project.

*Religion, Morality, and Community in Post-Soviet Societies* (2008), a collection of essays edited by Mark D. Steinberg and Catherine Wanner, represents an effort to discern various forms of religious beliefs in contemporary post-Soviet Russian culture. The volume questions the traditional clear-cut dichotomies of religion and modernity, and of religion and culture. The authors of the anthology assert that modern conditions can actually stimulate religious belief and practices in a more self-conscious way, modern communications have created new possibilities for Orthodox practices, nationalist movements articulate ethnonational identities of which Orthodoxy is a central part, and the Soviet experience itself nurtured high moral awareness and the habit of self-training, self-discipline, which are shared by Christian practice.<sup>xxvii</sup>

With a majority of Russia's population claiming to be Orthodox, religious literature, especially books describing the life of the priesthood and people's everyday religious experiences, are remarkably popular. Publications in line with official stand of the Moscow Patriarchate often receive financial subsidies and promotion on the central stands of bookstores. Orthodox literary prizes have played important roles in supporting and promoting Orthodox fiction in the book market. In 2004, the All-Russian Orthodox Literary Prize, named after St. Alexander Nevsky, was founded by the Holy Trinity Alexander Nevsky Lavra with the support of the Union of Russian Writers and has been presented annually ever since. The Patriarchal Literary Award was

established in 2009 and first presented two years later “for significant contribution to the development of Russian literature.” Many popular Orthodox writers, such as Vladimir Krupin (2011), Julia Voznesenskaya (2011), Olesya Nikolaeva (2012), or archpriest Alexander Torik (2013), have either entered the shortlist or received the prize.

Svetlana Boiko has noted that present-day Russian literature is classified by theme and function.<sup>xxviii</sup> She describes the prize-winning Orthodox novels of Voznesenskaya and Torik as “ecclesiastical literature” (церковная литература), which she regards as a thematic descriptor in the vein of “military prose,” “village prose,” or “camp prose,” while ignoring differences between the poetics of various authors and focusing on the choice of surface texture. Based on this principle, she classifies Maya Kucherskaia’s *Modern-Day Patericon* («Современный патерик», 2005) and Iulia Sysoeva’s *Notes of a Priest’s Wife* («Записки попадьи», 2008) in the same category of literature “that chronicle everyday life and mores.”<sup>xxix</sup> However, these two works are widely separated by their genre, poetics, and style.

Maya Kucherskaya’s *Modern-Day Patericon: To Be Read in Times of Despair* («Современный патерик. Чтение для впавших в уныние») is characterized by reliance on postmodernist narrative techniques such as fragmentation, paradox, and playfulness of the narrator. Kucherskaya is a literary critic, novelist, biographer and university professor, who graduated from the prestigious Moscow State University and obtained a PhD from the University of California, Los Angeles, and is the author of more than 100 articles on literature and culture. Her awards include the 2006 Young Guard (Молодая гвардия) Award and the 2007 Student Booker Prize. *Modern-Day Patericon*, which was shortlisted for the 2006 Bunin Prize, features a postmodernist uneven narrative structure, a mixture of heterogeneous materials and styles, avoidance of psychological characterization, and diffusion of its central plot. The dynamic rests

on the sheer exuberance of anecdotal material, in its collection of humorous and touching stories of modern lives in the Russian Orthodox Church. The clergy and their flock are presented as ordinary people with human weaknesses and peculiarities. Her language style is distinctly folklore-orientated, which can be traced to Leskov's tradition,<sup>xxx</sup> and the narrative style is down-to-earth without a trace of elevation. Orthodoxy is treated as an everyday way of life for ordinary people, sometimes trivial, sometimes depressing. Her work attracted great public attention from both religious and secular circles, though many readers found it baffling. Some of her stories depict church life as grotesque and dark; others, written in the style of children's tales, plunge into absurdity. Her "patericon" was first published in 2004 in the liberal journal *Знамя* (iss.1) and became the best-selling work of fiction of the year. It was translated into English and published in 2011 by Alexei Bayer as *Faith and Humor: Notes from Muscovy*. As a liberal intellectual, Kucherskaya, along with her *Modern-Day Patericon*, has come under fire from the conservative Orthodox priesthood; even so, her greatest contribution to contemporary Orthodox literature is her "rediscovery" of the patericon or short story collection.

Julia Sysoeva, widow of the rank-and-file Orthodox missionary-priest Daniil Sysoev, published *The Notes of a Priest's Wife* («Записки попадьи: особенности жизни русского духовенства») in 2008. This work follows the lives of contemporary Orthodox priests, their financial-material problems, and their special codes of behaviour that had always been mysterious and hidden from the eyes of the general public. The issue of spirituality or religiosity is absent, and the priests are described mainly as diligent state officials who have to climb the social ladder, get paid, and earn benefits from their jobs, just like everyone else. The pronounced stylistic difference between these two female writers is connected to the noticeable disparity in their political stances and social status: whereas Kucherskaya represents highly educated, Western-leaning, liberal



intellectuals, Sysoeva represents the worldview of less sophisticated, more conservative-leaning grassroots within clerical circles who are strongly influenced by the popular discourses of the Church establishment. I will discuss Sysoeva further later in this study.

Kucherskaya started a fashion for patericons in Russian literature. In 2010, Orthodox-oriented writer Vasily Dvortsov published *Endless Patericon* («Нескончаемый патерик»), a collection of mini-vitae, in the right-wing nationalist journal *Москва* (iss.1). The stories in this collection are set in remote Siberian villages, and are about finding faith, monasticism, and the lives of ordinary Russian people. Dvortsov's stories continued the tradition of Russian village prose of the Brezhnev era expressing nationalistic and patriarchal values. Much like Torik's *Flavian* («Флавиан»), this work also emphasizes Orthodoxy as the foundation of Russian identity and culture. In 2011, Dvortsov was awarded the All-Russian Orthodox Literary Prize after St. Alexander Nevsky, and Fr. Tikhon continued the trend of the patericon in *Everyday Saints and Other Stories* («Несвятые святые и другие рассказы», 2011). The following year, Olesya Nikolaeva's *Heavenly Fire and Other Stories* («Небесный огонь и другие рассказы», 2012), from the same series and in the same style, became another Orthodox bestseller. In *Heavenly Fire and Other Stories*, Nikolaeva offers her witness of God's miracles; like Fr. Tikhon's work, her stories feature the intervention of divine Providence in people's everyday lives, and take a similar interest in characterizing celebrities and the elite class. Nikolaeva is a professional poet, writer, and lecturer at the Literature Institute in Moscow. Many of her works were written from a religious perspective, and as the priest Vladimir Vigilyansky's wife, she is aware of the church world. In *Heavenly Fire and Other Stories*, she not only describes encounters with famous religious people of the day, but also attempts to depict her own spiritual experiences, even if not always successfully, with a lingering sense of self-fashioning in the relation of those experiences.

Nikolaeva's works were published by the Russian publishing houses Eksmo and AST, but her editors at those firms admit that "she has been praised mostly as an author of good romantic prose for women rather than of Orthodox novels" (Orlova).

The primary function of contemporary Orthodox literature, as Boiko has emphasized, is didacticism, mostly serving as an instruction to the reader. This is especially characteristic of Fr. Alexander Torik's *Flavian* trilogy («Флавиан»). Fr. Alexander is a popular Orthodox writer who became a believer in the late 1970s. During that time he went for spiritual guidance to the Holy Trinity-Sergius Lavra and was under obedience as a novice. In 1989, he was ordained as a deacon, and two years later, as a priest. In 1996, he published his first book, *The Beginner's Guide to Church Life* («Воцерковление для начинающих церковную жизнь»). In his novel *Flavian* (2004), the first part of the trilogy, Fr. Alexander places his protagonist-narrator, Alexei, an ordinary city dweller, amidst the chaos of contemporary life. Feeling weary and insecure about the financial situation of the company where he worked as a manager, and dismayed by his recent divorce, he finally finds a true meaning for his life in the Orthodox religion. The novel describes in detail the unexpected turning point in Alexei's life, which happens after a chance meeting with a former classmate, now Fr. Flavian. This event turns Alexei's life upside down, setting him on a new path towards faith in God. He discovers in Fr. Flavian's church a vast spiritual world in which everyone finds meaning, joy, and love. The vanity and volatility of city life in 1990s Russia gives way to a sense of safety and security with God in the church community. This novel presents Orthodoxy as an antidote to the social ills of post-Soviet Russia, "instructing" the reader how to conduct him/herself during the Vigil and even presenting extracts from the service itself. In a scene of the protagonist's confession, Alexei, an open and receptive person, "speaks with his friend, asks questions, probing the sum and substance. And for this

reason he is able to confess, which is not something that just anyone can do the first time around (it is hard to acknowledge ignorance, to overcome awkwardness, to ask for help...). These chapters can be used, should the need arise, in preparation for one's own confession."<sup>xxxix</sup> I agree with Boiko's opinion, and further point out that, aside from the consideration of the utilitarian function of efficacy, this emphasis on how the faith is expressed in visible, symbolic forms also relates to the tendency toward tradition in the external forms of belief that was typical of Orthodoxy throughout the length of its history. Orthodox Christians in Russia historically have identified their faith – *Pravoslavie* (Православие) – with "truth." The history of *pravoslavie*, or the "right worship," is a history of attempt to interpret, preserve and live the faith as "rightly" as possible. Russian church historian A.P. Lopukhin has pointed out that "highly valuing tradition, the Russian people received Orthodoxy not in order to develop it, but to preserve it from the intrusion of foreign elements."<sup>xxxix</sup> Russia's Orthodox faithful have always exerted enormous energy on preserving the "right worship" and the "right faith."

### **Scope of Research**

This study covers three bestselling Orthodox novels published in the post-Soviet era: *Fr. Arseny* («Отец Арсений», 1994); *Everyday Saints and Other Stories* («Несвятые святые и другие рассказы», 2011); and *Notes of a Priest's Wife* («Записки попадьи», 2008). The authors of these works include both priests and Orthodox-oriented lay writers, male and female. Their perspectives, and subsequently, their representations of the Church and priesthood, are differentiated. *Fr. Arseny* provides evidence of the burning late-Soviet dissident spirit, while *Everyday Saints* and *Notes of a Priest's Wife* share the distinct contemporary Orthodox mainstream stance and the utilitarian function of edification. While *Everyday Saints* by Archimandrite Tikhon presents a conservative nationalist view of Russian monasticism and its

sublime symbolic meaning, *Notes of a Priest's Wife*, demonstrates a relatively more liberalized, almost secular view of an Orthodox woman on the mundane, trivial side of everyday parish life. The liberal atmosphere of the 1990s facilitated the publication and active reception of *Fr. Arseny*, a samizdat novel about a catacomb church during the Soviet period. The book tells the story of a Russian priest who spent eighteen years in Stalin's labor camps and, after his release, managed to secretly build a vigorous, close-knit Orthodox spiritual community under the Soviet regime. The book contains reminiscences and stories of his "spiritual children," the survival of the faith under extreme circumstances, and the parishless priest's cultivation of institutionless Orthodoxy. Vera Shevzov notes that during the Khrushchev years, the Soviet dissident movement contributed to sustaining Orthodoxy as a living tradition in the late Soviet period:

The private gatherings associated with the dissident phenomenon provided many members of the intelligentsia throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s with a venue in which to study Orthodoxy, to assess the life of the contemporary church, and to provide a public moral voice with respect to the exercise of faith in an officially atheistic society...Orthodox consciousness was not immune to broader cultural, social, and political trends. Members of the Orthodox intelligentsia warned that the Soviet political system could very well produce a New Orthodox Believer alongside a New Soviet Person.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

This political vision partly found its expression in the novel *Fr. Arseny*. The novel highlights the moral courage and love of the saint-priest Arseny, who offered an example of great spiritual strength and unshakable faith, selflessly helping and supporting other political prisoners in the

darkest environment of a labour camp, often risking his own life. His charity, fortitude, and Christ-like justice amid the harshest circumstances of hunger, cold, and exhausting labor, transcend the simple formula of a Christian hero dying because the killers hate the faith. Part of Fr. Arseny's charism is his informed, empathic understanding toward others, so that they felt they can intellectually and emotionally resonate with his perspective, which eventually made a crucial difference in the life of each of them. Under his influence, the communist officials and young Komsomol members begin to re-evaluate the Orthodox religion that they had previously despised. Heinz Kohut once noted that every person struggles to some degree to hold their self together and therefore needs all the grace-responses they can get.<sup>2</sup> While undergoing this inner shift in worldview, these people publicly continue to do their previous jobs diligently, remaining conscientious members of Soviet society, and stayed connected with each other in a new, redeeming way. It's noteworthy that almost all characters in the book were ethnic Russians, there were very few non-Russians: two or three Ukrainians and one tartar, who were mentioned superficially and who played fairly insignificant roles in the plot. The novel reveals the extreme inhumanity and cruelty of the state penal system of the Soviet Union, but rather than placing the blame on evil power, it strongly implies the responsibility of all Soviet citizens for the moral tragedy of the country. It is this sober questioning and intense self-analysis, written in the best tradition of Soviet dissident literature, that distinguish it from the later works published after 2000.

*Fr. Arseny* has attracted the attention of both Orthodox and non-Orthodox readers. The first three parts of the book had been known in "samizdat" form in the 1970s, before the full novel was

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<sup>2</sup> Cooper, Terry D., and Robert L. Randall. *Grace for the Injured Self: Healing Approach of Heinz Kohut*, The Lutterworth Press, 2012

published in 1993 by St. Tikhon's Orthodox Theological Institute (now University) in Moscow. The book has been reprinted many times by this publisher and numerous times internationally. A further two extensive parts were added in the fourth edition in 2000 by Vladimir Vladimirovich Bykov, a member of *Maroseika*, a religious community in central Moscow that continued to function secretly during the Soviet era when one could be threatened with forced labour or death for such activity. The English translation was published by the largest Orthodox publisher in the United States, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press (*Father Arseny*, 1998, 2001, 2003), and the book has also been translated into Greek, Bulgarian, French, Spanish, Romanian, and Latvian. However, there has been no scholarly research of the readership the book has attracted so far, therefore we know very little about the age group, social strata and gender the readers represent.

The overall sense of cultural crisis felt in the immediate aftermath of the USSR's collapse was somehow overcome in the 2000s, when the book market as a whole was revived considerably. In the 2000s, Orthodox literature reflected the social problems of crime, poverty, moral degradation and social injustice that emerged in the first years after the dissolution of the USSR. During the 2000s, Orthodox fiction switched from a dissident spirit to the literary mainstream. Orthodoxy is now portrayed as the essence of Russianness, the defining feature of the Russian national identity and its historical and cultural roots. It continues the nineteenth-century Slavophile rhetoric, summarized best in Dostoevsky's *Demons*: "He who is not Orthodox cannot be Russian" (249). Moreover, Orthodox bestsellers share some characteristics of popular literature: these works usually feature candid and self-critical protagonists, uncomplicated language, and a sense of light humour. These works are intended for the masses, seeking to satisfy people's immediate curiosity with the priesthood; they present introductory knowledge of the Church rules, with no moral burdens but easy and enjoyable reading. The terms "popular literature" and "mass

literature” are used interchangeably in this study: “popular literature” is a neutral term generally used by western critics, and “mass literature” is the phrase normally used by Russian critics, albeit sometimes with a pejorative tinge. During the Soviet period, this type of literature allegedly did not exist in the USSR, but only in capitalist countries (Latynina & Dewhirst). “Mass literature” has long been disdained and disparaged by intellectual critics, but, beginning in the mid-1990s, some critics began to take this phenomenon more seriously. In 1996, an issue of the critical journal «Новое литературное обозрение» was devoted to “other literatures.”<sup>xxxiv</sup> Some critics have highlighted the useful psychological and social role that such works can play, either by providing entertainment and an escape from harsh reality, or by affording insights into contemporary society that serious literature may otherwise avoid, offering reassurance and helping people to adapt more easily to turbulent and changing times.<sup>xxxv</sup> They also argue that the tastes of the Russian population should not be judged, but respected. In contemporary Russian literature, the frontiers between “high” and “low” culture are becoming blurred. Russian critic Sergei Chuprinin has suggested that “elite” and “popular” literature are coming together and will continue to coexist in a system of “multi-literature” (Чупринин, Звоном щита). He advanced the new concept of “middle literature” to encompass the gradations between these two poles. Middle literature speaks directly to the writer’s contemporaries rather than to posterity, and does not demand the intellectual and emotional effort required to read “quality literature.”

In the first half of the 2010s, Orthodox literature has continued and is continuing to develop in the direction of popular subculture, fulfilling readers’ desires for miracles in everyday life with its problems of health, family, and children. After Kucherskaya’s *Modern-day Patericon* and Drozdov’s *Endless Patericon*, in 2011 another “patericon,” *Everyday Saints and Other Stories* by Fr. Tikhon, the abbot of the Sretensky monastery in Moscow, became an unprecedented success.

Fr. Tikhon, politically an Orthodox statist, belongs to the traditionalist faction of the ROC. He achieved nationwide fame in 2008 after his controversial documentary film *The Fall of an Empire: The Lesson of Byzantium* was broadcast on the major state-controlled TV channel “Russia.” In the film, Archimandrite Tikhon, the director, star, and narrator, claims that “The greatest treasure of Byzantium was God,” and he stresses that, unlike the “coarse, ignorant, money-grabbing” Western Europeans, “Russians comprehended Byzantium’s greatest treasure” and became the spiritual successors to Byzantium. Therefore, the lesson of the fall of the empire is that if Russians betray Orthodoxy, they will suffer the same fate. The political stability and well-being of the country, even its very existence, depends on allegiance to the principles of Russian Orthodox tradition. The film’s rhetoric of the political ideal of an Orthodox empire (православная державность) is shared by many of the Russian Orthodox elite. Fr. Tikhon Shevkunov is the leader of the Sretensky circle, a specific circle of clergy and active laity who adhere to a monarchist, anti-Western, and anti-globalist ideology. The Sretensky monastery’s publishing house and popular website, [www.pravoslavie.ru](http://www.pravoslavie.ru), produce large amounts of literature from a conservative point of view, consciously presented in opposition to the worldview of democratic liberals. They look to the pre-revolutionary Russian empire as a positive model and fully support the canonization of the tsar Nicholas II and his family as saints martyred by the atheist Bolsheviks. Nevertheless, they are also supporters of the Putin regime, desiring to institutionalize a special, intimate relationship between the church and the government and build a joint church-government project that ensures a specific Russian national and religious identity in a rapidly-changing and “very hostile” (in their view) world, through the spiritualization of Russian society.<sup>xxxvi</sup> Fr. Tikhon Shevkunov has many friends among the rich and powerful members of Russian society, and is said to have contacts in the Kremlin. Rumour



has it, though he has neither confirmed nor denied this, that he is the confessor to President Putin.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Some of his 2011 patericon stories are engagingly written to satisfy contemporary readers' desire for psychological consolation through the idyll of peace and harmony of monastic life, but the biggest achievement of the book lies in its successful depiction of the Christian ideal of humility in the portrayal of the main protagonist, in this case, the author himself. The novel was shortlisted for the 2012 literary award *Big Book*, which is one of Russia's most prestigious literary awards, and the book won in the nomination for readers' votes. The Russian national Big Book Prize was introduced in 2006, financed partly by the state and partly by private business.

Like *Father Arseny*, Fr. Tikhon's work also adopts hagiographic traditions, combining it with significant autobiographical elements. It presents a mixture of folk wisdom and Orthodoxy rather than a pure spiritual or theological quest. Matters of everyday importance play important roles in defining a society; while these concerns do not define Orthodoxy, they certainly permeate it. Post-Soviet Russia, much like Russia after the Revolution of 1917, has had to undergo a cultural and ideological reorientation. These popular "paterica" provide insight into the everyday reality of post-Soviet Russia, demonstrating how codes of behaviour have had to be redefined, and new social models and ground rules have been absorbed. In addition, in the post-Soviet nationalistic surge, the popular interest in medieval Orthodox culture has intensified. The attraction to medieval Russian culture prompted writers to seek inspiration in medieval hagiographical forms.

As early as the Perestroika period, women's prose had become a visible and voluble presence in Russian literature. In the twentieth century, writers such as Tatyana Tolstaya, Lyudmila Petrushevskaya, and Lyudmila Ulitskaya have moved to the forefront of the literary scene. Whether texts written by women can be regarded as a separate sector of literature is still under debate; however, I have chosen Iulia Sysoeva's *Notes of a Priest's Wife* as object of study not

only because it was written by a woman, but also because its problematics is connected to female experience. Her work provides insight into female viewpoints on Orthodox everyday life; gender and *byt* (everyday life) were inherited problems in late Soviet culture, suggesting that women are inclined toward domesticity, childcare, and the endless minutiae needed to support a family. Based on the valuable precedent Russian studies of private life of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries conducted by Iu. Lotman and his colleagues at the Tartu School, B.M. Sutcliffe distinguishes two opposite concepts in Russian culture: “byt” and “bytie.” He noted that *byt* not only refers to daily life but also to a corrosive banality threatening the higher aspirations of *bytie* (spiritual or intellectual life). Female tasks such as caring for others or maintaining a household are a part of the *byt*: petty, small-scale, mundane, exhausting, and repetitive.<sup>xxxviii</sup> This is particularly relevant in studying Sysoeva’s *Notes of a Priest’s Wife* that appropriates Orthodox everyday life (*byt*) as a cultural space for selectively documenting gendered problems within mainstream literature: love, family, home, and children. She touches upon the issues of “fathers and sons,” the eternal problem of the generation gap, the crisis of the patriarchal family as a social institution, the distortion of human relations, especially within the family, between men and women. Abnormal as these relations can be, they bring the priestly wives in her work to despair and a sense of irresistible loneliness and dissatisfaction. It is safer to not divide literature into “masculine” and “feminine”, but to agree that a feminine outlook on everyday life does enrich both society and literature. Much like in *Fr. Arseny*, there is a paucity of biblical reference in Sysoeva’s work as well. Biblical quotation plays little role in her book.

Orthodox literature became popular at a time when once-fashionable postmodern literary trends were on the decline. In the early 1990s, with the coming of the post-Soviet era, a strong wave of skepticism and cynicism, which is also the converse of a sensibility hurt by the “lies” and

“betrayals” of reality, emerged within the new literature. Within the movement, there were milder strands, such as Timur Kibirov, who poked fun at the audience’s cherished assumptions in his poems; and ruthless smashers, such as the intentionally “scandalous” Viktor Erofeev, Vladimir Sorokin, and Victor Pelevin, who launched full-scale assaults on mainstream literary values, smashing the cultural icons of the past and with them traditional reader expectations and even notions of propriety. With works such as Pelevin’s *Omon Ra* («Омон Ра», 1992), Erofeev’s *Encyclopaedia of the Russian Soul* («Энциклопедия русской души», 1999), and Sorokin’s *Day of the Oprichnik* («День опричника», 2006), these authors became leaders in producing absurdity and deconstructing the canon. Literary postmodernism, with its all-encompassing irony, fundamental rejection of any purpose whatsoever, and inclination toward “incomprehensibility,” engendered an aesthetic fatigue in readers. People want to make sense of life, and in so doing, they turn to their old traditions, which they invoke as useful tools for making sense of their new reality and as sources of inner strength. Claiming to be records of real people and real events, the Orthodox literary works offer Russian people a sense of positive meaning and hope among the tremendous social dislocation, cultural shock, and demoralization they have experienced.

As early as the nineteenth century, Russian literature served as an influential battleground for public, ideological, and social debate between progressive, revolutionary writers such as N. Chernyshevsky and N. Nekrasov, and conservatively-oriented authors such as N. Leskov or I. Goncharov; between the Westernizers such as I. Turgenev and A. Herzen and the Slavophile writers such as S. Aksakov and F. Dostoevsky. Twentieth-century Russian literature witnessed a war between writers who identified with Soviet power, such as, M. Gorky, V. Mayakovski, A. Fadeev, and F. Gladkov, and those labelled “anti-Soviet” or “non-Soviet,” including M. Bulgakov, B. Pasternak, M. Zoshenko, and M. Tsvetaeva. In post-communist Russia, the literary

“civil war” has been waged both on political and aesthetic grounds, with “patriots” such as V. Rasputin, A. Prokhanov, and V. Krupin on one side and “democrats” such as V. Erofeev, V. Sorokin, E. Popov, and T. Tolstaya on the other. It was in this literary landscape of the early 1990s, sadly lacking in harmony, that postmodernism, or the “other literature,” as Erofeev called it, as opposed to traditional realism, came to the foreground of public artistic life.

In *After the Future: the Paradoxes of Postmodernism and Russian Culture*, Russian-American Slavist M. Epstein has suggested a broader definition of Russian postmodernism that is part of a much larger historical formation, which he calls Russian “postmodernity.” He established that postmodernity is not just a phenomenon characteristic of late-capitalist and post-industrial Western societies. Russian postmodernism, including the Moscow Conceptualism and Sots-art of the 1970s and 1980s, having developed as a backlash against official socialist realism, is a product of Soviet cultural reality. While in the West, high technology constructed simulations of reality, an impressively grandiose simulacrum of the future was imposed on the Russians by the communist ideology that enslaved people with its totalitarian thinking mode, a mindset that was not erased after the collapse of the communist political system. Whereas many scholars would agree that in the West, postmodernism arose as a reaction to modernism, in the Russian context, the question of continuity between modernism and postmodernism is undergoing a long-running debate. For instance, in *Russian Postmodernist Fiction. Dialogue with Chaos* (1999), M. Lipovetsky argues for at least limited continuity between them, while in *Mapping Postcommunist Cultures: Russia and Ukraine in the Context of Globalization* (2007), V. Chernetsky insists that postmodernist discourse is an outgrowth of the post-Communist, post-Soviet space; and, as opposed to the cosmopolitanism of Epstein, Chernetsky tends to place more emphasis on local cultural conditions, calling for a more sensitive attitude “to the different

speeds as well as the mixed spaces of postmodern society.”<sup>xxxix</sup> In her article *Post-Soviet Russian Literature*, A. Latynina separates the conceptualist school and Sots-art from a narrowly defined postmodernist literature. While the former is politically committed, Latynina regards the latter as a rather depoliticized narrative that postmodernist practitioners have made into sheer play with styles. After the initial shock of “zero degree writing,” Russian readers gradually grew weary of the recurrent nihilism and relative lack of ideas. In addition, as a response to Soviet official art, Conceptual poetry and Sots-art could function only as long as the official art did. If the latter disappeared, no one would understand or care what those conceptualist poets were making fun of in their verses.

By the end of the 1990s, Russian readers increasingly believed that postmodernist literature had gone out of fashion, as was their faith in liberal democracy. On the other hand, nationalists and supporters of the ‘back-to-the-soil’ movement with serious interest in the Russian Orthodox Church began to gain ascendance in journals such as *Our Contemporary* («Наш современник»), *Moscow* («Москва»), and *Young Guard* («Молодая гвардия»). Orthodox novels seemed to offer a new perspective and a socially unifying ideology. After 70 years of atheism, the ordinary Russian people may have known little or nothing of Christian theology, but the warm and non-judgmental Orthodox stories gave them a sense of healing and peace that readers had missed, although most professional critics completely ignored works appearing in these periodicals.

The widespread popular ideology of mainline Orthodox Christianity of the ROC as the inseparable backbone of Russian national identity shapes the narratives of Orthodox authors and is transmitted in order to shape the reader’s experience. However, the equation of Russia with Orthodoxy tends to reduce the representation of Christianity to a cultural identity. In this study, the Orthodox bestsellers will be examined in the dimension of secular popular literature and

Orthodox “subculture,” coexisting and competing with other cultural and ideological discourses of contemporary Russia. I will attempt to show how contemporary Russian writers have used Orthodoxy as a means of exploring and reinventing new forms of post-communist identity.

In choosing the works to discuss, I had to be selective rather than exhaustive. It is impossible to discuss the vast number of novels that could be included. Moreover, my analysis of this fiction cannot be comprehensive. This study examines the individual works from a specific vantage point, reading the publishing boom as a secular phenomenon, and my discussion is focused and conditioned by the scope and substance of this study. Literature no longer possesses the same dominance it enjoyed in the former USSR, and respect for “high culture” as a whole has significantly declined (Rosalind). The study also discusses other forms of popular culture, such as popular films, in addition to print literature.

## **Methodology**

Literary scholars in post-Soviet Russia have generally avoided the sociopolitical or philosophical debates that literary works have engendered, devoting more attention to detailed textual analysis and theoretical examinations of literary trends; meanwhile, the majority of historians and social scientists have tended to concentrate on the political and historical implications of Russian culture to the exclusion of aesthetic considerations. My study will attempt to combine these two approaches. The theoretical premise of this project is New Historicism, as interpreted by prominent Russian-British critic A. Etkind. The New Historicism, a controversial approach that had its origins in Renaissance Studies, is gaining a certain popularity in Russian Studies. In his article *New Historicism, Russian Version*, published in the Russian literary journal *Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie* as part of a discussion on Russian New Historicism, Etkind described the general atmosphere from which New Historicism emerged as a prevalent distrust of any “grand

history” or “privileged” viewpoints.<sup>x1</sup> New Historicism closely examines all textual traces of the past: “sub-literary” texts and uninspired non-literary texts all come to be read as documents of historical discourse, side-by-side with “highbrow” literature. Under this framework, contemporary Orthodox literature, reinterpreting Soviet as well as pre- and post-Soviet history from its own religious vantage point, represents a legitimate stream of the multi-jet historical discourses. Even though many critics tend to disparage it, it is productive to study the “religious sub-culture” in order to gain a fuller picture of contemporary Russian public consciousness and the post-Soviet cultural milieu.

The post-Soviet cultural space is characterized by a multiplicity of constantly and rapidly changing patterns, like a kaleidoscope. Since the late 1980s, when the party tutelage was largely removed, waves of formerly banned or disapproved works of diverse content and styles, and from different times dating back to the 1920s, were first published in Russia. Russian New Historicism, attempting not only to understand a literary work within its historical context but also to reflect on the historical context on the basis of the literary work, offers a tool for detailed readings of this heterogeneous terrain, generating a corrective to the tendency to regard post-Soviet culture as monolithic.

A. Etkind defines the capacity of New Historicism with a focus not so much on the history of events as on the relationship between people and texts:

Its methodology combines three components: an intertextual analysis, which opens the text boundaries, linking it with a variety of other texts, its predecessors and successors; discourse analysis, which opens the boundaries of the genre, reconstructing the past as a multi-jet stream of texts; and finally, biographical analysis,

which opens the limits of life, linking it with discourses and texts,  
among which it passes, and which it produces.<sup>xli</sup>

Therefore, one of the goals of New Historicism is the penetration and negotiation of boundaries: between text and non-text, literature and non-literature, and generally between genres, disciplines, and cultural institutions: “The purpose of the new understanding of events, people and texts lies in their recontextualization, as a conscious antithesis of deconstruction.” New Historicism allows direct comparisons between the ideas of the author and his/her life, and between the theories and cultural practices of the era, which generates an in-depth reading of both the text and context. Reading against the background of history puts the text in context and reinterprets the historical moment in the light of a literary text. Instead of deconstruction, New Historicism seeks in the text, not logical contradictions, but the incarnation of situational problems of the author and his/her times. In the case of Orthodox bestsellers, their popularity is linked not so much with their artistic merits as with the receptive characteristics of the readership, which is shaped by the specific post-Soviet cultural reality. Orthodox bestsellers grew out of the phenomenon of post-Soviet mass conversion: therefore, one of their major functions is to offer a guideline to formerly atheist Soviet citizens on how to begin the path to the Orthodox faith, how to behave properly in church and in the monastery, and how it would feel to be a novice believer or to be the wife of a priest. Subsequently, Orthodox bestsellers require not so much traditional “close” readings as “distant,” extratextual and interdisciplinary readings. In studying a religious narrative, New Historicism may connect the interests of different disciplines; not just theology, but also psychoanalysis and even Marxism. According to Etkind: “This is how New Historicism differs from its distinguished predecessors, such as the Russian Formalist School, French Structuralism



or the American New Criticism, for all of which the focal point was the aesthetic merit, its literary originality. The analysis should show what makes poetry - poetry.”

The notion of discourse as a kind of collective action in the spiritual realm entailed the corresponding idea of the “death of the author” in French Structuralism. Russian New Historicism, according to Etkind, rehabilitates the old individualistic concept of the author so that his/her biography, psychological inclination, political disposition, and particulars of his/her life become valid tools in the research of his/her literary legacy. Etkind also retains the “realistic idea” of how life is reflected in the texts and the “romantic idea” of how text is able to affect life, describing the reifying power of representations as energy. Once included in discourse, text can become an agent of history. As Irina Paperno demonstrates in *Chernyshevsky and the Age of Realism: A Study in the Semiotics of Behavior*, which examines how readers changed their real lives after reading the text of *What is to Be Done?* («Что делать?»), Chernyshevsky’s narrative was not a historical discovery but rather a speech act, which produced historical consequences rather than described them. The author maintains that a text can enact changes in real life, when it “combines the three properties: the special property of the author (let’s call it authoritativity), a special property of the reader (let’s call it sensitivity), and the special property of the text (we will continue to call it performativity)” (Paperno). This is what defines the success of a literary bestseller, and this formula will serve as a guideline in analyzing the mechanism behind the phenomenon of “Orthodox bestsellers”; the performative power of intellectual narratives is predictably higher in situations of national crises and nationalist awakenings, such as in the current cultural landscape in Russia.

From my point of view, the Russian version of New Historicism presents an attempt to moderate the rather radical nihilistic tendency of Russian postmodernism, rehabilitating some of the old

categories of Russian realism. Self-conscious about contemporary ideological frays, Etkind calls for a return to historical material, to details, and “a resort to common sense.” Nevertheless, Russian New Historicism admits the critic’s bias: like the works they examine, critics are also influenced by their historical context:

Every generation has its own history; but it continues to read old books, though, doing it in a new way. In this sense, the history goes on – all in the same new readings, which are themselves becoming part of the history. There is no privileged perspective, which would be located outside of history and wouldn’t have its own history, although such perspective was claimed by many, beginning from the author of the Apocalypse. (Эткинд)

In general, New Historicist theory opens up a broad space outside the text. It closely connects text with its historical context, facilitating a deeper insight into the contemporary cultural process, which is essential in analyzing a literary bestseller. It also leaves ample room for literary researchers to navigate the area of sub-culture, or “mass culture,” that has been traditionally despised by critics. This is especially helpful for the newly emerging post-Soviet mass culture, a phenomenon whose paradigms need to be studied. On the other hand, New Historicism allows a reserved approach to the ideological claims of mainstream Orthodox literature, revealing the conflicts within and behind various discourses. That said, literature should not be reduced to a footnote of history; therefore, this study attends to the Orthodox novel as an art form. My departure point will be a literary analysis of what is actually being said in the text, and what linguistic features and devices are used in service of the main idea. Only after that comes the question of cultural effect, of how the text is received by critics and readers. The reception of

text by its readership is an essential part of this project, and for this study, online reviews of Orthodox bestsellers are specific examples.

## **Thesis Outline**

### **I. Introduction**

This study begins by sketching out the cultural context of contemporary Russian literature and the general place the Russian Orthodox Church occupies today. A general review of the history of the intertwined relationship between Christianity and Russian literary canons from early medieval time till the end of the nineteenth century is intended to explain the cultural background of today's incredible sales of Orthodox bestsellers. Analytical review of the works of a series of bestselling prize-winning contemporary Orthodox writers facilitates a fuller vision of today's Orthodox book market as a whole, throwing light on the mechanism of sales success and its significance in reflecting contemporary Russian culture. This section also outlines my theoretical framework.

### **II. Chapter 1. *Father Arseny*: A Soviet Samizdat Hagiography**

This opening chapter treats what has been viewed as the most influential Orthodox novel from the Soviet Samizdat era: *Father Arseny*. Based on classic studies of Russian hagiographic traditions, I examine the hidden medieval hagiographic themes and imagery in the novel's portrayal of its main character as a modern saint, suggesting a new perspective on Soviet samizdat camp prose. The second half of the chapter interprets the stories told by Fr. Arseny's spiritual children, paying particular attention to the ongoing accumulative feature of the book, analyzing and categorizing them into groups.

### **III. Chapter 2. *Everyday Saints and Other Stories*: A Bishop's In-churching Effort**

Chapter 2 examines Bishop Tikhon's conception of Orthodoxy as the root of Russian culture in his *Everyday Saints and Other Stories* which marked the height of post-Soviet Orthodox fiction, revealing the work's intertwined nationalist and in-churching agendas. It proposes a comprehensive analysis of the narrator's image, as the Christian ideal of humility, a crucial component of Russian religiosity, is most successfully revealed through the narrator's self-portrait. It further argues against the apocalyptic discourse promoted in the author's controversial documentary film *The Fall of an Empire - The Lesson of Byzantium*. This chapter features the most extensive discussion of reception in this project, examining critics' polarized reactions to Fr. Tikhon's view of a future Orthodox Russia.

#### IV. Chapter 3. *Notes of a Priest's Wife*: A Materialist Account of Everyday Parish Life

Chapter 3 includes a discussion of a priest's wife's confrontation with the patriarchal and conservative views of a *matushka's* gender roles. It offers a comparison of the nineteenth-century naturalistic sketches of the life of Russian clergy and Sysoeva's 2008 bestseller, exploring her continuation of the literary tradition and her contestation over the stereotypical image of parish priests, placing her writing within the larger ideological debate of the new image of the Orthodox Church.

#### V. Conclusion

This section summarizes the findings of this study and identifies possible directions for future research.

## Chapter 1. *Father Arseny*: A Soviet Samizdat Hagiography

A study of contemporary Russian Orthodox literature cannot avoid the well-known novel *Father Arseny*. The spiritual strength of its main character has deeply moved and inspired millions of readers. The novel first appeared in the mid-1970s in Soviet Samizdat, a phenomenon that is understandable only in its sociohistorical context. Samizdat literally means “self-published” or “underground press,” and refers to the uncensored publications that accompanied the Soviet dissident movement of the post-Stalin period. According to M. Meerson-Aksenov, samizdat arose in the mid-1960s, at the end of the Khrushchev era, as an independent subculture in the form of free creativity parallel to the activity within the framework of the system’s official culture.<sup>xlii</sup> The dissident movement and samizdat are two sides of the same process: the awakening of the consciousness of Soviet society. Literary samizdat attempted to “express the existential aspect of Soviet man, opening before him a multi-storied world of the “Soviet soul” in place of which, in the environment of an official culture of socialist realism, he had only an ideological construction of that world.”<sup>xliii</sup> V. Dolinin and D. Severyukhin have noted the liberal, Western orientation of the movement: “Unofficial and very liberal culture was based on the idea that it was a part of World Culture. The liberal artists and writers extended their loyalties into the whole World, being involved in the global cultural process.”<sup>xliv</sup> However, it is important to be cautious of mistakenly assuming that all samizdat publications were liberal and Western-oriented. Religious samizdat involved a broad variety of free social and theoretical thought ranging from the liberal ecumenism of the religious dissidents such as Fr. Yakunin to the conservative patriotic nationalism loyal to the official Church under the Soviet regime.

The original Russian text of the novel *Father Arseny* was first published in 1993 by St. Tikhon’s Orthodox Theological University (then Institute) in Moscow. Since then, the book has been

republished repeatedly. The first edition of the book contained three parts and was supposedly a collection of memoirs about the spiritual father, written by his spiritual children and compiled by an anonymous spiritual follower. The compiler calls himself “the servant of God Alexander.” The chief editor of this publication, Fr. Vladimir Vorobiov, is a well-known Moscow archpriest and rector of St. Tikhon Orthodox University. He wrote the foreword for the first edition of the novel, in which he states that the text belongs to an unknown compiler and places particular emphasis on the authenticity of the people and events described in the book. The foreword to the first edition of the novel reads:

«Отец Арсений»—это сборник литературно обработанных свидетельств очевидцев о жизни современного исповедника—их духовного отца, а также их рассказы о своей жизни. Подлинность описываемых событий (отчасти скрытых именными именами и названиями) не вызывает сомнений... Еще в самиздатской машинописи замечательная книга широко распространилась и произвела сильнейшее воздействие на большой круг читателей.

*Father Arseny* – a collection of literarily treated accounts by eye-witnesses of the life of a modern Russian holy confessor – their spiritual father, and their stories about their lives). The authenticity of the described events (partly concealed by the changes in names and titles) is beyond doubt... Even in its samizdat typewritten version, the remarkable book spread widely and exerted strong impact on a large circle of readers.

The next two parts of the novel were compiled by Vladimir Vladimirovich Bykov, a late parishioner of the Mechev Orthodox community in Moscow who claimed to know Fr. Arseny personally. According to the Foreword to the fourth edition of the book, in response to the rising doubts of Fr. Arseny's authenticity, V.V. Bykov provided its publisher, the St. Tikhon Orthodox University, with unpublished materials about Fr. Arseny that he had had then. They were included in the third edition of 1998 as the novel's fourth part, "The Path to Faith." Afterwards, Bykov took the initiative to collect even more stories from his acquaintances, which were added to the fourth edition of the book in 2000 as its fifth part, "Love Your Neighbour."

To defend the veracity and historical reliability of Fr. Arseny and his community, the "Foreword to the 4<sup>th</sup> edition" engages in polemics with critics who expressed scepticism:

Но нашлись и скептики, заявившие даже в печати, что книга "Отец Арсений" – роман, главный герой которого является собирательным образом, а рассказы, из которых он состоит, – художественный вымысел. Эти попущенные Промыслом Божиим сомнения побудили человека, лично знавшего отца Арсения, Владимира Владимировича Быкова, написать свои воспоминания, помещенные в настоящем издании в качестве Послесловия.

...there were skeptics who even stated in the press that the book *Father Arseny* is a fiction whose main character is a composite image, and the stories, of which it consists, are fabrication. These doubts, released by God's Providence, prompted a man who personally knew Fr. Arseny, Vladimir Vladimirovich Bykov, to

write down his memory, which is placed in this publication as the Afterword.

The “Foreword” also admits that due to the strict confidence in which information about the religious community was held under the Soviet regime, its secret has not been completely unearthed:

Нас не должна удивлять такая искусная и строгая конспирация — в новых воспоминаниях рассказывается, как жила духовная община отца Арсения в годы гонений и в последний период его жизни в Ростове Великом, как училась беречь свою тайну. Эта тайна и теперь еще не полностью открылась — мы не знаем подлинного мирского имени отца Арсения, не нашли названия храма, где он служил в Москве. Но мы благодарим Бога за благодатный дар приобщения к великому пастырскому подвигу замечательного старца и дивного чудотворца, столь близкого к нам по времени.

We should not be surprised by such skillful and strict conspiracy — new memories tell us how the spiritual community of Father Arseny lived during the years of persecution and during the last period of his life in Rostov the Great, how it learned to guard its secret. This mystery is still not fully revealed, as we do not know the real name of Father Arseny, nor did we find the name of the Moscow church where he served. But we thank God for the



gracious gift of sharing the great pastoral feat of a remarkable elder  
and wonderful miracle-worker, who was so close to us in time.

The book has been reprinted fourteen times by St. Tikhon Orthodox University and since 1998 has been published regularly once a year by the Sretensky Monastery. The novel is presently comprised of five parts, though the first three parts are the best known. Its full version is also available as an audio book, and it also inspired the Russian singer Aleksandr Marshal to record an album of the same title, released in 2003 with the blessing of Patriarch Aleksii II.<sup>xliv</sup>

The stories in the novel describe a Russian priest, Arseny, through the eyes of many who knew him, both during his years in Stalin's labour camp, and in the town of Rostov where he later lived. It has a roughly forward-moving narrative, with a loose chronology between chapters and volumes. The characters in the first volume witness a huge influx of new prisoners during the peak of Stalin's Terror and its subsequent decline when the camp territories shrank rapidly following the dictator's death. Some of the stories in the last volume take place in the 1990s. It is noteworthy that new stories are being added after the last (fifth) volume is concluded, so that the novel is becoming a living and ever-growing narrative body.

The book has been published numerous times internationally and was translated in a number of languages. In addition to English, the book has also been translated into Greek, Bulgarian, French, Spanish, Romanian, and Latvian.<sup>xlvi</sup> It has become one of the most loved works in the Orthodox world. Its English translation was published by the largest Orthodox publisher in the United States, St. Vladimir's Seminary Press. Vera Bouteneff, the novel's English translator, is a descent of an aristocratic Russian family, the Trubetskoys. The English translation of the novel *Father Arseny* comes in two volumes:

- 1) *Father Arseny, 1893-1973: Priest, Prisoner, Spiritual Father*. St. Vladimirs Seminary Press (1998). This volume contains the first three parts that were compiled by the “servant of God Alexander.”
- 2) *Father Arseny: A Cloud of Witnesses*. St. Vladimirs Seminary Press (2001). This volume includes only the fifth part of the expanded Russian text. Therefore, the fourth part of *Fr. Arseny* is not yet available in English.

The publication of *Father Arseny* was an important event in the Orthodox Church circles outside Russia. Response from readers has been extensive: many articles, blogs, and forum discussions about the books are accessible online. The *Los Angeles Times* called the books “a spiritual treasure” for Orthodox Americans: “Fr. Arseny’s radical compassion and humility embody the distinctive flavor of Orthodox spirituality, and as such his story struck an immediate chord.”<sup>xlvi</sup> Xenia Dennen, the Director of the Keston Institute, points out that the book is a powerful witness to the Christian faith that survived the onslaught of Soviet anti-religious propaganda: “The stories of Fr. Arseny ... are life itself; they are the living source that gives you the strength to believe... this is the effect of Fr. Arseny in this book as in life.”<sup>xlvi</sup>

#### Authenticity of the Main Protagonist

The most important reason that triggered “real Fr. Arseny exploration” was that the book was originally presented, not as a work of fiction, but as a collection of memories about a real person. The reader is given only a few details about Fr. Arseny’s life that can be historically contextualized: the reader learns that Fr. Arseny’s original name was Piotr Andreevich Streltsov, he was born in Moscow in 1894 and graduated from the philological department of the Imperial Moscow University in 1916; he published a series of studies on Old Russian culture and was known for his solid knowledge of ancient church architecture. He became a novice at the Optina

Pustyn Monastery in 1917 and was ordained a hieromonk priest in 1919. In the early 1920s, he served in a church in Moscow and set up a flourishing secret community with dozens becoming his spiritual children. He was first arrested in 1927 and deported to the Russian North. His second arrest was in 1931, after which he lived in exile in the North for five years. In 1939, during the Great Terror, he was arrested for a third time and imprisoned in a labour camp somewhere in the Ural region, as emphasized several times in the novel. Only in 1958, after having spent twenty years in the camp, was he released after being granted amnesty. When his followers learned of his release, they started to come to him from all over the country for spiritual nourishment. He asked them to write memoirs, or to talk about their courses of life. In this way, he expanded his ministry of spiritual direction to all areas of the Soviet Union from his small room in Rostov. He died in 1975, though the second edition claims he died in 1973.

The texts of this “literarily treated historical account” (V. Vorobiov, “Foreword”) take up more than 700 pages, with dozens of names involved. The book is also illustrated with many historic photos, including those of Patriarch Tikhon, Metropolitan Peter (Polyansky), other bishops and priests, martyrs for the Orthodox faith, places of life and execution of thousands of Orthodox, as well as views of Moscow and the Moscow region, and photos of Rostov churches. However, there are no photos of Fr. Arseny, nor of the dozens of his secret community members, even though their narratives play an important role in the plot development of the book. It is on the basis of their memoirs, oral and written testimonies, allegedly stored in archives somewhere, that the book was compiled. Even though the compiler of the work, archpriest Vladimir Vorobiev, insisted it was based on genuine historical evidence, meticulous biographical explorations conducted by Katya Tolstaya and Peter Versteeg have shown that the character did not exist.<sup>xlix</sup> The most vocal opponent of Fr. Arseny’s authenticity, however, is Fr. Yakov Krotov. Fr. Yakov

was once a liberal Russian Orthodox priest and a dedicated follower of the Soviet religious dissident Fr. Alexander Men'. His ecumenical tendency and high-profile accusations of violation of freedom and human dignity within the Church contributed to the long-standing tension between him and the Moscow Patriarchate, which subsequently played a significant role in his leaving the Russian Orthodox Church and becoming a priest of the Ukrainian Autocephalous Orthodox Church in 2007. In 1997, Krotov created a website, "Library of Yakov Krotov," on which he posted essays on the history of Christian faith, as well as other historical, theological, and bibliographical materials on history and religion. In his essay "1980s: The Operation of 'Father Arseny Streltsov,'" which was posted on the website around 2000, Krotov noted a number of internal contradictions in Fr. Arseny's biographical data; for example, a graduate of Moscow State University in 1916 could not have had time to become "an author of several well-known monographs on Old Russian art – as the novel claimed, 'a famous art historian, author of many books and articles, teacher of many, a famous professor' — in just one year (up to his vows in 1917)."<sup>1</sup> Krotov also questioned the writing style, which is more uniform than a collection of memoirs by different authors of different educational levels would suggest: "This style is peculiarly direct and straightforward, embedded with bureaucratism, such as the sentence supposedly from the mouth of the 'famous art historian': 'Orthodoxy had the decisive influence on Russian culture from the tenth to the eighteenth centuries.'"<sup>li</sup> In addition, Krotov asserts that biographical information of Fr. Arseny could be easily verified even in the 1970s or 1980s, before perestroika.

In his 2003 article "Hackwork on Spilled Blood," Soviet dissident and Russian church historian Pavel Grigorievich Protsenko expressed similar scepticism. He called the book apocryphal and noted that it was unlikely that Fr. Arseny's grave would not have been preserved, given the large

number of his spiritual children who have left memoirs and the fact that he died as a free man in the post-Stalin era. He further elaborated that if Fr. Arseny were a well-known scholar as the book claimed, and had served in a Moscow church until his arrest, then verifying his real name would not be a difficult task, but these details did not withstand verification. Not a single person with a similar biography was found among the graduates of Moscow State University, nor among the monks of Optina Pustyn monastery.<sup>lii</sup>

Dr. Bouteneff, son of the English translator of the book, on the other hand, believed that in the Soviet context it was possible for a real person to be completely erased. He argued that because a considerable number of persons were erased from Soviet history, it would be feasible to imagine that books and articles by Fr. Arseny had ceased to exist, along with any records of himself as a person.<sup>liii</sup>

Another supporter of Fr. Arseny's authenticity, American author Frederica Mathewes-Green, who is Orthodox by faith, sees the book's simple narrative style as an advantage and as evidence of its credibility: "*Father Arseny* and *A Cloud of Witnesses*, which were written by many different people of different educational levels, preserve a winning directness. Those who would like to know more about Orthodox Christian spirituality can see it enacted in these books, worked out in human lives rather than in theory."<sup>liv</sup>

These arguments are convincing, but in an online browse through the forums of readers' reviews, the first 20 items to appear in the online search for "Father Arseny" (See list of review forums in Appendix-1) suggest that the fact of Fr. Arseny's historical reliability seems to have little actual significance for most readers, and it is the spiritual insights provided in the book that are amazing and beneficial to read. Readers are greatly impressed by the image of the main character and they "stubbornly" viewed him as a new-era Russian starets and their role model: "I'd say it

[the book] is one of the biographies of great men... Fr. Arseny is the spiritual father and mentor for many Orthodox people,”<sup>lv</sup> one reader posts, while another notes, “I was struck by Fr. Arseny’s resistance and his firm belief under the harsh conditions.”<sup>lvi</sup> Still another has said, “The hero of the book is an example of firm and unwavering faith, courage, patience, humility, and compassion for others,”<sup>lvii</sup> while another one comments, “The book strengthens the Orthodox faith, teaches kindness, and helps to form the right attitude to the people around. The controversy over Fr. Arseny’s alleged ‘composite’ image and the rumor that he was not a real person doesn’t worry me. People who are like him, although maybe not entirely, can be found in our time. Events of the past are described realistically, that’s beyond any doubt.”<sup>lviii</sup> This study reads the work within the context of the hagiographical tradition.

### Genre Specificity

Fr. Arseny’s own life story covers the first two volumes. Chronologically, the first volume describes his life in the corrective labour camp and concludes with his release during the Khrushchev era, after Stalin’s death. The second volume begins with Fr. Arseny settling down in Nadezhda Petrovna’s house. Nadezhda Petrovna, as presented in the novel, is a former political prisoner who lived alone in the small town of Rostov. In her house, Fr. Arseny gathered the Orthodox community, taking confessions of his spiritual children whose own voices appeared and whose memories formed chapters of the volume. The compiler Alexander carefully integrated material from various sources to produce a holistic account of Fr. Arseny’s life and influence. He obviously attempted to model his text on saints’ lives, one of the most stable and traditional genres of Old Rus’ian and Russian literature.

Christian hagiography was developed in Byzantium around the fourth century, at which time there were three main types of catalogs of Lives of Christian saints:

1. menaion (which means “monthly” in Greek): annual calendar catalog of biographies of the saints that were to be read at sermons;
2. synaxarion (originally meaning “to bring together”): a compilation of rather brief lives of the saints, arranged by dates;
3. paterikon (“that of the Fathers”; in Greek and Latin, *pater* means “father”): biography of the specific saints, chosen by the catalog compiler.

The monuments of Byzantine hagiography were translated and subsequently served as models for original Russian saints’ lives. Margaret Ziolkowski has stated in *Hagiography and Modern Russian Literature* that “of the various types of religious literature, saint’s lives easily came to exert the most broadly based appeal, largely because of the dramatic excitement their often fanciful narratives had to offer”;<sup>lix</sup> she further points out that Russian writers throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries exploited hagiographical literature in various ways, applying hagiographic techniques to contemporary characters and situations. The major collections of saints’ lives available to nineteenth-century Russian readers were the *Prolog* («Пролог»), and the *Great Menaion Reader* («Великие Четъи-Минеи»), which are still the most popular hagiographical texts among Orthodox believers today.

A typical full-length saint’s life consists of several sections: the exordium, in which the author introduces himself and his hero; the biographical section that constitutes the main body of the life; and the conclusion, which contains a description of the saint’s posthumous miracles. The biographical section usually begins with a description of the saint’s pious childhood, then follows his adult life which is marked by various edifying episodes that demonstrate his ascetic

feats, miracles, or service to the community, and ends with an account of the saint's death, which he usually foretells to his disciples. If Fr. Arseny's spiritual children, or the book's authors, wanted to transform him into a saint, they would need to write their memoirs in the code of hagiography, calling upon the set of notions connected with the genre.

The collections of memoirs about Fr. Arseny do not contain any works patterned on the full-length saint's life; however, many of the stories do resemble the structure of a life's biographical section in which a series of short episodes are included. Those individual events included in the book function as evidence of the greatness of Fr. Arseny's exceptional character. Portraying him as an idealized figure, the book provides to the reader a model, whom the reader should strive to imitate. Many episodes start with the words "one day", or "on another occasion" and go on to describe the significant event, just like the way how St. Sergius' life stories usually begin in the *Life of St. Sergius* which is still one of the most popular and well-known saint's Life in Russia.

In her essay "*De Histoliis Sanctorum*": *A Generic Study of Hagiography*, Alexandra Olson underscores the difficulty of defining the genre of hagiography: "the differences are so great that one cannot make generalizations about what a 'typical' hagiographic work might be, although one can make broad statements about hagiography as a literary genre. The definition found in a standard modern dictionary, "biography of saints" is inadequate, because not all hagiographic narratives are full biographies...Hagiography is a curious amorphous genre which may be defined only by subject matter, not by form or style."<sup>lx</sup> She offers her own definition of a hagiographical work as "an account in either verse or prose which describes the lives, or incidents therefrom, death or miracles of saints....the accounts all have some underlying polemics."<sup>lxi</sup>



Ziolkowski agrees with Olson's definition, refusing to define hagiography narrowly. She emphasizes that hagiographic works are not limited to full biographies; in fact, such biographies constitute only a subgenre. Under this theoretical framework, the texts of *Father Arseny* fit well into the genre of hagiography. The work has a patchwork quality, which makes it structurally resemble ancient hagiographical work. Not only do the explicit sources shift clearly from chapter to chapter, but the subject matter also changes. For example, a story about Fr. Arseny's prophetic ability may be put next to a chapter elaborating upon religious or philosophical thoughts that are completely irrelevant to Fr. Arseny. Despite the work's composite style, the integration of sources reflects a clear narrative rationale, because the disparate texts are connected by the shared spiritual legacy of Fr. Arseny's community. Occasionally, different sources from which a chapter is drawn can result in abrupt transition in the narrative perspective within chapters, as in the examples that follow.

The appended information at the end of the first chapter of the second volume, "*I Remember*", indicates that the work consists of "Воспоминания написаны Т.П. на основе рассказа о. Арсения и его духовных детей" [Memoirs written by T.P. based on narration of Fr. Arseny and his spiritual children]. T.P., a stand-alone entity, is the narrator, and Fr. Arseny and his landlady Nadezhda Petrovna are addressed in this chapter as "he" and "she." However, pages of uninterrupted memory, thoughts, and inner feelings articulated in a first-person narrative by Nadezhda Petrovna herself constitute the main body of the second half of the chapter, suggesting that Nadezhda Petrovna has become the narrator. Towards the end of the chapter, T.P.'s perspective appears again and Nadezhda Petrovna's story is seen as having happened in the past.

As Janet M. Wehrle demonstrated in her study of the Life of Fr Alexander Men,<sup>lxii</sup> a hagiographical text is coded to establish contact with the reader and cause him/her to enter into

dialogue with traditional saints' lives. Once the reader recognizes the book *Father Arseny* as a piece of hagiographical literature, he/she will expect the hero, Fr. Arseny, to be a saint, and see his life as a confirmation of the truth of the principles of Christian doctrine. Many of the hallmarks of standard Orthodox vitae are present in the novel: accounts of the life of Fr. Arseny, his spiritual feats, miracles, and the legacy of the saintly confessor, drawn up after the death of the righteous; and the compiler's foreword is written in the style of hagiographical exordia, strictly following the genre conventions of reverence, acknowledgement of sources, justification for the work, and the rhetorical modesty that frequently characterized medieval Orthodox hagiographies.

Fr. Arseny is not a protagonist of a modern secular novel portrayed as a conflicted and contradictory person with individual traits or accidents in interactive development. He is depicted in a static manner: his personality does not change or evolve over time, and his most notable characteristic is his sanctity. He is primarily represented as a bearer of Christian virtues, a righteous, virtuous man, whose self-sacrifice moves sinners, washes away all sins, and brings salvation to others. Idealization is the main pattern of shaping his character. Most importantly, the author's purpose is to express his view of Fr. Arseny as a saint and to persuade readers to see him in the same way. Like a medieval saint, Fr. Arseny is presented not only as an intercessor between Christ and ordinary people, but also as an ethical model: the saint imitates Christ typologically and in turn provides a moral exemplar to those who read his story.

The saints honoured in Russian hagiography represented a variety of spiritual traditions that have characterized Russian Orthodoxy.<sup>lxiii</sup> The most relevant for the purpose of this study are listed below:

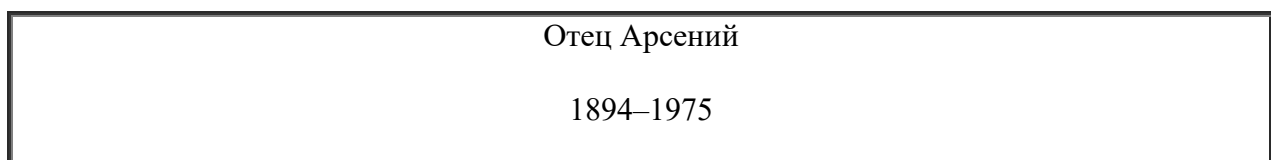
1. Kenoticism emerged in early medieval times and has been one of the primary motivating forces of Russian spirituality. The term refers to the imitation of Christ in his humility, revealing the holy man's "coming into this world" to join his followers, and the comfort of his presence among them. The representative of the ideal of kenoticism is Saint Theodosius of the eleventh century, who provided a pattern for monastic life that combined ascetic practices and service to the community.
2. Hesychasm is a late-medieval mystic current that originated from Mount Athos. Its basic principle "was the attempt to replace the ritual side of Christianity by the inner life,"<sup>lxiv</sup> which sought to approach God through contemplation and inward prayer. Sergius of Radonezh is the most important representative of this movement.
3. Starchestvo, or the institute of the elders (starets), is an important and characteristic part of religious life in contemporary Russia. The institution of starchestvo in its modern sense was introduced to Russian monastic life with the reforms of Paisii Velichkovsky in the eighteenth century. The famous elders of the Optina Monastery of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were archetypal representatives of the ideal startsy.

In his life as an Orthodox Christian and in his service as a priest, Fr. Arseny displayed various characteristics of each of the spiritual currents mentioned above, which are discussed further in the next chapter. When his memoirists describe his spirituality, they unavoidably associate Fr. Arseny with the saints of hagiographic literature. References in the memoirs to his kenotic qualities, which are observed in his sacrifice for and humble companionship with his fellow inmates, remind the reader of Saint Theodosius; similarly, Fr. Arseny's mysticism alludes to the *Life of St. Sergius*. As G.P. Fedotov states, St. Sergius is the first Russian saint in whom mysticism was observed. His biographer Epiphaniy did not observe the Hesychast contemplative

techniques in the Life, but he did describe typical Hesychast light-visions in which a shining angel was serving with Sergius in the liturgy,<sup>lxv</sup> which was very similar to the vision depicted in *Father Arseny*.

This said, one cannot help but notice that the text reads rather differently than medieval vitae of saints. It does not adhere to the narrative framework of a full-fledged, official saint's life, like that of St. Sergius's Vita written by Epifanij the Wise, which tells the story of a saint from his birth to his death and posthumous miracles. Fr. Arseny's family background information, youth, death, and posthumous miracles are not included. Whereas Old Russian hagiography often engaged in a "florid" style, the novel's language remains colloquial and simple, so that it is understandable to ordinary Soviet readers. Fr. Arseny's own biographical information is presented in a concise, statistic-like form and placed in a section called "Some Information about the Life of Father Arseny," which follows the "Foreword to the Fourth Edition" and "Foreword to the First Edition" and is separated from the main corpus of the text. This suggests that the biographical information was an interpolation inserted by the publisher, Saint Tikhon Theological University, and therefore was unlikely to be the author/authors' initial plan, but reveals the effort of the Moscow Patricarchate to promote Fr. Arseny as a real person. Tellingly, in order to convince the reader that Fr. Arseny did exist, the biographical section emphasizes the realistic detail of his grave site, placing a CGI rectangle emulating the appearance of the tombstone, instead of just describing it in words:

На могиле его был положен гранитный камень с надписью:



This passage of biographical information, along with the controversial tombstone that was erected by St. Tikhon University in Rostov after the novel's publication, were intended not only to produce a "reality effect," but also a "belief effect," in that it permitted the reader to more vividly imagine the man behind the character. These details imply that this novel was a work from life rather than from literature; therefore, the reader should categorize it not within the sphere of belles-lettres, but within that of Orthodox didactic.

In comparison, the first chapter of the modern *vita* dedicated to Fr. Maximilian Kolbe, a contemporary Polish Catholic priest who underwent the Nazi German concentration camp and died there as a martyr, is about the Kolbe family. Hagiographic conventions demand that the saint be born into a pious family and display saintly qualities from his early years, setting the stage for him to become a great spiritual figure in his adulthood. It is assumed that a saint is a special person who is chosen by God to do great things in the kingdom of God. Therefore, the young saint is usually shown as exceptionally pious, gifted, and different from other children. The reader learns from Fr. Maximilian's *Life* that the saint's parents "were poor, but rich in that refreshing faith which views hardships as a necessary means for gaining eternal life... As an adolescent, Maria Dabrowska [the saint's mother] prayed to the Lord with all the fervor of her young heart" to enter a convent, because she "longed for the religious life, so as to enjoy paradise, as she said, together with pure souls."<sup>lxvi</sup> The language is full of Christian imagery and conventional expressions. The first chapter of *Fr. Arseny*, when compared to this passage, conspicuously lacks such conventional hagiographical rhetoric and the formal, calm and deliberate tone. Fr. Arseny's life story (the first and second volumes) does not launch directly into its subject's genealogical background either; instead of descriptions of Fr. Arseny's paternal

and maternal genealogical lines, the author begins with a realistic description of the earthly picture of a Soviet labour camp:

...Вышки со стоящими на них прожекторами и часовыми уходили за горизонт. Струны колючей проволоки, натянутой между столбами, образовывали несколько заградительных рядов, между которыми лежали полосы ослепительного света от прожекторов. Между первым и последним рядами колючей проволоки лениво бродили сторожевые собаки.

Лучи прожекторов срывались с некоторых вышек и бросались на землю, скользили по ней, взбирались на крыши бараков, падали с них на землю и опять бежали по территории лагеря, окруженного проволокой...Солдаты с автоматами, стоя на вышках, беспрерывно просматривали пространство между рядами проволочных заграждений. Затишье длилось недолго, ветер опять внезапно срывался, и все снова ревело, гудело, выло, колючий снег заволакивал яркое пятно света, и темнота охватывала долину.

Towers with searchlights and guards could be seen on the horizon. Stretches of barbed wire created protective rows between which the icy glow of the menacing lights could be seen. Between the first and last rows of barbed wire police dogs roamed lazily.

The search light beams swept down from the towers onto the ground and slid slowly across snow, and then back to the barbed wire... Soldiers with automatic rifles standing on the towers were constantly watching the space between the rows of barbed wire. Yet it was never quiet. The wind would pick up again, blocking out the beams with snow, further darkening the misery of the barracks.

(5 “The Prison Camp”)

Hagiographical narrative traditions rarely offer a realistic depiction of the physical world that their audiences know firsthand. In the medieval saints’ lives, temporal and spatial characterization is symbolic and decontextualized, but in this work, they are real and concrete. The setting of the Soviet labour camp is depicted in great detail. The entire first chapter, “The Prison Camp,” is dedicated to a detailed and naturalistic description of the camp, typical of modern secular fiction. The first distinctly “realistic” hagiography in Early Modern Russian literature is the seventeenth-century vita by the archpriest Avvakum, which memorably recounts hardships of the hero/author’s imprisonment and exile to Siberia. The archpriest knew the canons of classical hagiography, but chose a different narrative style, combining the bookish hagiographical framework, conventionally full of theological reflections, with the lively, artistic techniques of oral stories. In *History of Russian Literature*, Dmitrij Tschizhewskij has demonstrated that the overall styles of the Lives changed over time, reflecting the literary trends of the period of time in which they were written.<sup>lxvii</sup> Therefore, hagiographical literature both encompasses the conventional, timeless features of the genre and incorporates the literary currents of its day.<sup>lxviii</sup> In this way, the book *Father Arseny* can be seen as a hagiography with modern features, for its style is consistent with the tastes of contemporary readers.

In the third chapter of the second volume “We Meet Again”, a classmate of Fr. Arseny’s describes his school years:

Мы были почти одногодки. Петр был старше меня на один год, учились в одной гимназии, но в разных классах. Знали друг друга, но подружились только в последних классах, однако потом пути наши разошлись. Он пошел в Московский Университет на искусствоведческий, а я в высшее техническое.

Был Петр всегда серьезен, добр, зачитывался книгами, любил искусство, театр, живопись, музыку, но я никогда не замечал его приверженности к религии. На несколько лет потерял его из вида и только после окончания мною МВТУ стороной услышал, что Петр досрочно окончил университет, написал книгу, являвшуюся результатом его исследований, каких, я тогда точно не знал, а еще через несколько лет мне сказали, будто он стал монахом и священником, что меня несказанно удивило.

Piotr and I were almost the same age. He was one year older; we went to the same school, but were in different classes. We were just acquaintances, becoming friends only in senior high school after which we each went our own way. He went to Moscow University to study art and I went into engineering.



Piotr was always a very serious and very good man; he read avidly, loved art, theatre, paintings and music, but I never noticed any inclination toward religion. I lost track of him for a few years, and only after I finished my studies did I find out that Piotr had graduated from University and written a book that was the result of his research. Then suddenly a few years later I was told that he had become a monk and priest, which utterly amazed me. (113, “We meet again”)

This passage does not give information on his religious formation in the way that traditional Lives did. Rather than being different from “average” students and chosen from birth, Fr. Arseny’s conversion was something of a surprise. If, in the Life of Fr. Maximilian Kolbe, the hagiographer draws attention to the boy’s “kindly appearance” and gentleness that “earned him the nickname ‘marmalade,’”<sup>lxix</sup> Fr. Arseny’s first appearance in the novel, which takes place only in the middle of the second chapter, emphasizes the mundane side of his image:

Отец Арсений, в прошлом Стрельцов Петр Андреевич, а сейчас «зек» – заключенный № 18376 – попал в этот лагерь полгода тому назад и за это время понял, как и все живущие здесь, что отсюда никогда не выйти. На спине, шапке и рукавах был нашит лагерный номер – 18376, что делало его похожим, как и всех заключенных, на «человека-рекламу».

Father Arseny, whose name had been Piotr Andreyevich Streltsov before his priesthood, had been assigned the title of “zek” (prisoner) № 18376. He had been sent to this camp six months ago and

understood that there was no hope for him to ever leave it. (6, “The Barracks”)

The narrator is omniscient, conveying the thoughts and feelings of the protagonist Fr. Arseny, in a distinctively modern narrative style, as the following passage exemplifies:

Мелькнула у о. Арсения мысль: шутку придумал Серый, знал его характер и помощи от него не ждал. «Бери, о. Арсений, бери, сколько надо». Стал о. Арсений собирать сушняк и думает: «Наберу, а он меня на потеху другим бить начнет и кричать: «Поп вор!», но тут же удивился, что назвал его Серый «отец Арсений». Прочел про себя молитву, крестное знамение мысленно положил и стал собирать сушняк.

Father Arseny had a thought that perhaps this was a joke. He knew Greybeard only too well and could not expect any help from him. “Take, Father Arseny, take what you need,” the criminal said. Father Arseny began to quickly gather some dry branches, all the time thinking, “I will take some kindling and he will shout that I am a thief.” And then he realized that the man had called him Father Arseny. He prayed silently, crossed himself in his mind, and began to gather the kindling. (8, “The Barracks”)

Although this passage does not contain the bold and sweeping perspectives seen in many nineteenth-century novels, such as Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, it allows a deeper revelation of the protagonist’s personality.

In *Father Arseny*, the word “podvig” (подвиг), which means “heroic deeds” and refers to Orthodox ascetic feats, appears many times.. Fr. Arseny’s ascetic achievements are different in nature from those of saints such as St. Sergius: Sergius was a hermit, and thus his podvig centered on ascetic exercises. For Fr. Arseny, living in the twentieth-century Soviet Union, his accomplishment lies in serving God through active engagement with the world and with the people who did not know Christ; thus, his podvig resembles that of St. Stephen of Perm, the dynamic missionary of the Medieval Russian Orthodox Church. Traditional hagiography was intended for a public seeking norms, since the readers accepted the dogma from the outset, and a coherent religious tradition linked the sacred past and the devotional present. Fr. Arseny’s spiritual feats, on the other hand, were not seen as norms; his exemplary ethical, moral practices went beyond broad contemporary expectations and were introduced to the reader as “new ideas” on how to live one’s life. In the beginning, Fr. Arseny’s prayer practice is seen through the uncomprehending eyes of the narrator (and the average reader) as something unusual and unfamiliar, because the social codes that inform their judgement and behaviour are different from Christian ones. Over the course of the story, the religious expressions become more elaborate and more committed; thus, the book is not solely a devotional work, but also seeks to bridge religious and secular discourses.

In his article *Hagiography and Imagination*, Lawrence S. Cunningham highlights the slow, yet constant growth of the hagiography, and the genre’s characteristics of absorption and accumulation of new materials over time: it is “a genre of writing in the Christian tradition which was to grow over the centuries into an unwieldy mass, the dimensions of which still resist total comprehension.”<sup>lxx</sup> A hagiographical work, like the Prolog, adding new translated and original

material, might be double the size of its Greek original.<sup>lxxi</sup> This tendency of a growing body of the texts is also observed in *Father Arseny*.

Fr. Arseny may well be a composite character. Critics have offered various names as possible prototypes of Fr. Arseny who were all prominent pre-revolutionary ecclesiastical figures, rather than any of the historical saints. It is not surprising that saints' lives do not, in general, represent the past in "historical" terms. Hagiographical texts often borrow events from earlier narratives or conflate different persons to create fictionalized ones. For example, the first hagiographer of Kyivan Rus', Nestor, incorporated sections from the *Life of Saint Euthymius* and the *Life of Saint Sabas* into his account of Saint Theodosius of the Kyivan Caves Monastery.<sup>lxxii</sup> In writing the life of a local monk, Rus'ian hagiographers sometimes copied and borrowed what had been said about a Byzantine monk of the same name.<sup>lxxiii</sup> However, in the context of hagiographical discourse, these were not considered as literary borrowings, but as evidence of God's plan to lead two or three saints through the same types of tests. Hagiographers only "uncovered" these connections. Similarly, in the overlapping of life episodes of the Soviet righteous man, the modern reader is meant to see the sign of the God's Providence.

Although the book of *Father Arseny* deviates from formal full-length hagiography in its traditional sense, the obvious similarities with traditional Russian saints' lives in structure and imagery cannot be attributed to mere coincidence. The memoirists hoped to present their spiritual father as a saint, and they attained this goal by incorporating hagiographic elements into their works. Witnessing is an integral element in the process of creating a saint. In summary, *Father Arseny* is a neo-hagiography of a modern saint with distinct contemporary features.

Fr. Arseny: A Saintly Figure

Fr. Arseny is presented as a new-era saint and a role model, although there is no official campaign by the Church to canonize him. The novel portrays the benevolent and compassionate ministry of Fr. Arseny in the heartless, inhuman prison which exploited the inmates' labour and hastened their death through overwork, starvation, beatings, and disease. As W.E. Fann has rightly noted, "All of this cruelty will be familiar to readers of other first-person accounts and official revelations of the routine atrocities of the Soviet era. What redeems the book and astonishes the reader is Father Arseny's response."<sup>lxxiv</sup> Through spiritual strength, personal virtue, and selfless perseverance, he surmounted persecution and barbaric imprisonment.

- *Starets*: A physician of the human soul

Fr. Arseny represents a typical Russian *starets*. The phenomenon of the spiritual elder or *starets* is related to the Christian notion of the call to perfection and the conviction that the human being can be transfigured by God's grace through ascetic practices. "Very early in Christian literature the one who gained such spiritual wisdom and maturity was referred to as an 'elder' or 'old man', which also became a technical term for an experienced monk regardless of physical age. The Russian term 'starets' reflects that evolution."<sup>lxxv</sup> The Norwegian scholar of Russian history Pål Kolstø points out that Orthodox theology emphasizes the need for authoritative and reliable guides to the spiritual life, because the path of self-denial is so fraught with difficulties and perils that anyone wishing to pursue it requires the support of someone who had gone before.<sup>lxxvi</sup> Typically, this task of spiritual direction fell to the monks, but only to those few who possessed the necessary spiritual gifts to function as wise old men, or as elders. Theologically, the institution of *starchestvo* was linked to the asceticism in monastic piety only. In the nineteenth century, with the rise of curiosity about native culture in general and Orthodox monasticism in particular, the institution of *starchestvo* was actively reworked by educated authors and

perceived as an ancient tradition that had always been present in Russian monasticism from early medieval times. One such example is Pushkin's tragedy in verse, *Boris Godunov* (1825) in which the monastery novice Grigorii, the future imposter of the play, was under the spiritual care of an aged monk-chronicler Pimen, "старец кроткий и смиренный." The wise and balanced Pimen embodies the very essence of genuine Orthodox Christianity: meekness and wisdom that trace back to the venerable Theodosius of the ancient Kievan Caves monastery, as Pushkin notes: "In him I brought together the traits that attracted me in the old chroniclers: their utter ingenuousness, their touching meekness ... their pious diligence in serving the tsar that God had granted them, and their complete lack of prejudice or concern for irrelevant minutiae."<sup>lxxvii</sup> In the second half of the nineteenth century, the influence of *starets* went beyond the monastery walls. The famous elders of the Optina Monastery, such as Makarii, Leonid, or Ambrose, functioned as spiritual teachers both to the novices and to the laity. People from all over Russia came to talk to them and seek advice from them. The first Optina intellectual, Russian philosopher Ivan Kireevsky, summarized the crucial role the elder played for many Russians: "More essential than all books and thoughts is to find an Orthodox starets to whom you can reveal each of your thoughts, and from whom you can hear not his own more or less reasonable opinion, but the judgment of the Church Fathers."<sup>lxxviii</sup> Dostoevsky further notes in *The Brothers Karamazov* that the *starets* is "the guardian of the God's truth in the eyes of the people" (*Brothers Karamazov*, chapter 5, Zosima). The elders (*starsy*) in residence at the monastery of Optina Pustyn attracted attention and visits by lay believers, and even skeptics, from all classes of society, including some of Russia's greatest writers and artists, such as Turgenev, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tchaikovsky, and later Solzhenitsyn, all of whom made pilgrimages to the famous elders. One of the central characters in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, starets Zosima, whose prototype is

generally believed to be St. Ambrose of the Optina Monastery, received people who came to him from far and near, looking for answers to their personal problems. Like starets Pimen, he represents the ideal of Russian religiosity; his focus is on a deep and full love for all creation, and he is presented as a mentor and comforter for suffering and sinful man. Dostoevsky is not interested in correlating the starets' teaching with official statements of the church establishment, nor does he refer much in his work to patristic literature, preferring instead to focus on anthropological and moral questions. He seeks to affirm love as the highest moral value in a scale of human virtues. In the late nineteenth century, *starchestvo* transferred from monastery culture to secular life.

In contemporary Russia, *startsy* are continuously in popular demand. People seek not only a mentor in matters of faith, but also someone who, through personal examples and actions, can inspire them to solve worldly problems. The concept of *starets* involves the principle of active love, the rejection of spiritual privilege, prophecy, and popular demand. Always close to the *narod* (the people), the elders are often venerated as living saints.

In the first volume of *Father Arseny*, Fr. Arseny's main character traits are his eager attentiveness and constant prayers, with the hellish labour camp as the Vale of Soul Making. He is invariably represented as a confessor who lives to help others rather than to lead an otherworldly hermitic life. His clandestine pastoral work in exile, in prison, and in the catacomb church are sources of inspiration, as he takes upon himself the burden of other people's troubles, helping in the way taught in the Gospel: "Bear on another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). He is responsible for the spiritual transformation of countless people, some of whom used to be cold-blooded criminals or devoted atheist communists. Many people who had lived alongside him in the camp died, but they would not leave the world angry or

desperate; instead, they were comforted, and their awful life in camp served as a means to bring them towards God:

Оказывая помощь человеку, о. Арсений не размышлял, кто этот человек и как он отнесется к его помощи. В данный момент он видел только человека, которому нужна помощь, и он помогал этому человеку.

Helping a person, Fr. Arseny did not think who this man was and how he would see his help. At the moment he saw only a person who needed help, and he would help this person. (“Hurry to Do Good”, Part 1)

...люди, несущие веру, и особенно пастыри душ человеческих, должны помогать и бороться за каждого человека до последних сил своих и последнего своего вздоха, и основой борьбы за душу являются любовь, добро и помощь ближнему своему, оказываемая не ради себя, а ради брата своего. (“O Mother of God! Do Not Abandon Them!”, Part 1)

[Fr. Arseny said,] ...the people who carried the faith, and especially the shepherds of human souls, must help fight for each person to the end of their own strength, until their last breath. The basis of the fight for a soul is love, kindness and helping your neighbour, help given not for one's own sake, but for the sake of one's brother. (40)



As a seer and confessor, Fr. Arseny would take up the sins of his spiritual children, giving them the feeling that their souls were enclosed in his soul. However, T. A. Smith notes that the office of the confessor does not exhaust the nature of the *starets*. While the *starets* performs many of the functions of the confessor and often hears the sins of the spiritual child, “there is a qualitative difference between these roles.”<sup>lxxix</sup> Humility and active love transformed Fr. Arseny into a Christlike figure who was ready to surrender himself for the sake of the other. Beginning with his release from the labour camp, when he settled down at Nadezhda Petrovna’s house, Fr. Arseny becomes more clearly an image of the *starets*, exhibiting features such as spiritual discernment, clairvoyance, and prophecy. Despite his physical infirmity, Fr. Arseny tirelessly served as elder for countless visitors and carried on a lively correspondence with his spiritual children:

Он отдавал самое лучшее, самое сокровенное тепло своей души, веру, опыт исповедания веры, учил молиться и разжигал в соприкасающемся с ним человеке искру Божественного. Кто из знающих его забудет дела, совершенные им? Сколько людей пришло к нему и унесло с собой все это, и сколько радости, умиротворения и спокойствия взяли мы у о. Арсения! (“I Remember”, Part 2)

He gave away what was most precious to him: the warmth of his soul, his faith, and his experience in living his faith. He taught us how to pray and transformed into fire the spark of God in each of us. How can anyone who knew him forget his deeds? So many

came to him and carried away with them all of this; so much joy and peace did we take from Father Arseny.

Я пережил все это сам, я видел, как на моих глазах перерождались, созидались и обновлялись души людей, и люди уходили верующими, унося с собой тепло, взятое у него. Вспоминая прошедшее и видя свое настоящее, я и сам начинал передавать людям Свет Веры, любовь и доброту, полученные от о. Арсения. (“I Remember”, Part 2)

I experienced all this myself. I saw it and I saw how people were changed, renewed, and strengthened. They left as believers and carried away with them the warmth they had taken from him. Remembering what had happened to me and seeing what I myself had become, I was able to pass on to others the light of faith, the love and goodness I had received from Fr. Arseny.

Духовных детей было много, и почти каждый приезжал два раза в год. .... Приезжали и уезжали друзья и духовные дети, унося с собою полученный запас сил, веры, желания помогать другим, желание быть лучше. (“I Remember”, Part 2)

The spiritual children of Father Arseny were numerous and each of them visited at least twice a year. ... People who came always carried away with them a reserve of strength, faith, and the desire to serve others and be better people themselves. (135-136)

Можно ли сосчитать дни и ночи, что он простоял за нас на молитве, и какой радостью для него было то, что он облегчил нам жизнь, утешил, отвел милостью Божией беду, наставил на путь веры. (“Letters: Excerpts from the Memoirs of O.S.”, Part 2)

You cannot count on the hours, the sleepless nights he spent praying for all of us. And what a joy it was for him that he alleviated our lives, comforted us, averted grieves with God’s mercy, led us to the path of faith. (120)

Fr. Arseny’s image of a *starets* bears some similarity to that in the *Life of St. Amvrosii* of Optina Pustyn:

Сколько людей перебивало здесь! И приходили сюда, обливаясь слезами скорби, а выходили со слезами радости; отчаянные утешенными и ободренными, неверующие и сомневающиеся верными чадами Церкви. Здесь жил «батюшка» – источник стольких благодеяний и утешений. Ни звание человека, ни состояние не имели никакого значения в его глазах. Ему нужна была только душа человека, которая настолько была дорога для него, что он, забывая себя, всеми силами старался спасти ее, поставить на истинный путь.

How many people have been here! And they came here bathed in tears of sorrow but left with tears of joy, the despairing went away comforted and encouraged; the unbelievers and doubters left as

faithful children of the Church. Here lived father – the source of so much blessing and comfort. Neither the title of a person nor his position meant anything in his eyes. He needed only a person’s soul, which was so precious to him that he, forgetting himself, tried with all his strength to save it and set it on the true path. <sup>lxxx</sup>

The portrayal of Fr. Arseny resembles the elders of Optina Pustyn, particularly St. Ambrose, in some other significant ways as well. He was able to predict events; for example, in the chapter “A Panikhida,” Fr. Arseny predicted the death of a friend before the telegram came.

The reader is given clear evidence of the elder’s spiritual insight: he has the ability to read a visitor’s heart and mind, and he can peer into the soul of his visitor and draw out at once the precise key to his visitor’s spiritual enlightenment. The gifts of wisdom and discernment enabled him to speak authoritatively and effectively to the personal problems disclosed to him by his visitors. Although his spiritual children would protest, the elder denied his giftedness and insisted that he was a sinner like all other human beings:

Когда он говорил, то ты сам отчетливо понимал, что он знает о тебе больше, чем ты сам. Он знал, что будет с тобой. Глаза его смотрели открыто, внимательно, ласково. Смотри в них, ты начинал черпать силы и спокойствие, а когда он говорил, голос его убеждал, и человек верил ему и убеждался потом, что он прав. (“I Remember”, Part 2)

When he spoke to you, you realized that he knew more about you than you did yourself. He knew what awaited you. His eyes were

attentive and gentle. Looking into his eyes, you acquired strength and peace. When he spoke, his voice was so convincing that you trusted him and just knew that he was right. (133)

В свои ответы о. Арсений вкладывал душу, он отрывал частицу ее и передавал человеку. Получая от него письмо, ты вдруг со страхом и удивлением узнавал о себе то, что еще еле-еле определилось в тебе, о чем ты никому и ничего не говорил, а только отрывочно думал и даже старался скрыть от самого себя, а даваемый им совет оказывался единственно правильным решением. ("Letters: Excerpts from the memoirs of O.S". Part 2)

In his answers Father Arseny would pour out his soul; he would tear out a piece of his soul and give it to the other... it happened sometimes that when you received a letter from him, you would suddenly realize something about yourself that you hadn't been aware of. You would be shocked and frightened to be made aware of something that hadn't been clear even to yourself; you hadn't talked to anyone about it or you had only sporadically thought about it, or sometimes you had tried to hide it from yourself. Suddenly his advice would appear to be the only right decision. (121)

The hagiographer also emphasized these qualities in St. Ambrose:

...Он всегда разом схватывал сущность дела, непостижимо мудро разъясняя его и давая ответ. Но в продолжение десяти-пятнадцати минут такой беседы решался не один вопрос: в это время преподобный вмещал в своем сердце всего человека – со всеми его привязанностями, желаниями – всем его миром внутренним и внешним.

He always grasped at once the essence of the matter, inconceivably wisely making an interpretation and giving an answer. But during the ten to fifteen minutes of such a conversation, not one question was solved: at this time the Reverend held in his heart the whole man – with all his affections, desires – his whole world, internal and external.<sup>lxxxix</sup>

Both St. Ambrose and Fr. Arseny were said to have a bent for creation:

Помню его слова: “Каждый человек что-то должен оставить в жизни: построенный своими руками дом, посаженное дерево, написанную книгу – и все это необходимо совершить не для себя, а для человека. Люди будут смотреть на возвращенное тобою дерево или сделанную вещь, и в эти минуты ты снова будешь жить, так как принесешь им радость, и, вспомнив тебя, они призовут Господне благословение. Неважно, что именно делаешь, важно – к чему ты прикасался, что меняло форму, становилось лучше, чем было раньше, чтобы в этом новом

оставалась частица тебя самого, и все совершалось бы во имя Господа и любви к людям.”

I remember his words: “Before dying, each person should leave something behind, must leave a trace of some kind. Be it a house built with his own hands, or a tree he has planted, or a book he has written – but whatever it is, it must have been done not for himself, but for other people. Whatever your hands have created will be the mark you leave after your death. People will look at what you have made, or at what you have planted and you will live again in bringing them joy, and they will remember you and ask the Lord to bless you. What you make is not the important thing, but what is important is that what you have finished becomes better than what it was before. It will contain a spark of yours, if you made it in the name of God and of love for others. (“I Remember” 132)

Созидающая деятельность у Амвросия была в крови. Он часто научал других предпринять какое-нибудь дело, и когда к нему приходили сами за благословением на подобную вещь частные люди, с горячностью принимался обсуждать и давать свои пояснения... и давал благословение, а с ним и веру в удачу самым смелым предприятиям.<sup>lxxxii</sup>

The creative inclination was in the blood of Amvrosii. He often taught others to make something, and when people came to him for blessing on such a thing, he would discuss it in heat and give his

explanations... then gave his blessing and along with it his belief  
in success of the most daring enterprises.

As with Elder Amvrosii (Ambrose),<sup>lxxxiii</sup> scholarly work brought Fr. Arseny satisfaction, but his spiritual and intellectual gifts drew him to people. Like Elder Ambrose, his ability to penetrate the innermost thoughts of others, combined with his profound compassion and love, made him a much-sought-out spiritual counselor. A humble and righteous priest and confessor, Fr. Arseny is portrayed in the book as a typical Russian *starets* characterized by active love, humility, and advanced spiritual knowledge. He maintained his religious charisma despite the brutal persecution of the regime.

- *Molitvennik* – A Man of Prayer

When he is introduced at the beginning of the book, even before any physical description, Fr. Arseny is found in the practice of prayer, as he is splitting logs to feed the barrack stove: “Господи! Иисусе Христе, Сыне Божий! Помилуй мя грешного” (Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner). The Jesus Prayer, which Fr. Arseny constantly practiced, is one of the most important elements of modern Orthodox spirituality. It is also known as “Mental prayer” or “Prayer of the heart,” because it is usually recited silently, and because the heart is understood as the place at which the spiritual and physical come together. Orthodox Hesychasts believed that the recitation of the “Jesus Prayer” coordinated with their breathing and heartbeat could facilitate the vision of the divine “uncreated” light, which shone from Jesus during his Transfiguration on Mt. Tabor and which the Apostles were privileged to see. The vision can result in the spiritual element overcoming and deifying the physical.

When searching for dry kindling, Fr. Arseny continues praying ceaselessly, and the content of his prayers are included so that the reader may imitate and say them for help: “Господи!



Помилуй мя грешного. Помоги мне. На Тя уповаю, Господи и Матерь Божия. Не оставьте меня, дайте силы” (Have mercy on me, a sinner. Help me. I put my trust in Thee, O lord, and in you, O Mother of God. Do not abandon me, give me strength.); “Господи, не остави меня грешного, помилуй” (Do not abandon me, do not leave me, a sinner. Have mercy on me). On the other hand, Fr. Arseny’s physical appearance is kept vague; the reader knows little except that in his worn jail uniform, he could hardly be distinguished from the grey crowd of poorly clothed, starving inmates. However, the reader sees that he lives an intense inner life.

Знающим его казалось временами, что живет он не в лагере, а где-то далеко-далеко, в каком-то особом, одному ему известном, светлом мире. Бывало, работает, губы беззвучно шепчут слова молитвы, и вдруг он радостно и как-то по-особенному светло улыбнется и станет каким-то озаренным, и чувствуется, что сразу прибавится в нем сила и бодрость.

To people who knew him, it seemed at times that he did not live in the camp, but somewhere far, far away, in some special, bright world known only to himself. Sometimes, when doing some work, his lips silently whispered words of prayer, and suddenly he would happily and brightly smile and become illuminated, and it’s felt that he’d just been added new strength and courage. (“Hurry to Do Good,” Part 1)

The book notes that Fr. Arseny’s prayer is in an “inward condition” and “uninterrupted.” pointing to the Hesychast mystic tradition. Overall, *Father Arseny* should be treated as a devotional work of Orthodox contemplative spirituality, a neglected, persecuted, and almost

forgotten tradition in the Soviet period. Contemplative spirituality “is a way of focusing one’s life completely on God, through prayer, living in love, and an awareness of God’s presence.”<sup>lxxxiv</sup> Orthodox elders, both fictional, such as Zossima and Arseny, and living, such as Ambrose and Leonid, are the principal bearers of this tradition. It is within the literary tradition of Christian mysticism, in terms of its conscious pursuit of mystical union with God via intense inner prayer, visions and ecstatic transformation. The Greek word *hesychasm* means “silence,” for Orthodox monasticism, spiritual knowledge is acquired in silence, and no language can adequately convey it. However, when a spiritual writer reports his mystical visions to guide others, his mystical ecstasy is impossible to explain in words. When describing Fr. Arseny’s encounter with God’s infinite dimension, the authors were faced with the challenge of articulating in word what he was praying in silence and how he felt what was lying beyond. In *The Optina Pustyn Monastery in the Russian Literary Imagination*, Leonid J. Stanton emphasizes “the need for a vocabulary to address the transcendental nature of the knowledge elders possesses.”<sup>lxxxv</sup> *The Life of St. Amvrosii* also refers to Amvrosii’s knowledge of “умная молитва” (contemplative prayer), but does not attempt to describe it. In contrast, this book vividly describes Fr. Arseny’s prayerful contemplation to clear his mind of outside concerns so that God’s voice may be more easily heard; in his prayers, he listens for direct guidance from God, and feels His presence. The goal of these contemplative techniques is for the human soul to reach mystical communion with God and to experience a vision of the divine light. Hesychasm was integral to the tradition of elderhood, and the intense inner prayer provides *Father Arseny* with a special place within the genre of modern Russian popular hagiography. To a certain degree, it also serves as an instruction book aimed at re-establishing those forms of belief that define the religion. To his fellow Soviet inmates who knew little about their traditional Orthodox spiritual legacy, Fr. Arseny is a praying

eccentric, carried away in his own world. At first he seemed out of place in the Soviet labour camp, but over time he established a kind of charismatic authority or leadership among the atheist inmates, which stemmed from his exemplary character traits of heroism and self-sacrifice, and from his perceived holiness and miracles.

When a fight broke out between two factions of criminals and political prisoners over stolen rations, Fr. Arseny asked for help, but got only ridicule: “Ты вот своим Богом помоги! Смотри! Твоего Авсеенкова Иван Карий сейчас прирежет. Двоих-то уже уложил. Бог твой, поп, ух как далек!” “Why don’t you help with your God? Ivan the Brown has already killed two of your friends, and now he’s going to kill Avsenkov. Your God seems not to notice this!” (22) As the dramatic tension built, the prisoners could only shout and were afraid to help their own. At this critical moment of blood, moans and screams, and God being mocked publicly, an incredibly powerful wave of courage swept down the inner fence of fear, as Fr. Arseny came out and took a stunning action with readiness to face the pain and suffering which he must expect:

... подняв руки свои, он пошел в самую гущу свалки и голосом ясным и громким сказал: “Именем Господа повелеваю – прекратите сие. Уймись!” И положив на всех крестное знамение, тихо произнес: “Помогите раненым”, – и пошел к своим нарам... Стоит и, уйдя в себя, молится...

... he lifted his arms, went into the very midst of the heated fight and said in a clear and loud voice: “In the name of God, I order you! Stop this!” He blessed them with the sign of the cross and said in a whisper, “Now help the wounded,” and he headed for his

bunk...he stood there having receded into himself, praying... (22-  
23)

Fr. Arseny's psychological process at this critical moment is of great interest, but it is omitted entirely; instead, we are given an external portrayal of his intense praying. This is in accordance with medieval hagiographic tradition, in which descriptions mostly concerned external events and remarks rather than digging into the inner depth of human psychology. While the attacks were taking place on the surface, his ceaseless inward prayer strengthened him and gave him direction. His extraordinary courage and fearlessness also came from his unshakable faith in God's power and an overwhelming desire to restore His glory. The prayer shows that he has understood the divine message sent to him and implies a transcendental experience of his direct and personal encounter with God. He was ready to endure suffering and to make sacrifices for the sake of his faith, whatever that may be, and he made a complete and selfless answer. His heroism and the enormous faith behind keep the readers in awe, as his faith in God gives him great power. Miraculously, Fr. Arseny was not killed by the criminals, nor even injured. On the contrary, the storm of madness died down, as if on cue, and the crowd dispersed. Following the tradition of Christian hagiographical topoi, the author portrays this scene as a divine miracle that serves as evidence of his power: "There he (Fr. Arseny) stood, as if in a different world, as if surrounded by light." The rhetorical ploy of repeating the phrase "as if" blurs the line between reality and imagination. There was no explicit evidence that Fr. Arseny was practicing inner, mystic prayer, except for a note that he "receded into himself" as he prayed; however, the vision of light immediately reminds the reader of the imagery in St. Sergius' Life, which suggests that hesychasm is one of the currents in Fr. Arseny's spiritual life.

This is followed by a standardized repentance and major spiritual re-orientation of the die-hard criminal who had mocked Fr. Arseny's God, in a sketchy fashion, with obvious didactic and religious imperatives:

Сазиков подошел к о. Арсению и сказал: “Простите меня, о.  
Арсений. Усомнился я в Боге-то, а сейчас вижу – есть Он.  
Страшно даже мне. Великая сила дана тому, кто верит в Него.  
Простите меня, что смеялся над Вами!”

Sazikov came near Father Arseny and said: “Forgive me, Father  
Arseny! I doubted your God. I see now that He exists. It even  
scares me. A great power is given to one who believes in Him.  
Even I am frightened. Forgive me for making fun of you!” (23)

In her essay “Inventing a Saint: Religious Fiction in Post-Communist Russia,” K. Tolstaya notes that the stories in *Father Arseny* are told “without any obvious attempt to emotionally manipulate the reader.”<sup>lxxxvi</sup> Narrative manipulation such as omission or placement of literary topoi with varying degrees of subtlety is present in the novel, and although hagiographers often prided themselves in telling the “truth,” hagiographical “truth” is religiously nuanced and meant to support an ideology.

The novel contains many examples of the efficacy of prayers, such as the chapter “Where Two or Three Gathered in My Name,” in which a prayer saves the student Alexei's life when a hardened criminal named Grey was trying to kill him. Only Fr. Arseny dared to try to stop the killing and protect the young man, risking his own life. His heroism goes beyond the need of miracles to convince people that his God is there. It is his faith in God that touches people, not

verbal persuasion or miracles forcing people to believe. The young man Alexei and Fr. Arseny were punished by the camp administration for being involved in a fight, and they ended up being locked inside a non-heated metal cell for two days without food and water, when it was 30 degrees below freezing outside. The two were doomed to die in the cell. In total dismay, Alexei watches Fr. Arseny start to pray, as the old man says:

Будем молиться. Первый раз допустил Господь молиться в лагере в полный голос. Будем молиться, а там воля Господня... Тот, стоя в молочной полосе лунного света, крестился и вполголоса что-то произносил...

We will pray. For the first time God has allowed us to pray aloud in this camp, with our full voice. We will pray and the rest is God's will... Making the sign of the cross and quietly pronouncing some words, Father Arseny stood in the rays of moonlight. (34)

At first, Alexei does pay attention to the prayer, as he is distracted by the pain in his hands and feet that were numbed by the cold, and simply no longer cares. Hearing the stream of prayer, he gradually begins to feel a kind of quiet and refreshment:

Сквозь оцепенение, сознание наступающей смерти, боль от побоев и холода сперва смутно, но через несколько мгновений отчетливо стали доходить до Алексея слова...

Through the numbness and the pain from the blows he had received, Alexei could clearly hear the words that Father Arseny was saying... (34)

Alexei started listening to the words of the prayer. At first he was perplexed, but gradually he began to comprehend, the words became almost tangible:

... И полились слова молитвы, и в каждом слове,  
произносимом о. Арсением, лежала глубочайшая любовь,  
надежда, упование на милость Божию и незыблемая вера.

...and so the words of prayer poured forth, and in each of these  
words lay the deepest love and trust in God's mercy, and  
unconditional faith in Him. (34)

The mystical union of one's soul with God can be initiated, intensified, or prolonged only by divine motion, but one can enter a receptive state by praying. The prayer calms Alexei's soul, taking away his fear of death and uniting his soul with Fr. Arseny's.:

Молитва охватывала душу спокойствием, уводила от  
леденящего сердце страха и соединяла со стоящим с ним  
рядом стариком – о. Арсением...

The intensity of this mystical union of souls steadily increases as Fr. Arseny continues his prayer. From there, Alexei's perspective is joined with Fr. Arseny's, so that the young man can see what Fr. Arseny sees and hear his silent inner prayer. This is analogous to the use of mixed perspective in Byzantine and Russian icon painting, in which objects farther away are drawn as larger, and closer objects as smaller, the invisible sides of an object appear visible, and the vanishing points of parallel lines are drawn as though they were in front of the painting. Russian religious philosopher Pavel Alexandrovich Florensky refers to this technique as "reverse perspective." Defending icon art as truer to vision in the light of contemporary ideas, he asserts

that the effects of mixed perspective achieved in icon-painting were deliberate; the meaning of such drawing is contained in its special realism and its rejection of sensual-tangible illusions. It is believed to provide access to an instant comprehension of the higher truth, a vision.<sup>lxxxvii</sup>

The prayer fills Alexei's being and he begins to pray together with Fr. Arseny. He feels unintelligible peace, warmth, and deep delight, the effects God produces to make him aware of His presence:

Слова молитв, читаемые о. Арсением, сейчас были понятны, близки, родственны – проникали в душу. Тревоги, страдания, опасения ушли, было желание слиться с этими словами, познать их, запомнить на всю жизнь... Было тепло, дышалось легко, ощущение радости жило в душе...Казалось, что о. Арсений слился воедино со словами молитв. Ощущение, что Бог есть, что Он сейчас с ними, пришло к Алексею, и он чувствовал, видел своей душой Бога.

The words Fr. Arseny said were now easy to understand; they had become familiar and entered into Alexei's soul. He felt no anxiety, no more suffering, no more fear, only the desire to become one with these words...It was warm and easy to breathe, and happiness filled his soul... It seemed that Fr. Arseny had become one with the words of his prayer. The certainty that God existed, that He was with them, came to Alexei. He saw God with his soul.



As advanced practitioners of contemplative asceticism, the elders possess the gift of mediation. Fr. Arseny functions as a bridge to the beyond for Alexei. Their union with God entails a splendid vision that Alexei relates: suddenly the dark cell, the moonlight, the cold all disappear. He recalls that there was a bright light and everything around them was transformed: the two were in a church in which Fr. Arseny, dressed in white vestments, was praying aloud, and two shining white angels assisting Fr. Arseny in carrying the liturgy. A very similar scene appears in St. Sergius' Life, and in both works one of the people present at the liturgy sees and relates the vision.

Alexei also sees his mother coming: "Her hands took his head, and she pressed him to her heart." The angels guarded them all the time, until two days later, when the camp officers came to check on them and found in astonishment that the two were alive:

Били по дверному засову, визжал замерзший замок, раздавались голоса. Алексей открыл глаза. Отец Арсений еще молился. Двое в светлых одеждах благословили его и Алексея и медленно вышли. Ослепительный свет постепенно исчезал, и наконец карцер стал темным и по-прежнему холодным и мрачным.

Somebody struck the door, and the frozen lock squealed, and voices could be heard from the outside of the cell. Alesha opened his eyes. Father Arseny was still praying. The two in garments of light blessed him and Alexei and slowly left. The blinding light was fading and the cell at last became dark, and as before, cold and gloomy. (36)

Communion with God through contemplative prayers is a tradition that is considered common only among “those who try to live the whole Gospel wholeheartedly and who engage in an earnest prayer life.”<sup>lxxxviii</sup> The author of the book tries to dissect and describe this mystical experience, its progressively deeper meditation centered about prayer, presenting in contemporary language what is difficult to communicate in words. Although prayers usually help to improve the situation, problems are not immediately solved by intervention from Heaven.

Critics who believe in the authenticity of this work’s origin as a collection of memoirs argue that the sketchiness in some places is due to the varying educational levels of the memoirists, many of whom may not have literary training. Other critics who do not accept this work as a historical document have questioned the possibility of such scenes happening at all in a Gulag. For example, Protsenko notes that reliability is supposed to be a prerequisite for memoir, but in this book, “in a camp with special regime where hardened criminals were stabbing innocent people, shedding blood (similar pictures are described in many camp memoirs), it is known that the ungirded savagery could be stopped only by brute force, not by a priest’s order.”<sup>lxxxix</sup> The critic accuses the writer of the miracle narrative of creating a fictional world divorced from social reality. From this realistic perspective, *Fr. Arseny* would probably fail to meet the requirements for a historical text; yet, average readers do not set for themselves the task of evaluating the textual and historical authenticity of the book they have read, but seek primarily to compare the story to their own life experiences. In *Fr. Arseny*, this dare to challenge the impossible, the mystery of religious energy, the striving for transcendence help the work reach a wider audience than the religious community, appealing both to believers and non-believers. Miracle narratives in this novel are meant to reflect religious and behavioural ideals rather than actual practice.

Humility, perception and active love, rather than stern, extreme asceticism, are the core legacy of Russian spirituality. Outlandish ascetic accomplishments would hold little appeal for a Russian audience, as we see in Dostoevsky's unflattering portrait of the ascetic monk Ferapont in *The Brothers Karamazov*. On the other hand, active connection with the world is emphasized in positive characters such as the starets Zasima and his disciple Alesha. Fr. Arseny lived out this ideal, believing it is his duty to take care after people around him and selflessly devoting himself to the call for love, the example of which was set by Christ himself. The generosity of Fr. Arseny's heart, his warmth, and his constant readiness to help everyone with true kindness win the respect and admiration of readers and fellow characters, of believers and non-believers.

In the chapter "The Patients," Fr. Arseny helped two seriously ill strangers (also prisoners) however he could. He cared for them at night, and when he had time during the day, he would interrupt his assigned work to talk to them and pray for them. He even gave them part of his daily ration when he himself suffered from constant lack of food. This was at complete odds with the common practice of indifference and cruelty in the prison, as exemplified by the camp medic who was called in but only looked at the patients "at a distance" and "threw" the medication onto their beds, shouting that they would soon be dead, not caring that the patients could hear him. Fr. Arseny's "odd" behaviour aroused only suspicions of his motives. People would ask Fr. Arseny about his incentives and calculations in doing good, applying the cost-benefit analysis that is embedded in human nature. They would ask questions such as: "Ну тебя с Богом! Чего тебе от меня надо? Чего лезешь? Думаешь, сдохну – что-нибудь от меня достанется? Нет у меня ничего, не крутись" ("What do you want from me with your God? What do you hope to get from me? You hope I will die so you can take my belongings? I have nothing, so don't even try!") (12) or "Грехи замаливаешь и нам поэтому помогаешь. Бога боишься!" ("You pray to get

forgiveness of your sins and this is why you help us. You are afraid of God!”) (13). Although most people expect reciprocal help and immediate rewards, Fr. Arseny did not; even when the other patients insulted him, he would not try to argue:

Что это за люди, о. Арсений не знал. Попали в барак больными с этапа, почти в беспамятстве, и поэтому никто их толком не знал. Заботы о. Арсения больные принимали холодно, но обойтись без него не могли, и, если бы не он, то давно бы им лежать в мерзлой земле. О себе не рассказывали, а о. Арсений и не спрашивал, по лагерным обычаям не полагалось, да и ни к чему это было. Сколько таких людей видел он по лагерям, не счесть. Бывало, выходит больной, расстанется и никогда больше не увидит. Да разве всех запомнишь!

Father Arseny didn't know who the sick inmates were. They had come to his barrack from another camp and had been very sick when they arrived. They accepted the care of Father Arseny with no enthusiasm, but they could not survive without him. They said nothing about themselves, and father Arseny asked nothing. He had seen many people like these two patients and he had cared for them all. When they left, he seldom heard of them again. (13)

How is it possible to love sinful humanity, such as prisoners and criminals who are brutal exemplars of human nature in its darkest light? In showing his genuine pity and taking diligent care of them, Fr. Arseny established a spiritual kinship with Christ's idea of merciful love for all

humanity. Fr. Arseny died of natural causes; his holiness was defined neither by death nor ascetic labour but by his prominence in his local community. In *Light in the Darkness* («Свет во тьме»), S. Frank elaborates on the essence of Russian religiosity that the path to holiness necessarily passes through a change in the quality of relationships with other people. It is impossible to love God without loving His children. The true Christian attitude is not just kindness and humanity, and not just sympathy for neighbours, but active participation in fulfilling other people's needs. The path to holiness is the path of self-denial.<sup>xc</sup> In the representation of Fr. Arseny's personality, we see these qualities in the foreground.

### Christian Realism

Religious realism, or Christian realism, is a concept that many scholars have explored from different perspectives. With Soviet scholarship on the Russian classical literature of the nineteenth century actively revisited and rethought, critics such as V. N. Zakharov, I. A. Esaulov, and V. M. Markovich, who are visible figures among the general public who appear regularly on radio and television, have labelled nineteenth-century Russian literature as Christian realism rather than as the Soviet characterization of "critical realism." In the contemporary Russian context, the term *Christian realism* falls into the realm of post-Soviet popular discourse. The critics argue that classical literature should be categorized as realism because it remained faithful to the empirical-physical and psychological worlds in its representation of reality; however, "the sociopsychological and historical determinism does not exhaust the spiritual meaning of Russian realism. Behind the social, psychological and historical phenomena, in many works of Russian literature another layer of reality was present,"<sup>xcii</sup> a mystical layer beneath the empirical, and "the social life, the history, the roaming human souls were given a transcendental meaning, correlated with such categories as eternity, higher justice, the providential mission of Russia, the end of the

world, the Last Judgment, or the kingdom of God on earth.”<sup>xcii</sup> These works unearthed the rich spiritual undertext of nineteenth-century Russian literature. Zakharov traces this descriptive principle back to the Bible: “this realism manifests itself in the vivid details of life which reveal not only historical reality, but also the mystical meaning of the events that are happening before the reader... This realism represents events both in their random manifestations and their divine destinies. As an aesthetic principle, Christian realism appeared long before the discovery of artistic realism in art. It manifested itself in the New Testament conception of world, person, in the dual (human and Divine) nature of the Messiah.”<sup>xciii</sup> Medieval hagiography followed the same “aesthetic canon of the Gospels,” with this principle expressed in Dostoevsky’s novels from *Crime and Punishment* to *The Brothers Karamazov*. Zakharov believes that “‘Brothers Karamazov’ not only continued the gallery of images of faithful Christians (Sonya Marmeladova, Myshkin, Makar Dolgoruky, the elder Zosima, Alyosha Karamazov), but the church is also represented as a positive social ideal.”<sup>xciv</sup>

I. Watt points out in *The Rise of the Novel* that in literature, “the modern field of vision is mainly occupied by the discrete particular, the directly apprehended sensum, and the autonomous individual.”<sup>xcv</sup> G. Levine further elaborates the understanding of literary realism as a child of modernity, believing that “despite many apparently realist narratives that affirm the most pious and religiously correct visions of reality, the realist novel was fundamentally secular.”<sup>xcvi</sup> C. Cavallin further notes nineteenth-century realism’s “gradual exorcising of the supernatural from the cosmos through the advance of scientific explanations—this disenchantment of nature and man pushed the larger religious vision of reality into the realms of fantasy, dreams, intoxication, and madness.”<sup>xcvii</sup> She proposes the term of “deep realism” for Christian authors’ challenges to the realist world by “constructing alternative fantastical worlds. These were clearly intended to

be fictive creations, but carried a deeper claim to realism, either when interpreted in an allegorical vein, or when read as incarnating central aspects of Christianity in their unfolding as story.”<sup>xviii</sup> Like Zakharov, she emphasizes the Christian origin of realism as a style: “In the Christian tradition, we find this approach already prefigured in the gospel parables.”<sup>xcix</sup>

William Peter van den Bercken uses the word “religious realism” to define Dostoevsky’s style. On the realism of Dostoevsky’s Christianity, he explains that “this faith is realistic because it is mixed with doubt, something every critical believer has. Its context is also realistic: it is faith that clashes with its surroundings, in which evil, suffering or crime rules. It is no religious *schöngestei* or ritually aestheticized belief... It is not faith connected with miracles or feats of saints, but with deeds of lay people (Sonya, Myshkin, Makar, Sofya, Markel) and unconventional monks.”<sup>c</sup> This results in what he calls “religious realism,” which has nothing to do with factual reality in Dostoevsky’s time. The realism, rather, lies in “the general anthropological relevance of the ethical and religious conflicts in Dostoevsky’s fiction, and the challenge felt by the individual reader to define one’s position in them.” He argues that Dostoevsky “not only remains aloof from traditional Orthodoxy but is also not an ‘alternative’ Orthodox. The writer Dostoevsky gives expression to a biblical and ethical Christianity, not connected with institutional forms of religion.”<sup>ci</sup>

In a broad sense, it can be said that *Father Arseny* follows the aesthetic principle of Christian realism of nineteenth-century Russian classical literature in that, while faithfully depicting the physical and psychological details of reality, it “represents events both in their random manifestations and their divine destinies.” The novel should also be defined as Christian realism because it teaches Christian faith and encourages responsible engagement with social and political problems from a distinctively religious perspective, underscoring the importance of “the

responsibilities of everyday” and “the decisions of individuals.”<sup>cii</sup> Most importantly, I agree with I. Watt’s premise of tension between the form of literary realism and the religious content of Christianity, which assumes that the cosmos encompasses more than the created reality visible to the eye. This perspectival and epistemological tension appears to be particularly acute in *Father Arseny* due to its mystical tendency. Therefore, its author is left with only two options: he must either escape the Christian relationship to what lies beyond the palpable and sensible, or challenge the modern realist world.

Bercken notes Dostoevsky’s Christian anthropological perspective and his central focus on Christ as the highest ideal of a human person. By comparison, *Fr. Arseny*’s religious view is more in line with the traditional Orthodox faith, maintaining the balance of the Trinity and highlighting the mystery of God. The ultimate mystery within the religious tradition is that of life and death, to which our limitations of understanding and knowledge call eager attention. However, as I. Watt, G. Levine and C. Cavallin have pointed out, within the limitations of a realistic novel, it is problematic for a traditional religious author to build upon his worldview, for if violating the empiricist epistemology of literary realism, the novel would become a fantasy and lose its claim to veracity. In its attempts to adhere to a non-subjective description of the world and reestablish the reality of the supernatural at the same time, *Father Arseny* bends the secular realistic genre to suit the inclinations of its Orthodox viewpoint, making room for didactic theological discourse within the narrative.

The chapter “*O Mother of God! Do Not Abandon Them!*” is a realistic depiction of Fr. Arseny’s posthumous adventure: when Fr. Arseny was dying and losing consciousness, he suddenly felt a lightness and then saw himself lying on the bunk and his friends standing around him. He realized that his soul had been released from his body and he was seeing his own death. Now he



was able to see the not only prisoners' physical appearances, but also their souls, which appeared as burning candles giving off light. The whole barrack appears before Fr. Arseny's eyes, and he experiences the relation between the soul, the body, and consciousness: the human soul as something light and fluid trapped inside the body, afflicted by uncomfortable feelings of illness that afflict the body. When flowing out of the body, the soul returns to its "original" calm and healthy state, controlling a clear mind, yet still being able to see, to feel emotions like sadness or rapture. As he continues to pray, he sees a bright light in the distance that leads him to his own church, where he sees the familiar icon of the Mother of God and his parish. He feels as though "he was burning with joy and inner warmth" (47), implying a mystical communion with God, who made himself felt and known. Fr. Arseny's mystical vision of light and his parish is similar to another vision in the *Life of St. Sergius*, in which the saint saw his parish during a contemplative prayer. The Mother of God appears before Fr. Arseny and tells him to go back to continue serving people there. At this moment he wakes up and finds himself lying in the barrack, still surrounded by friends.

The description of a near-death event in a work of literary realism serves as a partial resurrection of a premodern Orthodox worldview. The truth value of the vision of the Mother of God, which is essential for religious believers, cannot have been obtained by naturalist or positivist means. Yet a dream or a fever-induced vision makes it possible for such a transition from the natural to the supernatural to take place. We do not know for sure whether Fr. Arseny has really left the camp and been in the church, or whether this was his dream. The nature of this adventure is not articulated explicitly. The mystical could be interpreted as merely a subjective phenomenon, thus keeping realism intact. The author seems to hesitate as to whether to let Fr. Arseny's vision be interior and subjective, or to let it challenge the realism of the novel. K. Tolstaya thus argues that

the author's attitude towards the supernatural in this book is an open one, inviting the reader to make his/her own choice as to whether it should be seen as an allegory, or whether the vision was caused by Arseny's critical physiological condition. The author does not force his faith on the reader, but also does not appear to use the symbolic and allegorical possibilities of a religious dimension of meaning. The amount of detail, seamless transitions from real to unreal, and uniform narrative tone strongly suggest that the reader is meant to accept Fr. Arseny's mystical experience as real. The writer argues implicitly that he is presenting a real world rather than a metaphorical description of the real world, to a point at which the reader's worldview is transcended. The readers then must decide whether they are invited to join in the exploration of a fantasy world, or if they actually are facing the decision to make a leap of faith.

The chapter "*Mikhail*" provides another death scene, in which Fr. Arseny "almost" saw the Creator, the infinite and ineffable. In the Bible, humans generally cannot directly perceive God. However, Orthodox theology maintains that humans can directly experience the divine energy radiated from the Godhead, which is the essence of God, in the form of a vision of light. Furthermore, Russian iconography often represents God in anthropomorphic imagery, such as in Andrei Rublev's *The Mystery of the Trinity*, whose three peaceful and calm angels symbolize the manifestation to Abraham of the three divine hypostases. In *Theology of the Icon of the Orthodox Church* (1960), Russian art historian Leonid Aleksandrovich Ouspensky, following P. Florensky, defended the symbolist movement in Orthodox theology of the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>ciii</sup> In his interpretation, iconography is a symbol of the invisible taking the form of the visible, rather than a faithful and accurate illustration of the Gospels. This religious modernism is absent in *Father Arseny*, which puts the protagonist's mystical experience firmly within a traditional Christian historicist framework.

In this story, a fellow inmate named Mikhail, a righteous monk, is fatally ill and dying on his barrack bunk in the middle of the night, and Fr. Arseny is called to take his final confession. This incident demonstrates how prayer allows Fr. Arseny to contemplate “something so great and mysterious [as] death.” As the two men pray, “a state of closeness to God, prayerful contemplation and silent inner unity seized them both and placed them before God. All that was painful, stormy, or human had gone away.” Mikhail prays so deeply that his soul “had left everything of this world”, and Fr. Arseny’s soul, “so near to Mikhail’s in prayerful union, released all that was around him” and followed the former on its way to the Lord. Father Arseny “saw with his own eyes how the soul of Mikhail was leaving his body”: the dying man’s body falls backwards, his hands, which had been holding Fr. Arseny’s, open up, his features grow peaceful, and only his eyes are still open and bright. Fr. Arseny begins to see, or rather to feel, the beyond:

...свет постепенно гас, озаренность пропадала, чуть заметная  
дымка покрыла их, потом веки медленно закрылись, по лицу  
пробежала тень, и от этого лицо стало величественным,  
радостным и спокойным.

... the light was slowly fading, a barely perceptible mist covered  
them as the eyelids slowly closed: a shadow ran over his face, and  
because of this it became majestic, joyous and peaceful.

Shaken, Father Arseny falls on his knees and begins to pray. He thanks God, who “in His mercy had allowed him to see the Unseen, the Uknowable, and the most mysterious of mysteries – the death of a righteous man” (52). He feels no grief, only peacefulness and “an inner joy,” because he has seen a righteous man and “had touched God’s mercy and His glory” (53). The thought

that God himself has been there to receive Mikhail's soul comes to him repeatedly, "like a lightning bolt."

Fr. Arseny's mystical religious experience is presented in realistic terms, as the author reads signs or messages from the Lord in empirical phenomena. One can feel the significant tension at the heart of human desire to touch the profound mystery, the unobservable entity, when Fr. Arseny almost "saw" the Creator.

In "Where Two or Three Gathered in My Name," Fr. Arseny and the student Alexei are locked in a cell and left to freeze, during which time they experience a vision, described in such a manner as to mitigate the shock of the supernatural for an atheist reader:

Алексей обернулся к о. Арсению и удивился. Все кругом изменилось, преобразилось. Пришла мучительная мысль: "Брежу, конец, замерзаю". Карцер раздвинулся, полоса лунного света исчезла, было светло, ярко горел свет...

Alexei turned to Father Arseny and was stunned, everything around had been transformed. An awful thought came: "I'm losing my mind, this is the end, I'm dying." The cell had grown wider, the ray of moonlight had disappeared. There was a bright light...

The reader is given the option of interpreting the vision as a dream or trance. The border between these two realities of the natural and supernatural is not clear-cut, but rather evasive and blurry. After two days, hearing the voices of the camp guard who were coming for them, Alesha opens his eyes. Instead of disappearing momentarily, the two gracious and poised angels bless them before leaving, and the bright light "fad[es]" slowly.

The immediacy of perception of the mystical brings a distinctly Orthodox feeling to this book. Its secular realist framework is significantly widened when the author does not only hint indirectly at the supernatural reality affirmed by the Orthodox faith, but actually incorporates it into the empirical world of the book. Therefore the mystical experiences, the powerful joy and awe, presented in the book, were intended as real evidence of the presence of God, not as visions brought on by extreme psychological stress.

#### Christian Message in Soviet Context

Olson's definition of hagiography refers to its "underlying polemical purpose." The administrators of the Stalin camp assumed that in the face of suffering, especially the disproportion between their suffering and the fragility of their religious worldviews, Christian believers would give up their faith. The book demonstrates the opposite: despite what he has suffered in his man-made hell, Fr. Arseny would not give in, nor renounce what he believed in, and nothing would ever break him.

The book situates the Christian themes of compassion, self-denial, and moral heroism that are embodied by Fr. Arseny in a new Soviet context. After the Revolution of 1917, many people abandoned religion, and the Soviet propaganda characterized its ideological front as the total collapse of the Orthodoxy and victory of the atheism. However, despite the seeming success of state ideological control, since the late Stalinist period a noticeable trend of interest in religion appeared in a series of literary works by authors such as L. Pasternak, A. Solzhenitsyn, and V. Soloukhin. There was a growing interest in the Russian past. From the mid-1970s, around the time when the novel *Fr. Arseny* emerged and circulated underground, religious themes were a recurring feature in literary journals; however, these writers were members of the Soviet Writers

Union and were outside of the Christian faith. Their depiction of Orthodoxy was motivated by a sympathy for traditional Russian religion from a cultural-historical perspective, focusing on concerns over the moral degeneration of the Russian people as a nation. As Michael Meerson-Aksenov notes in his “Introduction to The Problem of the Church in Samizdat,” the religious revival in late Soviet literature was moving along the path of a much broader and more powerful national renaissance.<sup>civ</sup> Therefore, by force of circumstances, one cannot evade the issue of Orthodoxy in the national-cultural movement.

*Fr. Arseny* was written within the Christian tradition, as a Soviet hagiography depicting fervent believers in non-Christian surroundings: in the inhuman prison camps, a world suffused with hate and cruelty, where suffering could and did cause people to lose their faith as an act of existential reaction. Apart from state persecution, the prisoners were also faced with the challenges of modern science and atheism. Churchless and priestless, they sought Orthodox answers and had no contemporary role models to guide them.

Although the novel was not meant to lay blame, its anti-communist spirit might have been in line with that of Yeltsin’s ideology of the early 1990s, when the book was first published. It presents a realistic depiction of the tragic experiences of prisoners in labour camps, but Fr. Arseny never questions the social structure that is built on totalitarian dictatorship. In an argument over the zeks’ attitude towards the government, he called Stalin’s great purge “a mistake”, with the belief that this “mistake” would soon be corrected:

не могу я осуждать власть нашу, потому что пали семена  
безверия на уже возделанную нами же почву, а отсюда идет и  
все остальное, лагерь наш, страдания наши и напрасные  
жертвы безвинных людей. Однако скажу вам, что бы ни

происходило в моем отечестве, я гражданин его и как иерей всегда говорил своим духовным детям: надо защищать его и поддерживать, а что происходит сейчас в государстве, должно пройти, это грандиозная ошибка, которая рано или поздно должна быть исправлена.

I cannot point a finger at our authorities, because the seeds of faithlessness fell on the soil which we ourselves had prepared. And from there comes the rest: our camp, our sufferings, the wrongful death of innocent people. But I will tell you in all sincerity, whatever happens in my country, I am its citizen. As a priest, I always told my spiritual children that it is our responsibility to defend and support our fatherland. What is happening now must end: it is a huge mistake that will sooner or later be corrected. (57)

It is not his conviction in the specific political course of the Communist party leadership, but rather his metaphysical belief in God's justice, that leads him to regard Stalin's labour camp as God's punishment for the loss of faith among people. In Christian understanding, suffering has theological significance. The believers see their suffering as part of God's wider purpose, or as Moore puts it, "as a consequence of taking up one's cross and following Christ, because instead of explaining our suffering God shares it."<sup>cv</sup>

The existence of suffering is the most difficult feature of reality for a theist to explain. Job, for example, in the midst of his tribulations, seeks an explanation from God, but God is nowhere to be found. In *The Brothers Karamazov*, Ivan claims: "Мир не стоит даже одной слезинки замученного ребенка." Belinsky is ready to return his ticket to Heaven in light "of all the

victims of life and history, of all the victims of chance and superstition, the Inquisition, Philip 2  
\\\* ROMAN.”<sup>cvi</sup> *Fr. Arseny* went in the opposite direction of the secular humanist quest of  
nineteenth- century Russian writers, with its recurring ascetic theme of suffering, in accordance  
with religious tradition, presented as an ineradicable feature of Christian faith, and the natural  
environment of the labour camp seen as a vale of soul-making.

Unlike Fr. Tikhon’s assertion that Soviet Communist rule was imposed from abroad and had  
nothing to do with Russian *narod*, Fr. Arseny sees it as an organic result of Russia’s past sins.  
Although Fr. Arseny is distressed that Russia is in the grip of evil and injustice, he does not  
reject the state, and still believes that humanity should obey the laws of the world. His religious  
view of suffering effectively offsets any rebellious sentiments against the state, as he regards  
suffering as the result of people living without God. In place of revolution, he proposes moral  
repentance. This firm ethical proposition that “everyone is responsible for everything and  
everyone” gives everybody a guilt complex, in opposition to the sweet and easy form of  
Christianity presented by some contemporary Orthodox writers. Because of this ethical focus, the  
novel focuses on the cruelty of human nature instead of political injustice or social ills:

Вошли этапники в барак, а новичков всегда всюду плохо  
встречают, что в детстве в школе, что на работе, а в лагере и  
подавно.

So the new prisoners entered the barracks. New people are never  
welcome anywhere. It all starts in school when kids make fun of  
new kids, then at work when people sneer at new employees, and  
even more so in camp. (69)



Another example of cold indifference in human relations occurs when Fr. Arseny's friend Mikhail dies and one of the supervisors "kicked him with his boot" before sending a sleigh two hours later to pick up his body. A medic glances carelessly at Mikhail, lifts his eyelid "with his gloved hand," and gives orders "in disgust" to "get him out fast":

В санях уже лежало несколько трупов. Михаила вынесли из барака и положили на тела других заключенных. Возница стал усаживаться на перекладину саней, опираясь ногами на окоченевшие тела мертвых. Было морозно и тихо, шел редкий снег и, падая на лица мертвых, медленно таял, от чего казалось, что они плачут.

There were already several corpses in the sleigh, so they took Mikhail and put him on top of the other dead prisoners. The driver settled himself comfortably by resting his feet on the frozen bodies. It was freezing and quiet, a light snow fell onto the faces of the dead men, it melted slowly, so that they seemed to be crying. (53)

The image of the melting snowflakes on Mikhail's still warm face serves as an accusing reminder of human evil. However, this evil does not belong only to certain social classes as often seen in Soviet-era socialist-realist works, nor is it generated by political systems as in the works of nineteenth-century revolutionary authors such as Nikolay Chernyshevsky. Good and evil exist in all human souls, regardless of ethnicity or social status. The wonder of life is not interpreted as trivial luckiness, but instead as another human being with a soul filled with faith, love and kindness, the most sacred and magnificent treasure and the basis of individual and social transformations.

Although the Soviet state machine ruthlessly persecuted the Church and believers, this novel does not portray communist officials as cold-blooded hangmen. On the contrary, the camp administrators, high-rank party officials, and even the secret police officers are often portrayed sympathetically and positively, with their humane side, their uprightness, and their magnanimity explaining the complexity of their intentions, their situations, and their actions. This is not meant to whitewash them, but to understand why they did what they did, and thus to rescue them as people from the pervasive judgment of history. In contrast to its horrific scenes of cruelty, the book also shows that those who created all this suffering, who made the arrests, who carried out the executions or signed the death warrants, those who stood by and did nothing, are, in a sense, also victims of history, condemned by many. This gives the reader a fuller sense of what it means to be human. Fr. Arseny does not focus on their evil-doing, but on the destructive impact of sin, on how flawed we are, and as a spiritual father, he devotes all his efforts to recover them.

Fr. Arseny believes that everybody has a soul that can be transformed, and this human capability of doing good is stressed several times throughout the novel. Fr. Arseny passionately seeks the humanity in the prisoners who daily face battles with death. By contrast, the works of Varlam T. Shalamov, whose short stories chronicle the Stalin-era prison camps, prisoners are dispassionate, insane, murderous, and suicidal. On the verge of death, all human traits are lost, everything is focused on physical survival, and Shalamov treats this as completely normal.

Downplaying the exterior sociopolitical factors, the author of *Father Arseny* demonstrates the possibility of an inner revival for everyone. Ordinary Soviet citizens like the camp administrators, the guards, or the secret police agents such as Irina all prove to be spiritually transformable. They are portrayed far more positively than the German collaborators, traitors who served their terms along with Fr. Arseny. The collaborators are portrayed unsympathetically, in accordance with the

social stereotypes of their time, presented as adversaries and unforgivable “enemies.” This mindset conforms to the popular postwar idea that the honest Soviets would confront the “enemies of the people” who were exposed as traitors, cowards, or collaborators. Love for one’s homeland (which was deeply intertwined with the Great Patriotic War in the Soviet context) rather than political or religious conviction functions as the final principle to sort out enemies from friends:

Власовцы держались в лагере независимо, ничего не боялись,  
так как им все уже было отмерено, конец свой знали и сидели  
действительно за дело.

The Vlassovtsy kept themselves apart from everyone else. They  
were afraid of nothing, they knew they had been arrested for a  
reason, they knew their end was near. (56)

In the chapter “I Am Freezing” the camp guards are portrayed as responsive and kind-hearted; like the ordinary people, they “should not be held responsible for the tragedy, because they were carrying out their duties, and they did what they could to help people” (171). Similarly, the Head of the camp of the special regime where Fr. Arseny serves his term, Sergey Abrosimov, becomes almost a spiritual child of Father Arseny. A former general demoted to the rank of major, Abrosimov shares with the zek №18376 his personal history and some secret information:

Александру Павловичу скажите, что генерал Абросимов  
Сергей Петрович, разжалованный теперь в майоры, – здесь.  
Помнят Александра Павловича в верхах многие, но помочь  
трудно. Стараются и не один заход к Главному делали, но

безрезультатно. Главный отвечает: “Пусть посидит”... Александр Павлович... идейный, прямой, а таких не любят. Давали указание убрать, но Главный санкции не дал. Пытаются окольными путями, через уголовников действовать. Уголовника Ивана Карего толкают на это.

Do tell Alexander Pavlovich (another prisoner, a former high-ranking party official who was purged by Stalin) that General Sergey Petrovich has been demoted to the rank of major. Many people in high places still remember Alexander Pavlovich Avsenkov, but it is extremely difficult to help him, several went to Stalin to request his release, but he only says “Let him stay in camp for a while”... Alexander Pavlovich ...is a true idealist, and he’s straightforward. This kind of person is disliked in the ranks. They want him shot, but Stalin has not given the order. So Stalin’s subordinates are trying to get rid of him unofficially, through the camp criminals. It’s rumored that Ivan the Brown has been asked to get rid of him somehow. (27)

Russian literature includes many other works inspired by the legacy of Stalin’s camps, such as Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day of Ivan Denisovich* and *Gulag Archipelago*, as well as hundreds of testimonies of people who survived the camps. In their less idealistic but more realistic memoirs, there simply could be no such confession made by a camp chief to a prisoner. Although the author presents an inspirational scene of mutual trust and support between characters from opposing social classes, such scenes probably bear little resemblance to reality, and those who

had experienced the camps could potentially be offended by such a depiction of camp life. In contrast to the usual Soviet realist camp prose, *Father Arseny* focuses on the man's holiness and the transforming power that defines it.

Fr. Arseny believed that Communism and Christianity could be combined, as in the example of Avskenkov, an Old Bolshevik who occupied a high position in the party:

Революцию Октябрьскую “делал”, член партии с семнадцатого года, Ленина знал, армией командовал в 1920г., в ЧК занимал большой пост, приговоры “тройки” утверждал, а последнее время в НКВД работал членом коллегии, но теперь его послали умирать в лагерь особого назначения.

He had been part of the October Revolution in 1917, he had known Lenin, he had commanded a brigade in 1920, he had had an important position in the secret police, he had worked for the NKVD, and now he had been sent to die in a “special” death camp.  
(13, “The Patients”)

In prison, Avskenkov came under Fr. Arseny's influence and converted to Orthodoxy. However, when he was later released, he managed to stay in his high position. In addition, after serving in the camp as the chief officer and becoming a good friend of Fr. Arseny, Major Abrosimov soon returned to Moscow in his previous rank as a lieutenant-general. The narrator of the chapter “The Boots” was both a Communist and a Christian at the same time: “I have a responsible job, but I try never to get involved with any work which has to do with atheism or with antireligious propaganda. I just make my way all around that.” O. Altaev discusses the “double-think” of the

Soviet Russian intelligentsia, who were involved in the creation of the regime's ideology, but were alienated from and despised the ideology and the regime.<sup>cvi</sup> These characters are models of the survival of the honest intellectual who hid their true faces from the totalitarian state bureaucracy.

Concerns about life and morality were widely present in Soviet literature of the 1970s, which reflected on the social problems of the late communist age and offered potential solutions to those problems. These works demonstrated that the communist ideological foundations were already melting, and the solutions they proposed lay in the application of Christian ethics. Such literature fulfilled a religious social mission, in its exposure of the injustices of society and its search for truth and repentance. The author of *Father Arseny* views Orthodox religion as the only effective antidote to the moral degradation of society and of individuals.

*Father Arseny* gives no romantic picture of the pre-Revolutionary Russian religious scene as most contemporary church writers (Tikhon or Torik) do. His negative presentation of Orthodox realities in imperial Russia contrasts sharply with the idealized images of pre-revolutionary faith in contemporary novels and films. A religious view of history inevitably takes on an apocalyptic color, and the author interpreted the October revolution of 1917 as a judgment upon history. In the book, a criminal nicknamed Graybeard recalls his family and childhood life:

Из поповичей я. Отец дьякон был, в Бога не верил, служил  
пересчету, деться-то некуда было. В общем, служил, как  
профессионал.

Когда рос я, то видел кругом ложь и обман, водку пили,  
развратничали, баб хватали, над Богом и обрядами издевались

и этим же Богом прикрывались. На словах одно, на деле другое. Бывало, отец из церкви после службы придет и начнет доходы считать, за водкой посылает, над верой насмехается, матерится. Рассказывает, как деньги с тарелок таскал или бабу деревенскую облапошил...

I come from a priest's family. My father was a deacon. He didn't believe in God; he served to be paid because he could find no other job. He served as a professional.

When I was growing up, I saw lies and fraud around me. They drank vodka, they grabbed women, they made fun of God and the rites of the church, and at the same time they hid behind this same God. My father said one thing and did another. Sometimes he would come home after a service and count the money, and he would send someone for vodka, make fun of everything sacred, and swear in a dirty way. He would tell everyone else how he had taken the money from collection plate and how he had tricked a simple woman. (78, "Life Continues")

His moral questioning is addressed to everyone:

Говорите, что коммунисты верующих пересажали, церкви позакрывали, веру попрали. Да, внешне все выглядит так, но давайте посмотрим глубже, оглянемся в прошлое. В народе упала вера, люди забыли свое прошлое, Набросили многое

дорогое и хорошее. Кто виновен в этом? Власти? Виноваты мы с вами, потому что собираем жатву с посеянных нами же семян. Вспомним, какой пример давали интеллигенция, дворянство, купечество, чиновничество народу, а мы, священнослужители, были еще хуже всех... Задолго до революции утратило священство право быть наставником народа, его совестью.

You say the Communists have arrested the believers, closed churches, trampled on faith. Yes, it does look that way, on the surface, but let us look into this more deeply, let us glance at the past. Among us Russian people many have lost the faith, lost respect for our past, we lost much of what was precious and good. Who is at fault? The authorities? No, we are at fault ourselves, we are only reaping what we ourselves have sown. (56, "Whose Side Are You On, Priest?")

This passage criticizes the Orthodoxy of the nineteenth century as hopelessly compromised by its wealth and social prominence and losing the hearts of the people. The success of the October Revolution demonstrated the Church's spiritual bankruptcy, because many Russians had already abandoned the Church and were not truly convinced by its vision of life in God. The rise of Bolshevism was seen as God's judgment on a church that had accommodated itself to social expediency rather than representing the gospel.

As time progressed, the pre-Soviet era seemed to become more attractive to the Russians. The reception of one of the most popular films in the post-Soviet era, *The Barber of Siberia* which



was released in 1998, can serve as an example. Nikita Mikhalkov's production is set in Russia in the 1880s, which is depicted as a golden age, full of symbols of pure Russian Orthodox religion, traditional food and gorgeous costumes, the glorious Russian military tradition, loyalty and self-sacrifice, and pride in the monarchy. The autocracy, anti-Semitism, social deprivation of the time, on the other hand, are largely ignored. Religion was represented as a natural part of everyday life. The stereotypical past is sentimentally misremembered, but provides a contemporary sense of national belonging. The film's success with Russian audiences stems, in no small part, from its recreation of a Russian identity. Today, when the ROC claims to be the historic faith that requires recognition of its specific role for particular national or ethnic groups, church writers use idealized history as a reference point in order to promote identity formation. *Father Arseny*'s exposure of the failures of the imperial period stands outside of this trend.

### Reader's Response

Readers of *Father Arseny* have posted online responses to the work, characterized by a mixture of gratitude and inspiration.<sup>cviii</sup> With Fr. Arseny, rather than his spiritual children, as the object of most of the readers' comments, this section of the study treats reader responses before discussing the stories of his followers.

Readers appreciate the work for its "true stories" and as "a guidebook for living." Others praise its didactic nature and its virtue as a model to imitate: "The resilient and bright image of Father Arseny sets a vivid example for us all."<sup>cix</sup> According to the online reviews, what readers appreciated the most about the novel is its demonstration of how to find strength to endure suffering: "All the problems cease to exist when you realize what hardship people have experienced and realize your own infirmity and lack of faith,"<sup>cx</sup> says one reviewer; or, "A strong

book, about a strikingly strong Man”<sup>cxix</sup>, comments another; while still another has said, “This novel is a must for those who think that everything is bad, worse than ever.”<sup>cxii</sup> The work elevates thoughts about Orthodox faith, but also raises the reader’s overall strength and firmness of character. Reading the novel gives courage to those who found in it the necessary strength to confront the difficulties and sufferings they encountered:

This (book) is my second help after God and prayer in the face of life’s difficulties. As you read, you become horrified by the kind of horrors that people went through; they were like you, but they were a thousand times stronger in spirit, and the flame of faith is a thousand times hotter. They could not be broken either by the burdens of camp life, or by the hardships of exile, or the war, the life of endless waiting ... even when you are reading the same chapter for the hundredth time, you still cry, and you think what nonsense all those of your ‘life difficulties’ are! And instantly you find the strength and make the right decisions. And you are firmly and boldly walking along the chosen path.<sup>cxiii</sup>

Fr. Arseny gave his whole being to helping people with nothing held back; he is even ready to die for the Christian cause. It is in his willingness to make sacrifices and his complete self-denial that make him a source of inspiration to readers seeking greater faith and unity: “What a happiness to hear these simple and great stories about the true Man of prayer and the great soul! So profound!”<sup>cxiv</sup>

The reception of Fr. Arseny indicates that, far from approaching the book as a form of entertainment, readers took it as a guidebook for life, a strategy by which to endure material and

political hardships. As one reviewer has noted: “It’s not important whether he [Father Arseny] was a real person or a composite image, because the entire literature is based on imaginary characters! ... and nothing wrong with it. The main thing is to take out of the book what was useful and important for yourself.”<sup>cxv</sup>

In his most difficult circumstances when facing interrogations, beatings, hard work, severe cold, and hunger, Fr. Arseny was fortified by his deep faith in God’s love and mercy. His great spiritual strength comes from his intense prayer life and his strong devotion to God. Because of this firm foundation, he is able to overcome his hardships and place himself at the disposal of others. His exemplary love and care for fellow inmates gained him the respect of communist party members, camp guards, religious sceptics, and even criminals. With its protagonist portrayed as a high ideal of devotion, the book *Father Arseny* stands close to a literary classic of the Stalinist era, N. Ostrovskij’s autobiographical novel *How the Steel Was Tempered*. In *Saints and Revolutionaries: The Ascetic Hero in Russian Literature*, Marcia A. Morris says of the ascetic traits of many heroes of nineteenth-century Russian literature that “the ascetic hero continues to be a productive type in Soviet literature throughout the early thirties”,<sup>cxvi</sup> and that “middle class values force the ascetic hero “underground,” into the world of dissident literature.”<sup>cxvii</sup> *How the Steel Was Tempered* is an example of the edifying tendency of Soviet literature, especially in relation to its popularity among readers in both Russia and China. After being translated into Chinese in 1942, the book was printed and published 57 times between 1952 and 1995, and a total of 2.5 million copies were released. Its main protagonist, Korchagin, does not defend the Orthodox faith, but fights for communist power. However, his devotion inspired millions of Soviet readers. He sacrificed himself, giving all his energy to the cause of the party, and readers received the work as a guidebook that taught the right way to do things.

History repeats itself. In 1935, an article in the official newspaper of the Soviet Communist Party *Pravda* revealed that Ostrovskij, like his hero, was gravely ill. From that moment, Ostrovskij was regarded more as an autobiographer than a novelist. In “On the Literary Context of the Book *How the Steel Was Tempered*” Elena Tolstaja-Segal demonstrated that the connection between the biographical and the fictional in the novel was intentional, in order to facilitate the sympathy and identification of readers.<sup>cxviii</sup> It is only when this sympathy is present that the reader actually sees the character as a model to imitate.

Similarly, the case of *Father Arseny* suggests that contemporary readers are in the middle of a process of creating a saint. Fr. Arseny is no less a creation by the editors of Saint Tikhon’s Theological University. Katya Tolstaya points out the theological consideration in the ROC’s relentless effort to promote the character Arseny as a real person, that within the Orthodox tradition “a saint is viewed as a person who is related to God in a special and intimate way, a locus of contact between divine and human and thus a mediator in the process of personal salvation, it is clear that a non-existing saint is in no way compatible with this view. He or she is nothing but an empty space, at best a pious fantasy. A non-existing saint is not in touch with God; therefore, praying to him or her for intercession is futile.”<sup>cxix</sup> Yet, as J. Perkins noted: “Representation by its nature is partial and selective and inevitably excludes material which might have been represented or represented differently. A culture’s reality, its sense of the way “things really are” is now recognized to be a function of its systems of representation, the processes and particularities used to bring its cultural world to consciousness... In this sense all saints’ Lives, whether based on historical figures or otherwise, can be considered “fictions”, fashioned models for emulation rather than historical portraits.”<sup>cxx</sup>

Besides Fr. Arseny's own life stories narrated by his friends and spiritual children, the novel also contains life stories of other members of his religious community, including accounts of either a complete life course or particular episodes from it. The narrators do not represent life in its entirety and variety, but instead emphasize religious experience. Most of the stories are told in first person, and some have explicit narrators who are not the protagonists. Many of the stories are set against the background of the war or of the Stalin purge, focusing on a critical, perilous, and sometimes tragic period of life, with the narrators self-understanding as sufferers protected and guided by God's mercy. The male narrators often recollect the horrendous war scenes, the fierce battles in which they were ordered to carry out extremely dangerous tasks against the enemy troops, and their miraculous survival (chapters "Raft", "Bridge", "Fr. Platon Skorino", "By the Grace of God", "Heights"), while the female narrators predominantly remember the hardships, the hunger, and the chaos they experienced during the war and the time of Stalinist repression. They remember that the Mother of God rescued them in the most treacherous or desperate moments of their lives, often involving family, love, or children (chapters "O Victorious Leader of Triumphant Hosts..."; "I Deliver Letters"; "Lena"; "O Mother of God! Help me"; "On the Roof"; "Korsun'-Ershi"; "An Admission".) Each story discerns something of the divine movement in human life. Their lives are also reflective of the tumultuous time in which the Soviet people were pushed to the edge of their very being and their well-being, when meaningless cruelty, gross indifference to human life in Stalin camps, wartime mass displacement and devastation, and human loss in war deprived people of hope or willingness to continue this kind of life. The Orthodox religion enabled men and women to come to some

significant understanding of themselves in relation to the chaotic context in which they existed, and helped them to live morally purposeful lives.

The time span covered in this corpus of texts covers the entire Soviet era, and many of them were composed orally and transcribed by friends or other spiritual children of Fr. Arseny's. If in volume 1, *The Camp*, Fr. Arseny acts as the main character, while in volume 2, *The Path*, particularly in the chapters "The Journalist", "The Musician", or "Two Steps to the Side," he is at best a secondary character whose appearance in other people's life courses seems to be short and insignificant in terms of plot development. Volume 3, *Spiritual Children*; volume 4, *Path to Faith*; and volume 5, *Love Your Neighbour*, present collections of the life stories of Fr. Arseny's spiritual children. Their memoirs include the simple language and complex experiences of ordinary Orthodox believers and their communities, following the path to faith: prayer, testimony, praise, confession, doubt, lament, and above all, conversion. Religious traditions helped orient the lives of the Soviet people and brought them feelings of comfort at a time when God was the only thing on which they could rely. The reader is fascinated by two mysteries at work: that of God and that of human life, crafted into one profoundly tangled mystery. The life stories presented in volumes 3 and 4 are introduced at the beginning of the narrative without a background framework, while in volume 5, Fr. Arseny asks his guests at dinner or evening tea to tell their stories of conversion or of their faith being strengthened over time. The guests' answers to the initial question of how they became Orthodox Christians are generally in the form of stories. Under Fr. Arseny's encouragement, the guests recall critical turning moments and describe appealing episodes of their lives. However, rather than encouraging the reader to grasp the inward sense of what is outwardly read or heard, to pursue the meaning of it by him/herself, the novel directly bridges the stories into Orthodox teaching. Before or after those often brief and

dramatic stories, Fr. Arseny would make comments, in order to build doctrinal insights. Those comments correlate personal experiences with biblical teachings reminiscent of theological statements of the institutional Church. As a result, the moral or ideological presence of the institutional Church embodied in Fr. Arseny's starets image is noticeably increased in the last volume, at the same time that his literary image as integral part of the belles-lettres tradition is blurred, and the bold supernatural challenge of afterlife, the sharp redemptive longing so vividly presented in the first volume has also faded.

Compared to Fr. Arseny's rather flat theological preaching in the form of abstract reflection, the stories of his spiritual children, memoirs of misfortunes, predicaments, anxieties, strength, kindness, and sudden relief seem artistically more appealing, because a story about a life, especially a decisive episode and a moment of crisis, has the potential to engage the hearer in ways that other types of presentations do not. This gives the story a dramatic character as a whole, and that is why narrative can be so compelling. Although these life stories are extreme in a sense, they resonate with the reader because they cover the scope of the human dimension in the actions of the protagonists.

Spiritual memoirs are a long-established practice in Christian tradition. The ancient parables in the Bible suggested a religious dimension to the telling of life stories.<sup>cxxi</sup> In the tenth century, Augustine of Hippo gave his brooding reflections on his life and memory in his *Confessions*. Retrospectively viewing his early life from the perspective of his conversion to Christianity, he assessed God's workings and the steps toward his spiritual salvation. The post-conversion Augustine construes the first half of his life as a series of errors and self-indulgence, with his moment of conversion as the turning point of his life, when he was called by a spiritual voice

that urged him to seek dialogue with God and to reflect on the centrality of memory to spiritual salvation.

While it is relatively easy to find statements from authoritative sources that set out how life should be seen from the perspective of Eastern Orthodox tradition, the use of narrative life stories not only stimulates the interest of people who wish to learn about the religion, but also greatly enhance their perception of the key beliefs of the religious tradition.<sup>cxxii</sup> This is why religious institutions and actors employ spiritual memoirs as one of the primary cultural forms with which to facilitate the shaping and sharing of one's religious identity. As Tilley believed, "Christian stories provide the central and distinctive structure and content of the Christian faith...stories do not merely decorate or illustrate, but provide the substance of faith. The better one understands the Christian stories, the better one understands the Christian faith."<sup>cxxiii</sup>

### 1. *Conversion*

The main body of the third, fourth, and fifth volumes of the novel consists of conversion narratives. Those stories fall into two narrative schemas:

- 1) Conversion as a complete break with one's past.
- 2) Conversion as a process in which the convert progressively discovers, reclaims, and cultivates a latent Orthodox self that is retrospectively viewed as part of his or her life all along.

In both cases, conversion appears as the culmination of the plot and the impetus for a new direction in the narrative. When discussing the formative role of conversion narratives in shaping one's self-identity, Daniel Winchester pointed out that "conversion narratives themselves should be analyzed as religious practices that help constitute experiences of religious conversion among those who tell them."<sup>cxxiv</sup> Both types of conversion narrative in *Father Arseny* retrospectively



address the relations between personal pasts and presents, configuring the temporal gap into a meaningful biographical pattern. In the first group, the stories construct moments of biographical rupture and spiritual rebirth in which the old “sinful” self of the past is put to death and a new “godly” self is born. For example, the opening story of volume 4, “The Raft”, is an autobiographical account of a former soldier, Vasilii Andrevich, who was telling the other guests at the table about the Red Army troop in which he fought as a soldier during the Second World War in 1943, and their forced crossing of the Dnepr River. In the beginning, the Germans opened heavy fire at the boats and rafts moving on the water towards them:

Осколки мин и снарядов визжали, шипели вокруг нас; люди сбрасывались взрывной волной в воду убитыми, ранеными и шли на дно. Часть лодок и плотов плыла по реке уже без людей...

Shrieking, shards of mines and shells hissed around us; people were thrown by the blasts into the water, killed or wounded and went down to the bottom. Part of the boats and rafts floated empty on the river... [my translation]

Vasilii and the other members of his group of eight, did their best to speed up the crossing, despite the terrifying scene of human loss, because a soldier’s duty is to go forward, no matter what:

Вода кипела от взрывов; тысячи осколков от мин и снарядов во всех направлениях пронзали воздух, убивали и ранили солдат, ломали бревна плотов и лодки. Надежды добраться до

берега не было, да и там нас ждала смерть, но мы гребли и гребли. Иногда кто-нибудь из находившихся в воде хватался за наш плотик или за протянутую нами руку, но осколки поражали людей, и они тонули.

The water was boiling from the explosions; thousands of broken pieces of mines and shells pierced the air in all directions, killing and wounding soldiers, breaking the log rafts and boats. There was no hope to get to the bank, and there only death awaited us. Still we rowed and rowed. Sometimes someone in the water would grab our raft or our extended hands, but the broken pieces struck the people, and they drowned. [my translation]

In order to make his story more dramatically satisfying, the narrator employs tools usually associated with fiction, such as extensive physical description and poetic language. The number of casualties killed and wounded and the scale of confrontation and devastation on the scene help to build up the dramatic tension.

In the thickest of the fire, the memoirist makes a philosophical inquiry: “What guarded and saved us”, when all the others in his group had been killed except the sergeant and the narrator Basili himself? Completely helpless, he saw that, unexpectedly, the sergeant was beginning to pray. This was unusual in the Soviet army, and the significance of this crucial moment is “zoomed in” by the meticulous recovery of details against the chaotic backdrop of the fierce battle, as if for a moment time froze:

Брызги воды при взрывах секли по лицу, рукам, а мы все гребли и гребли. Рядом прогремел взрыв, плотик завертело, закачало, и я понял, что сейчас мы погибнем.

From explosions the water kept splashing up in our face and arms, still we rowed and rowed. A bomb blew up nearby, and the raft spun and swayed, I realized that we were going to die.

Suddenly, the sergeant dropped the oar and stopped amid the explosion and the howling of mines and debris. He was seen to “cross himself several times” and “say clearly” something strange for a Soviet soldier: “Have mercy on me, O Lord, take my soul in peace, and if you save my life, I will go and become a monk and priest, but not the way I want, Lord, but as thou wilt.” The narrator further asserts that even though he was surrounded by “the deafening explosions and people screaming and cursing terribly,” he heard clearly what the sergeant said. What he saw of the sergeant shocked him. The background information inserted into this perilous scene demonstrates the memoirist’s effort to build a contrast between the “before” and the “after”:

Мне было девятнадцать, что я знал в то время о Боге – обрывки высказываний! Но где-то в сознании глубоко-глубоко всегда жила мысль: есть что-то высшее, вероятно, это Бог, но о православии, христианстве не знал ничего.

I was nineteen, at the time what I knew about God was only some snatches of sentences! But somewhere deep in my mind there was always the thought that there is something higher and it's probably

the God, but I did not know anything about Orthodoxy,  
Christianity. [my translation]

The sergeant most likely wanted to live, as did Vasili. At that moment he turned to God and “с истинной верой внутренней и мольбой, тоже перекрестился несколько раз... И, пока мы плыли, все время просил Бога спасти нас” [with true inner faith and prayer, crossed himself several times, too ... And all the time while we were sailed, asked God to save us – my translation].

He fought in the ground forces until the end of the war in December 1945. Having survived the war, he was “clearly aware” that the Lord had saved his life. The moment he began to pray to God on the Dnepr River, he reached out for God’s protection for the first time in his life and put his trust in God, for he had no one to rely on. After the war, he learned by chance (or, in the words of the memoirist, from his present Orthodox religious standpoint: “неисповедимы пути Господни – Промысл Господа вел меня к ней”) [through the inscrutable ways of the Lord – the Lord’s Providence led me to it (the meeting) – my translation] the whereabouts of the former sergeant, who is now Fr. Fedor. Following their reunion, Fr. Fedor christened his family.

The narrator was baptized in church in a formal ceremony after the war, when he learned more about Orthodox tradition and practices. However, he chose to omit that episode as less relevant. The simple temporality of succession, of duration, of before and after in an autobiography are subject to the narrator’s pursuit of life meaning and self-interpretation. His choice of the turning moment suggests that he interprets the brief moment at the Dnepr River in 1943 as his true moment of being “born again” and becoming one of the faithful. In this moment of rupture, the narrator’s past is retrospectively plotted as a distinct self at variance with his present religious self. Only from the standpoint of present experience, however, can one speak of the past of how

“the Lord led him” to faith during the war and to a future with God. When he concludes: “Вот так я пришел к вере, потеряв двадцать лет из неразумия, непонимания истинного пути жизни человеческой” [That’s how I came to faith, having lost twenty years in foolishness and lack of understanding of the true path of human life – my translation], he sees his new, spiritual self of the present as qualitatively different from and morally superior to what had come before.

In the fifth volume, the chapter “Ilia Nikolaevich” presents another conversion story of type 1. While the specifics of personal life events inevitably vary, the born-again moment remains central to the narrative construction. The chapter features a former Stalin camp prisoner, Ilia Nikolaevich, who met Fr. Arseny in the camp and became a good friend of the latter, describing his path to faith. As a former political commissar and Soviet Border Guards officer, he begins as a staunch atheist with a condescending attitude toward religion. He never explains how he ended up in the camp, but to readers who had lost relatives or friends in Stalin’s Terror and the Great Purge, this is all too familiar; the reason for imprisonment could be anything, no matter how trivial. The narrator expects that readers will regard this omission not as a technique for suspense but as a sensible choice to leave less relevant episodes out of the account. Along with other prisoners, Ilia was sent to a coal mine as free labour. Due to the loose observance of safety regulations, the mine collapsed and trapped eighteen prisoners underground. Piles of falling rocks and dirt formed a narrow “pencil box” that tightly encapsulated Ilia so that he could not move and his screams went unanswered: “Надежды на спасение нет никакой, главное – смерть будет длительной и мучительной” [There was absolutely no hope for me being saved, and the most terrible thing was that death would be slow in coming and painful].(161, “Ilya Nikolaevich”). In despair, he remembered his conversations with Fr. Arseny in the barrack: “мысль, которая ранее не приходила мне в голову, явилась сейчас в ожидании

мучительной смерти... Он существует, – и я стал горячо молиться, вспоминая все, что ранее говорил батюшка” [a thought came to me for the first time: if a man like Father Arseny believes in God, this means He exists, and I started praying ardently, remembering everything Father Arseny had said] (161, “Ilya Nikolaevich”). He repeated the prayer unceasingly until he fell asleep:

Проснулся, мучила жажда, но воды, конечно, не было. Вновь молился и засыпал. Сколько прошло времени, не знаю. Я был беспомощен, нога все больше и больше болела, но Господь давал силы молиться, и я собирал всю душевную волю, чтобы войти в слова молитвы. Утихала боль в ноге, жажда и голод не возникали.

I woke up and I felt terribly thirsty, but of course, there was, no water. I fell asleep again, praying. How much time went by, I do not know. I was helpless, and my leg was hurting more and more, but Lord gave me the strength to keep on praying, and I gathered all my spiritual willpower to enter into the words of my prayer. The pain in my leg grew less, and I was no longer thirsty, nor was I hungry. (161, “Ilya Nikolaevich”)

He was rescued seven days later. Ironically, while giving him a cup of water to drink, the head of the camp of the special regime began to interrogate the severely ill survivor right at the rescue scene, asking him “What happened? Why?”

Only Ilia was left alive, and he asked himself, “Why was I saved?”. At this breaking point between past and present selves, conversion is experienced as a powerful clash, a moment of specific shock, a shift from one realm of thought and action to another: “Спустившись в шахту не верящим в Бога, теперь я стал искренне верующим человеком” [I had done down that mine an atheist, but came out a true believer – my translation]. As in “The Raft,” the threat of death forces an irreligious person to reach out to a future with God, and the survival is retrospectively interpreted as a godly miracle:

Под завалом погибло семнадцать человек, из всей бригады в живых остался я один. Горный инженер из заключенных говорил мне, что в известной ему литературе не встречал, чтобы в обрушившемся забое человек мог прожить семь дней без воды, еды и при температуре вечной мерзлоты. Господь по молитвам о. Арсения и по Своей милости совершил чудо и спас меня.

Seventeen people died in that accident. I was the only one to survive from my brigade. A mine engineer – himself a zek– told me that in his experience and in all the literature that he had read, he never heard of anyone ever surviving seven days without food or water at near-freezing temperature. God, through the prayers of Father Arseny and through His great mercy, performed a miracle and saved me. (162, “Ilya Nikolaevich”)

In his humility, he perceives that all the one-sided preaching on “scientific ethics” and “emancipation from religion” was only empty phraseology.

These life narratives provide a concrete, contemporary, and often compelling human expression to Orthodox concepts that can seem abstract. From these stories, the readers gain a sense of the meaning of their own baffling dramas, and this sense of meaning in turn affects how they interpret their experience as well as the form of their future action. Such socially shared stories help to link people's inner lives and orient them to the shared Orthodox community values.

The genius of memoir is that one can say about it, "This really happened," despite the virtual impossibility of reproducing anything as it really happened. Public occurrences are reconstructed with conflicting motives and perceptions; personal experiences such as facing death, being saved, or falling in love, all the more so. Emotion that is recollected in tranquility never quite captures the chaos of emotion in its raw state. Richard Lischer gave a subtle description of how unreliable our memory can be: "Detached from things and lodged in memory, along with inner impressions of feeling and mood, the previous images are susceptible to the uses of thought and the play of imagination."<sup>cxxv</sup> The autobiographer's vantage point represented in the text can provide an evaluative filter through which information of the past is encoded and made meaningful. It is not that those converts were lying, or fudging details of their own lives, but that in retelling their life stories, they are "clearer" about their purpose in this world. By sharing their spiritual stories, they keep shaping their religious identity, accepting who they are in a new way.

The second type of conversion narratives in the novel describe conversion as a long, continuous process. These conversions to Orthodoxy were not primarily marked by a punctuated event of self-transformation, but moments of self-realization in which they uncovered in their pasts an Orthodox subjectivity that was always there, just awaiting discovery, to be "let out." One such example is "The Elevation," a chapter in volume 4. The narrator of this story, Sergei Petrovich, is asked by S.P. Mamontova about his path to God, which he outlines as a long process:



Это длительный и мучительный рассказ, охватывающий детство, отношения, сложившиеся в семье между отцом и матерью, двойственность моего сознания под влиянием воспитания, вернее сказать – двуличность. Решающую роль сыграли годы, проведенные на войне, и люди, встреченные в жизни. Одно от другого неотделимо.

It is a long and painful story, covering my childhood, the relations between my father and mother, the duality of my mind under the influence of education, or rather – duplicity. The years spent during the war, and the people I met in life played the decisive role.

They were inseparable from one another. [my translation]

The narrator grew up in an Orthodox family. His father, a pious and loving man, used to spend evenings with the children, playing with them, telling stories, and taking them to the old pre-revolutionary aristocratic estates and parks in the summer. The narrator remembers how his father “spoke about the history of the Church, the Holy fathers, the structure and content of the services”. As the children grew older, they created a family tradition of reading a chapter of the Gospels every day:

Методично и аккуратно делалось все это (чтение) мной, но прочитанное, так же как и богослужение, проходило мимо, не оставаясь не только в сердце, но и в памяти... хотя внешне, до самого ухода на фронт, я выполнял все, чего требовал от нас и чему учил отец.

I did all this (reading) methodically and carefully, but what was read, as well as the church services, passed by without a trace not only in the heart, but also in the memory ... although ly, until the departure to the front, I was doing everything required from us and taught to us by father. [my translation]

In contrast to the protagonists of the two stories discussed earlier in this chapter, from the beginning of his story Sergei Petrovich had already had decent knowledge of Eastern Orthodoxy. However, his interest in the Orthodox faith was ambiguous and bifurcated, and he was self-conscious about his lack of faith and his failure to meet his father's expectations. Orthodoxy was a beautiful cathedral which he regarded more from outside than felt and built in himself inside.

The significance of his conversion to Orthodox Christianity was discovered over the course of time. When the Great Patriotic War broke out, he was among the first soldiers sent to the front. He admits, "Трудно сейчас представить" [it's difficult to imagine now], but while going through exhaustive training and participating in battle, he never remembered God or the Church; in his words, "До Бога ли было?" [In no mood for God]. The narrator's faith had become a sort of "latent Orthodoxy," which had retreated into his remote memory, but could always be collected again.

The narrator describes his feelings of fear and efforts to suppress those feelings in the war. In a battle in 1943, his troop was ordered to take a German occupied strategic high ground at any cost, and he recalls the fierce resistance and heroic sacrifice of ordinary, nameless Red Army soldiers and officers while defending their fatherland. That heroism and patriotism were mixed with a sudden awakening of Christian faith that facilitated the narrator's accomplishment of a heroic

feat; in the full swing of the battle, a field nurse's payer "reminded" the narrator of the existence of God:

Всю войну ни разу, даже мысленно, не крестился – вырос в верующей семье, многому был научен, а о Боге никогда не вспомнил, а здесь девчонка-санитарка с отвратительной кличкой вдруг о Боге говорит, крестится, на Бога надеется и хочет к ДОТу ползти. Посмотрел на нее внимательно и вижу – в другой руке держит связку гранат. Прижал Веру рукой к земле, взял свои и ее гранаты, неожиданно для самого себя перекрестился несколько раз и вдруг вспомнил все до мельчайших подробностей, чему учил отец, и громко сказал:

– Господи, помоги и спаси, не остави нас, грешных, – и опять перекрестился...

Throughout the war it never even occurred to me to cross myself – although I was raised in a religious family, having been taught much, I didn't remember God even once; now the young nurse with a hideous nickname is talking about God and crossing, putting her trust in God, and wants to crawl to the pillbox. I looked at her attentively and saw that she was holding a bunch of grenades in her other hand. I pressed her to the ground with my hand, took my grenades and hers, unexpectedly for myself, crossed several times, and suddenly I remembered everything my father had taught me, down to the smallest details, and said loudly:

– God, help and save, do not forgive us sinners. – and crossed  
again... [my translation]

At this moment, Sergei Petrovich realized a previously hidden truth about himself: that he had always had God’s protection. This inspired him and filled him with strength, courage, and fearlessness, so that he decided to approach the enemy’s firing pillbox and blow it up:

Происходило необычайное: двигался я – передвигалась ровно  
на столько же и струя пулеметного огня. Стараясь поразить  
меня, пулеметчик следил за моим перемещением, но пули  
ложились то впереди меня, то сзади; казалось, что пулемет  
просто играет со мной.

Something extraordinary happened: I moved, and the spray of  
machine-gun fire moved at the same time. Trying to hit me, the  
gunner watched my movement, but the bullets went either in front  
or behind me; it seemed that the gun was just playing with me. [my  
translation]

Miraculously, he successfully destroyed the pillbox, although he was seriously wounded in the explosion. Returning home after the war, he met with his family, whose joy “knew no bounds”: “но то, что стал верующим, радовало папу и сестру не меньше, чем то, что остался жив” [“But that I became a believer pleased my father and sister no less than that I remained alive”]. In this story, a definitive “conversion point” is instead a series of stepping stones along a continuous path to Orthodoxy, as Sergei’s obscured and unrecognized Orthodox subjectivity came to reveal itself over time.

## 2. *Testimony*

Many narratives in the novel are testimonies of faith, in which narrators share how God brought them through difficult times in their lives, such as loss or illness, and built their faith in Him through those experiences, and then they describe the continuous process by which God leads, guides, and shapes them into mature Orthodox believers. The chapter *Милость Господа* ("By the Grace of God", vol. 4) is an example of this type of narrative. It presents a relatively full memoir of one's life that includes the narrator's family upbringing, pre-war life, wartime captive experience, after-war settlement, and family relationship. The narrator recalls his path of spiritual growth, despite suffering the many painful experiences common to Soviet prisoners of war. The narrator Alexei was born into a religious intelligentsia family, graduated from the most prestigious university in the country, and had a prospect for a bright future. In 1941, with the Great Patriotic War breaking out, he was enlisted and sent to the battlefield. At their first campaign, they were ordered to halt the advance of German troops, whatever the cost might be, to "fight to the death." Alexei was wounded and lost consciousness in that fight. When he recovered his senses, he found himself lying in an open field among dead people and heard German soldiers talking. He realized that he had been left on the enemy occupied territory and his troop must have been on the other side of the frontline. "By the grace of God," he escaped and was taken in by a pious Russian peasant family. During his months of recovery, he fell in love with the daughter of this family, Mariushka, and they agreed that if he survived the war, he could come back and marry her. He returned to where the Red Army was camped, but nobody believed his story. He was tortured and sent to a Soviet labour camp as a traitor, and was conscripted to the penal battalions along with hundreds of former-Red Army-officers-turned prisoners. They were put to attack without covering fire and kept fighting by "blocking units"

instructed to mow down any troops who appeared to be retreating. As soon as they took the German trenches and crushed enemy gun emplacements, the regular troops followed, and the prisoners were quickly gathered, body-searched, weapons seized, and taken back to the rear under heavy guard. Alexei was thrown into the horrendous suicide attacks three times before being put in the regular army:

Бежал вперед со всеми, мысленно повторяя: «Господи Иисусе, Сыне Божий, помилуй меня, грешного!». Повторял беспрерывно... и, молясь, понимал, что каждое мгновение могу быть убитым, и от дознания этого еще более углублялся в молитву...

I ran forward with the others, repeating to myself: "Lord Jesus, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner." Repeated uninterruptedly ... and praying, I realized that could be killed any moment, and knowing this, went even deeper into the prayer...[my translation]

It was because of God's mercy, according to Alexei, that he survived the war and returned to Moscow demobilized. Yet as a Soviet citizen without an exemplary record, like many of those conscripted or captured by the Germans, he was automatically under suspicion, and could not shake off the stigma. His experience in enemy occupied territory led to constant refusals of the authorities to give him a job, despite his brilliant educational background. When he finally was taken as an employee, he married the village girl Mariushka as he promised. Unfortunately, his mother disliked her daughter-in-law's peasant background, and gave the couple such a hard time

that they had to move out of her house. Eventually, “by God’s grace” again, his mother changed her mind and reconciled with them.

One cannot help noticing how many of the life stories in this novel are organized around the possibility of death. Indeed, most of the stories with male protagonists are set against the backdrop of the war. Like all great catastrophes, war strengthens the religious consciousness of men. A man hidden behind a heap of earth under a rain of bullets will realize that he is not the lord of his life, and that his own life is not surer than an ant under his foot. At this moment, the man has a philosophy of life that is different from that of the man in peace-time. In the face of death, ordinary things such as love, money, business, and ambition become worthless. Men in the trenches live exclusively in the present, and have only two things in mind: life and victory. Nowhere else does one feel so intensely that God is near as on the field of battle. Even those who may not believe in God have the feeling that an Unknown force is intervening in human life and is taking human movement into His hands. Technically speaking, those who had come to believe in God in the midst of war might be as superstitious as those who sought the Gospel in war hoping that it might protect them from the enemy’s bullets. Whatever kind of religion it may be, or however primitive it may be, it comforts, encourages, and incites the believer to self-sacrifice, and is the greatest good he possesses.

Why, then, did Christianity in the twentieth century fail to stop the world war? Why did Christianity not prevent the crimes of the Soviet labour camp or the many sins of the regime’s chief representatives? The spiritual children of Fr. Arseny rarely venture beyond their personal ethical boundaries to explore these metaphysical questions, although in the first volume of the novel, Stalin’s prison camp is seen as poison from the outside as an antidote to poison on the inside. The novel is concerned mainly with the relationship of the individual soul to the

individual soul and to God, which is in line with the Gospel teaching that the kingdom of God must first be within you before it can exist among you. War and prison can serve as missionaries that have converted many of the fiercest unbelievers into believers.

To some extent, the outline of Alexei's story bears a certain similarity with another life narrative, M. Sholokhov's short story *The Fate of a Man*, often considered a model text of Socialist Realism and the basis for a popular film adaptation. The main character of *The Fate of a Man* is Andrei Sokolov, an ordinary Soviet worker, who lived happily with his wife and three children in a small town in the Russian south. He went to fight the Great Patriotic War from the outset, and like Alexei, was wounded and lost consciousness in a battle. Also like Alexei, Andrei came to his senses only to find that he was left in enemy-occupied territory. Captured by the Germans, he attempted to run away, but failed and spent two gruesome years in Nazi POW camps before he managed to break through and joined the Red Army. He planned his escape so that he could deliver a German major who had information about German fortifications. Given the regular fate that awaited former Soviet POWs, his act seemed like an attempt to atone for his "crime" of being captured. In Sholokhov's interpretation, he was lucky enough to seamlessly amend his tarnished war record and be accepted by the Soviet "family":

Сдал я им пистолет и пошел из рук в руки, а к вечеру очутился уже у полковника -- командира дивизии. К этому времени меня и накормили, и в баню сводили, и допросили, и обмундирование выдали, так что явился я в блиндаж к полковнику, как и полагается, душой и телом чистый, и в полной форме.



I handed over the gun and it went from hand to hand, and in the evening I found myself already before the Colonel – commander of the division. By that time, I was fed, and washed, and was questioned and given a uniform, so I came in dugout to the Colonel, as expected, clean in body and soul, and in good shape. [my translation]

He received a month's leave and learned that his family had already perished during the war. He fought until the end of the war and his only surviving son Anatoly, a Red Army captain, was killed by a German sniper on the last day of the war. To the father's comfort, Anatoly died with honour, and received adequate recognition from his superiors and fellow soldiers:

Подполковник подошел ко мне и тихо говорит: «Мужайся, отец! Твой сын, капитан Соколов, убит сегодня на батарее... Теперь и то как сквозь сон вспоминаю, как ехал вместе с подполковником на большой машине, как пробирались по заваленным обломками улицам, туманно помню солдатский строй и обитый красным бархатом гроб... Подполковник речь сказал. Товарищи-друзья моего Анатолия слезы вытирают...

Colonel came up to me and said quietly: "Take courage, father! Your son, Captain Sokolov, was killed today in the troop ... and now I remember this as if through a dream how I was travelling with the lieutenant colonel in a big car, how we went along streets littered with debris. I remember vaguely a line formation of

soldiers and the coffin upholstered in red velvet ... The lieutenant colonel gave a speech. My Anatoly's comrades and friends were wiping tears... [my translation]

After the war, Sokolov returned to Russia, became a truck driver and adopted an orphan boy.

Even though Sholokhov's story was sympathetic to the Soviet military, it was not published in the 1940s because its protagonist had spent half the war as a POW. However, the protagonist is a typical Socialist Realist hero, although less spectacular in comparison with those in the works of F. Gladkov or N. Ostrovskij. As Nicholas Luker noted, "he possesses the essential moral features of the positive hero type: unflinching stoicism, steadfast patriotism, immense resourcefulness, iron will-power, and, however overwhelming the odds, indomitable faith in the Communist cause."<sup>cxxvi</sup> He is from a worker-peasant background, the mainstream class in Soviet society, and his humanity and goodness are the traits that Sholokhov wanted to present as typical of the average Soviet citizen who has a fortitude to endure whatever destiny may bring him. Alexei is from a family of intelligentsia, an alienated minority class. He is quiet, humble, and never inclined to judge. Sokolov is heroic, agreeing to drive ammunition to the trenches even under air attack. However, the heroic and patriotic dimension is greatly reduced in Alexei; instead, his fear and praying are emphasized. After the suffering he experienced, he might have been expected to be overwhelmed by grief to the extent that he would doubt whether life was worth living; yet, the traumatic experience did not break his spirit or damage it irreparably. He survived, and retained the capacity to love and work, as demonstrated by the close bond he forms with his mother and wife. He was not crushed by grief, but remained thankful, recording those "undeserved" mercies that have filled up his life. The very title of his memoir indicates the motif of thankfulness. For him, Christianity was a healer, showing that religion can provide support in suffering.

In his story, Sholokhov depicts a character who, having lost his family, is incapable of coping with his resentment against life:

Иной раз не спишь ночью, глядишь в темноту пустыми  
глазами и думаешь: «За что же ты, жизнь, меня так покалечила?  
За что так искажила?» Нету мне ответа ни в темноте, ни при  
ясном солнышке...

Sometimes I cannot sleep at night, staring into the darkness with  
empty eyes and thinking: “Why have you, life, crippled me so  
badly? Why deform me? I got no answer either in the dark, or  
under the sun ...” [my translation]

The story “By the Grace of God” in *Father Arseny*, by contrast, begins with an explicitly contesting statement: “Нет судьбы человеческой – есть только Господь Бог наш, Его воля и наша собственная вера к Богу и людям, по глубине и силе которой и определяется наша жизнь” [There is no human destiny – there is only the Lord our God, His will and our own faith in God and people, the depth and strength of which our life is determined by – my translation]. In survival and thriving, value is not attached to the person’s efforts to survive, but to the recognized supremacy of God’s providence, with human effort, though very important, remaining secondary. This baseline ideological difference is the fulcrum around which the two stories unfolded. For Sokolov, man’s willpower and brevity are highlighted, while for Alexei, the Christian virtues of faith, hope, and meekness are in the foreground. The war is the beginning of Sokolov’s suffering, in contrast to his pre-war life. The culmination of the plot comes as he stands dignified before high-ranking German officers in a POW camp, first when he refuses to drink to the German victory and then when he drinks three glasses of vodka “to his death and

liberation from suffering.” Although he has been starving, he defiantly refuses food proffered by the Germans. After the war, as peace and order return, Sokolov gradually recovers from his bereavement. For Alexei, life itself is tragic; many minor tragedies make up the one great tragedy of humanity, with pain, tears, fear, ignorance, and death. He suffers in the sufferings, merited or not, of his fellow men. The plot culminates in his torture by his compatriots in a labour camp and penal battalion in which human lives are trampled like so much rubbish. Even so, suffering purifies, because it supplies grounds for reflection. Happiness, on the other hand, is always muffled, as with Alexei’s falling in love with Mariushka, their reunion after the war, and Mariushka, though despised by her mother-in-law for her humble origin, gaining respectable social status as a doctor. Despite all of this, Alexei never seems to smile; his soul is melancholic, as is the whole story.

Most of the war-time stories were more or less within the traditions of the Soviet war prose of the 1960s, emphasizing the capacity for suffering, the heroism and moral strength of the “simple man” or the average citizen. They relate how men and women succeed in controlling fear and overcoming deprivation, pain, and destruction by the efforts of their will, by their sacrifice, and by God’s miracles.

### *3. Confession*

In addition to conversion and testimony, confession is also a major theme in the novel. The narrators of testimonial memoirs seek self-explanation, not by looking inward, but rather by focusing outward. By contrast, confessional memoir describes the vigorous inner life, intense self-examination, and self-analysis of the memoirist. The narrators scrupulously explore their motives behind every moral and intellectual development, thinking and reflecting upon their

state and their actions, so they may proceed to an accusation or excusing of themselves. The chapter “Признание” (“An Admission”) in volume 3 presents a typical confession.

In her portrayal of life during the Soviet era, the narrator L. focuses on her family life rather than the greater social situation. She remembered an experience of her infidelity as she looked back over decades from the perspective of the 1970s when she was writing her confession story. Her story is a confession narrative in the traditional Christian understanding of confessions, as realizing, revealing one’s sin to his or her confessor and repenting of it; on the other hand, it shows the confused faith in the virtue and strength of the capricious human passions.

She was married to a man who was ten years older than she was. Of his characteristics the memoirist put his religious faith as the defining feature of his moral reliability: “я вышла замуж за человека верующего, спокойного, доброго, но крайне замкнутого и молчаливого даже со мной.” Her feelings towards her husband are not part of the body or the flesh; her husband is presented as a hollow shadow of a virtuous man, and their marriage is flat, colourless, and tiresome. In contrast to the blandness of her husband, her colleague and future lover Fedor is intelligent, vigorous, and sexually attractive, but most importantly displays the tenderness of protection and the warmth of continuing care. We can thus distinguish between the “goodness” of Fedor and the “virtue” of her husband who is not even named. During a month’s vacation in a sanatorium, the narrator engages in a passionate affair with Fedor:

Было начало мая, стояла солнечная теплая погода, светлая прозрачная зелень, раскинувшиеся холмистые дали, кружевные перелески, первые полевые цветы невольно создавали радостное, приподнятое настроение. Сверкание глади маленьких озер, связанных бесчисленными протоками,

уединение, тишина, почти полное безлюдие в окрестностях санатория наполняли душу умиротворенностью, спокойствием, настраивали на лирические мысли. Вспоминались картины художников Васильева, Левитана, Нестерова. В эту весну мне все казалось прекрасным... вся моя прошлая жизнь разлетелась вдребезги, и началась совершенно новая, наполненная радостью встреч, светом другого человека, огромной, сжигающей любовью.

It was the beginning of the month of May; the weather was sunny and warm; the greenery was still pale and transparent. There were hills in the distance, the forest was sparse, and wildflowers had started to appear. All this unwittingly created an atmosphere of happiness and excitement. The sun was reflected in small lakes that were connected by streams; there weren't many people around the sanatorium; everything was peaceful and reminded one of the paintings of Levitan or Nesterov. That spring everything seemed perfect to me...my whole previous life fell to pieces and this was the beginning of a totally new life filled with the joy of our meetings, with the light of another person, with an enormous all-consuming love. (243, "An Admission")

Although this is a situation of adultery, the memoirist never uses this term, insisting on the beauty and spirituality of her passion. The reader is under the impression that through this passion she attained the fullness of being, genuine beauty, and freedom, and that the instinct for

life should transcend any theory of right and wrong. This impression keeps the reader's sympathy on the heroine: it is clear that she has become a wife and mother without having been a girl in love. She shows no thought of conquering her passion. If she lived by a limited commitment to her husband, and could put up with it in the name of family, this was no longer the case once her full energy was released.

The lovers kept meeting each other regularly and rented an apartment for this purpose. Yet, after some time, her pure, ennobling feeling at the beginning of her affair fades and is replaced by the logic of guilty passion, shame, and bitterness. Now she realizes that she is the guilty wife and mother, and the truth of living with her husband while meeting secretly her lover terrifies her. When her daughter fell ill and was sent to the hospital, she was not there for her, but "managed to find snatches of time to spend with Fedor." As she is torn between family and passion, she comes to see her child's illness as God's punishment. This secret relationship lasted for half a year before she could finally sever it. The ardent feeling cools down and she returns to her previous position and her peaceful family life. The ideal of the family, honoured by Christian morality, is saved. Marriage remains the only form of love for her. However, she does not return from an illusory happiness with her lover to the solid content of her own home. She does not seem to show genuine gratitude for the mercy of God that has accepted her unconditionally in her home, nor does she feel particularly sorry for her husband:

Жизнь наша с мужем пошла по-прежнему, только внутренне я стала другой. Незримая черта тайны отделила меня от мужа, но он, как мне казалось, не чувствовал этого, так же был молчалив, немногословен. Знаю, он любил меня, но слишком размеренно и спокойно, иногда мне думалось, что я была для

него одной из вещей, находившихся в квартире, матерью наших детей, но не женой и женщиной.

My life with my husband went on as it had before, but I was now different. An invisible line of secrets separated me from him, but it seemed to me that he did not feel it. As always, he was quiet, a man of few words. I know he loved me, but too rationally and calmly. I sometimes had the impression that I was one of the objects in our apartment. I was the mother of our children but I was not a “wife”, I was not a “woman.” (247, “An Admission”)

Their actual relationship was not improved. The guilty passion is denied, but the family pattern of love is not truly confirmed either. Her husband remains a figure of the avoidance of “real” love, of open emotion. She was not concerned with analyzing his inner life, but rather simply left him on a moral pedestal. Readers are won over to her by her straightforwardness and sincerity. Her utterance of repentance occupies only a very small portion of the actual narrative. The reader gains the impression that she relinquished her love in obedience to the strong and obscure pressures of her religious community, making the Christian moral convention invoked against her seem pale and shallow:

Конечно, я была безвольной игрушкой в руках греха, мне было стыдно за себя, что я отступилась от Бога, забыла наставления о. Арсения, что пошла по пути неверности и развращенности... но в то же время не жалею о происшедшем. Слишком искренней, настоящей и по-человечески прекрасной была наша любовь с Федором. Я ошиблась, оступилась, но я



любила и, даже находясь семь месяцев в состоянии греха и сознавая его, молила Господа простить меня, так же как молю и уповаю и теперь на Его милость.

Мне говорили: раз ты так говоришь, то ты не раскаялась, не осознала глубину своего падения. Это неправда, я все осознала, но проклясть прошлое не могу и не хочу. Судить меня можно по-всякому...

I knew I had been a weak toy in the hands of sin and I was ashamed that I had stepped away from God, that I had forgotten everything Father Arseny had ever told me, and that I had chosen the path of infidelity and vice...in spite of all this, I cannot regret that all this happened. Our love for each other was too sincere, too real and beautiful. Yes I was wrong, I went astray, – but I truly loved and even then I begged God for His forgiveness and I continue to do now.

People have told me, “If you say this, it means you have not repented, that you have not realized the depth of your fall.” This is not true, I did realize everything but I’m unable to curse my past, and I do not want to do so. I can be judged in many different ways... (246-247, “An Admission”)

This confession combines a wonderful candour with a tendentious design. The “heroics” of her capability of love, her courage of repentance, and her acceptance of full responsibility for their

love affair are highlighted and expected to keep readers' sympathy and respect. In many respects, the story echoes L. Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina*. The truth and rightness of her love is reminiscent of that between Anna Karenina and Vronsky: by the standards of their own souls, they were right. The tenderness, insight, and compassion amid guilt and misery, left an indelible imprint on her soul. The memoirist holds her passionate and serious loving as something of absolute value and virtue, but she did not break up her marriage or abandon her children. If Anna chose great passion and death, challenging a false society, the heroine of this story returns to family and traditional pieties, and the baneful effects of her infidelity are balanced out by her subsequent confession and repentance. If Karenin represents the falsehood of legalism and pharisaism, her husband represents the Christian virtue of forgiveness:

Я думала, что муж ничего не замечает, да и сейчас не знаю, догадывался ли он о том, что было. Слишком он всегда был молчалив. На мои вымышленные задержки, раздражительность не реагировал, только стал более внимателен, больше уделял времени детям и много молился... Я бросилась к мужу и зарыдала. Мягко обняв меня и глядя по плечам, он повторял «Ничего, ничего, все уже кончено, все»... Я боялась смотреть на мужа: его кротость, терпение сделали больше, чем любые укоряющие слова.

I thought that my husband didn't notice anything, and to this day I'm not sure he did. He was always so silent. He never reacted when I told him I was delayed at work, or when I was nervous. He just began to be even more caring with the children, spending a lot

of time with them and pray a great deal...I looked at him and started sobbing; he gently hugged me, touched my shoulders, and repeated, "It's all right; now it is all over, all of it!"...I was afraid to look at my husband; his humility and his patience did more for me than any accusation could ever have done. (245, 246, "An Admission")

However, she feels that she has crossed a line and faces moral judgement in a tragic and heroic stance: she repents of her sins and will answer to God for this passion by herself. She does not think the whole establishment is false, but over the story hangs an atmosphere of brevity and bitterness. She actually poses a muffled defiance to the conventions. Thinking from within Christian ethics, she does not approve the liberal principle of freedom in feeling and love. She wants to prove the correctness of Fr. Arseny's moral teaching, that transgression against laws will eventually make people unhappy, that it is impossible to build new happiness on the old unhappiness. Her story is narrated ideologically by two voices: her own, rebellious, defiant, consciously tragic and heroic; and the overarching voice of moral convention, to which she declares allegiance and which she fails to deeply internalize.

The epigraph of *Anna Karenina* is the Biblical quotation "Vengeance is mine, and I will repay," which shames the judgement of man. In this story, the same passage from Scripture appears, but as a quotation by Fr. Arseny. The elaboration on revenge in this story is also presented without an explicit addressee as Tolstoy does, but in a less massive dimension:

«Надо постоянно помнить, — говорил о. Арсений, — слова  
Писания: «Мне отмщение, и Я воздам» (Рим. 12, 19).

“We must constantly remember,” said Father Arseny, “the words in the Scriptures: ‘Vengeance is mine, I will repay, says the Lord’ (Romans 12: 19). (250, “An Admission”)

The author models her story on the prevailing Russian literary canon. Her inner dialogue with the Christian moral discourse therein not only fails to overshadow the rupture between individual and society, but in a sense, underscores it. In other spiritual stories of *Fr. Arseny*, the narrators try to erase the traces of sin by effacing their stubborn selves. Self-effacement is seen as a means to a higher state of being subsumed in God. Usually in a spiritual memoir, human personality, with its ethical and psychological struggles, is downplayed in favour of the language of “heart anatomy,” in which man is not portrayed as a fully autonomous and independent being, because God made man as a living soul and gave him the faculty of conscience. In this type of story, we do not see the Lord’s special dealings with the protagonist, nor a jubilant victory over Satan’s temptation. Its descriptive categories are more flexible, and the presentation of human personality is relatively richer. In their effort to attain self-knowledge, the narrators openly defy complete self-effacement, but they strive toward self-instruction, which has as its goal a return to the Lord, as its method is a search and trial of one’s ways. In this respect, her confession shares the religious edge with the rest of the novel.

## Conclusion

*Father Arseny* is written in the code of hagiography. It includes a series of short episodes that function as evidence of the greatness of Fr. Arseny’s exceptional character. The book provides the reader with a model that he/she should strive to imitate. The main protagonist, Fr. Arseny, is presented as a saint, and his life is seen as a confirmation of the truth of the principles of

Christian doctrine. Although the book deviates from formal traditional full-length hagiography, its obvious similarities in structure and imagery with traditional Russian saints' lives cannot be mere coincidences. Many of the hallmarks of standard Orthodox vitae are present in the novel, and it employs medieval hagiographic techniques, such as literary topoi and mixed perspective, at the same time that it uses modern descriptive novelistic devices. Father Arseny is a neo-hagiography of a modern saint with distinct contemporary features, with the traditional Russian Orthodox concepts of kenoticism, hesychasm, and starchestvo forming the core of his spiritual legacy.

The work combines hagiographic topoi with realist poetics. It contains a series of supernatural scenes and events depicted in realistic detail, demonstrating that these mystical experiences are meant to be accepted as real, not symbolic or allegorical. The author collective does not merely hint at the supernatural reality affirmed by the Orthodox faith, but actually incorporates it into the empirical world of the book, which significantly widens its secular realist framework. Fr. Arseny's after-death event, in particular, represents a resurrection of a premodern Orthodox worldview. The immediacy of the perception of the mystical gives this work its distinct Orthodox flavour.

In addition to Fr. Arseny's life stories, the second half of the book consists of stories of his countless spiritual children, testifying to the turbulence of the Soviet past and vicissitudes of their personal lives, recording the experiences of ordinary Orthodox believers and their communities. Many of their stories are set on the background of the war or of the Stalin purge, focusing on a critical, perilous, and sometimes tragic period of life. There are three main types of life narratives presented here: conversion, testimony, and confession. These stories feature distinctive structures and content exemplifying their Christian faith. The Orthodox religion enabled these men and

women to come to some significant understanding of themselves in relation to their chaotic contexts and helped them to live morally purposeful lives. The descriptive categories of these stories are often in close interaction with the popular Soviet literary forms of the time or fundamentally influenced by the classics of nineteenth-century Russian literature.

Influenced by the cultural trends of its time, the book reflects on the social ills of the late communist age and offers its solution to the problems of that era. It shows that the communist ideological foundations were already melting, and the solution it proposes lies in the application of Christian ethics. It views Orthodox religion as the only effective antidote to the moral degradation of society and individuals. Communism and Christianity can be combined, as Fr. Arseny believed. His religious view offsets any rebellious sentiments against the state. Downplaying external sociopolitical factors, the book demonstrates the possibility of an inner restructuring for everyone. Fr. Arseny believes that everybody has a soul that can be transformed, and the human capability to do good is stressed as the hope for the future. The book fulfills a religious social mission, in its exposure of the injustices of society, and in its search for truth and repentance.

## Chapter 2 *Everyday Saints and Other Stories*: A Bishop's In-churching Effort

### Fr. Tikhon: A Conservative Nationalist

In 2012, Bishop Tikhon's novel *Everyday Saints and Other Stories* (Несвятые Святые и Другие Рассказы), which literally translates as "Unsaintly Saints and Other Stories," became a success. It was first published in 2011 and translated into English in 2012. It was an immediate bestseller, with 1,100,000 copies sold in the first year of its publication. It was the best-selling book in Russia for 2012, competing only with *Fifty Shades of Grey*,<sup>cxxvii</sup> and was a finalist for the literary award of Big Book in 2012, winning first prize in the category of "Readers' Votes." That same year, it was nominated for the Book Prize Runeta 2012 contest, and won the Book of the Year Award in the category of Prose of the Year. The book has been translated into other languages, including French, Spanish, Bulgarian, Romanian, Arab, Serbian, Japanese, and Chinese.

The author, Fr. Tikhon, whose secular name is Georgiy Alexandrovich Shevkunov, is the bishop of Yegoryevsk, vicar of Moscow Eparchy, and a popular writer. Born in 1958 in Moscow, Shevkunov graduated from the Screenwriter school of the Gerasimov Institute of Cinematography in 1982. He was baptized that year, and moved to the Pskov-Caves Monastery as a novice. In 1991, he took monastic vows at the Donskoy Monastery in Moscow, assuming the name Tikhon after Patriarch Tikhon of Moscow, and was then ordained as a hieromonk. In 1993, Fr. Tikhon was appointed the head of the newly created Moscow Residence of the Pskov-Caves Monastery. The building was previously occupied by the Orthodox community of Fr. Georgy Kochetkov, a religious thinker and missionary, though Tikhon later criticized Kochetkov and his followers for their "modernism."<sup>cxxviii</sup> In 1995, the Residence was reformed into the restored Sretensky Monastery, one of Russia's oldest, and Fr. Tikhon was ordained as its head.

In 1998, Tikhon was elevated to the rank of Archimandrite.<sup>3</sup> In 2015, he became Bishop of Yegoryevsk, a moderate-sized district in the Moscow region. Bishop Tikhon is a polarizing figure who has attracted the attention of Russia's political press and stands at the centre of a debate on the church's power and its possible influence on President Putin. He is often portrayed as the "gray cardinal."<sup>cxxix</sup> He has been said to be Putin's confessor, but has neither confirmed nor denied this, though he has often been seen with Putin in various news reports.

Aside from his successful ecclesiastical career, Tikhon is also highly visible in the cultural front. He is the secretary of the Patriarch's Council for Culture and a member of the Russian president's Cultural Council, as well as an editorial board member of the journal "Russian House" – the primary journal of the Russian Orthodox Church – whose publishing house is located in the Sretensky monastery. Fr. Tikhon is also a prolific Internet writer, as the editor-in-chief of the Internet portal Pravoslavie.ru and the author of many articles on that site.<sup>cxxx</sup> The follow-up to his 2012 bestseller, *With God's Help Everything Possible: About Faith and Fatherland*, was published in 2014, but was not as much of a commercial success.

Fr. Tikhon's conservative nationalist political view is elaborated upon in his 2008 documentary film *The Fall of an Empire: The lesson of Byzantium*, which won the Golden Eagle Award for the Best Documentary of 2008. The film was broadcast on the major state-controlled TV channel "Russia" and prompted much public reaction. The major point of the movie is that the collapse of the Byzantine Empire was not due to the Ottoman Turks' attack, but because of its internal rot: the imperial elite and populace trusted the wicked West and abandoned their traditional respect for Orthodoxy and for centralized socioeconomic structures, and this ultimately resulted in the

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<sup>3</sup> News reporters and his online readers usually call him Fr. Tikhon and Shevkunov claims that this is the form of address he prefers.



fall of the empire. The implication is that if the Russians betray Orthodoxy now, they will suffer the same fate. The film demonstrated the “predatory” nature of the West, warning that the West is responsible for the death of the great Orthodox empire of the Byzantines. Russia should therefore preserve Orthodoxy and the authoritarian tradition as its political and ideological foundations and avoid the extremely harmful influence of the West. In essence, his imperial dream echoes with the old tsarist doctrine of Official Nationality. The three-pronged policy of Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality adopted by Russian emperor Nicholas I was intended as a conscious counterpart to the Liberty-Equality-Fraternity troika of the French Revolution. The film, which Fr. Tikhon both directed and starred in, presents emotionally charged, deeply agitating ideological propaganda, and viewers noticed its clear allusions to contemporary Russian politics.

Despite being a monk, Father Tikhon seems preoccupied with his political directions for the future, combining nostalgia for a fallen great power with the belief in Russia as the heir to Byzantine Orthodox imperial greatness. The patriotic-nationalist commentary seems to pander to the official rhetoric of the Putin administration, but on the other hand, one should not forget that the film actually provides opportunities for a snapshot of the ideologies and trends prevailing in Russian society. Vigorously defending Tikhon’s film, Russian historian N. Narochnitskaya vocalizes the hurt feelings caused by the West’s “hostilities, indifference to other cultures, ignorance of cultural heritage within Christianity itself.”<sup>xxxxi</sup> As do many Russians, she believes that Russia was and still is alienated by the West, not because of the common perception in the West that Russia is the aggressor, but because of its stubborn adherence to a foreign civilization such as Byzantine Orthodoxy. She articulates the idea that Russia is destined to follow its own path and development patterns “based on borrowed ideological schemes” are doomed to failure,

and Byzantinism is the essence of Russian uniqueness as well as a counterweight to the Western Renaissance and Enlightenment. Tikhon's film treats Catholicism not as a branch of Christianity marked by confessional differences, but as a political enemy. Narochnitskaya's view is less radical, but equally nationalistic, similarly ignoring the positive values of Orthodoxy in favour of its role in national identity formation. Like Fr. Tikhon, she identifies the notion of "Orthodox" with "Russian."

In *The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics*, Irina Papkova refers to Fr. Tikhon and the Sretensky circle as the "pillar of the traditionalist camp." However, it is perhaps more correct to call him an ultra-conservative. Papkova believes that Tikhon advocates a theory of "православная державность", or Orthodox statism, which she interprets sympathetically as "the desire for a powerful Russian state, with the renewal of Orthodox values as the source of the country's strength." Alexander Verkhovsky, head of the Moscow-based non-governmental analytical center Sova, places Tikhon in the context of the nationalist-patriotic movement, tracing the emergence of the nationalist movement to the late Soviet period:

Historically, all political activists, positioning themselves now as Orthodox, come from the more or less unified nationalist-patriotic movement during perestroika and the early 1990s. In a sense all of them are Russian nationalists. On the other hand, the vast majority of Russian nationalists, for obvious reasons, are Orthodox. But for the major nationalist organizations of the 1990s Orthodoxy was rather an element of national identity than an independent basic value. The 'national', as was understood, ranged from purely racial to the national-imperial interpretations.<sup>cxxxii</sup>

The main feature of this political and ideological platform is its focus on confrontation with an Enemy, defined here as the West in general and liberalism in particular. It regards these things as tools of the Antichrist, and Russia as the last bastion of opposition.

Fr. Tikhon first appeared in the press as an ideologue of the fundamentalist wing of the Russian Orthodox Church. In 1990, he published an article, “Church and State,” in the newspaper *“Literary Russia,”* a mouthpiece for nationalist village prose writers. The essay articulated his views on democracy: “A democratic state will inevitably try to weaken the most influential Church in the country, reviving the ancient principle of ‘divide and rule.’”<sup>cxxxiii</sup> He claimed that democracy was the enemy of the Moscow Patriarchate. Given the circumstance that Russia under the Putin government, at least constitutionally, is supposed to be a democratic state, he does not permit himself to make such statements anymore, although he does not say anything to the contrary either.

Fr. Tikhon has not been shy in developing his political connections. According to the journal «Собеседник», he is the confessor or “духовник” to Vladimir Putin, to whom he was introduced by a retired KGB Lieutenant General, Nikolai Leonov.<sup>cxxxiv</sup> Putin often takes Tikhon on his international trips. After Moscow Patriarch Aleksy 2 \\* ROMAN stated in January 2000 that the Church “reacted with satisfaction to Vladimir Putin’s consent to participate in the election for president of Russia,”<sup>cxxxv</sup> Tikhon stated matter-of-factly: “I voted for Vladimir Putin... I like one thing about him – he does not seek power at all.”<sup>cxxxvi</sup> His invectives against freedom of expression, such as “the people who scream most of all about the threat of ‘restrictions’ are precisely those who have monopolized information and have transformed the news media into a real weapon,”<sup>cxxxvii</sup> reiterates the clichés of pro-government propaganda.

Through his essays and sermons on the popular website [www.pravoslavie.ru](http://www.pravoslavie.ru), run by his monastery, Fr. Tikhon publishes anti-liberal, anti-globalist, anti-Semitic, anti-Western, and monarchist literature. Apart from fighting against the liberals and the West, Father Tikhon has also fought against the devil in its various manifestations as well. In the late 1990s, when the state imposed the Taxpayer's Identification Number, or INN, skeptics within the ROC feared that it contained 666 – the “number of the beast” in the *Book of Revelation*. For two years, Fr. Tikhon campaigned against this “tool of American totalitarianism” until it was clear that the Church leadership would not endorse the campaign. In 2000, Tikhon shifted his ground radically and appeared unshakable in support of the government policy, firing at those who used to be his campaign followers.<sup>cxxxviii</sup> When David Copperfield was invited to the celebration of the 850<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Moscow, Fr. Tikhon warned Muscovites about the dangerous spiritual dependence on “the darkest and most destructive forces” of the magician's performance: “It's simply amazing, how spiritually illiterate and insensitive are those who invited this man on the anniversary, and even to the heart of Moscow – Kremlin... Participation and even staying as a spectator to these occult experiments will entail the most negative mental and physical consequences, up to madness and suicide,”<sup>cxxxix</sup> he warned in an interview to the reporters of Itar-Tass. However, despite his warning, the Muscovites turned out in waves to see the American magic show, and the “devilish” barcodes are printed on the back of each copy of his hot-selling book.

#### Essentialist Representation of the Monastery

Having been under fire for the obtrusive absence of religious messages whatsoever in his 2008 documentary, Fr. Tikhon was conscious enough to offer the public the Orthodox ideal of his

perception in his 2011 autobiographical novel. The subject matter that he chose to elaborate upon is Russian monasticism.

Monasteries have always been central to the Russian imagination. John P. Burgess has articulated the fascination of Russian readers with monasteries: “Their holy men and women, represented by Fr. Zosima in Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, inspired Russians to repent of their sins and glimpse the mystical interconnection of all life.”<sup>cxl</sup> Fr. Tikhon’s book vividly portrays the legendary monastic elders of the Pskov Caves Monastery as great masters of wisdom and spiritual gifts. The monastery itself, at which Fr. Tikhon used to be a novice and stayed during flying visits for eight years, was one of the few renowned Orthodox centres in the Soviet era. It is noteworthy that since Soviet times, the monastery has been functioning as the showcase of Russian Orthodoxy to tourists and pilgrims.

Tikhon’s choice of monasticism was not necessarily out of pure concern of the human soul, but was largely influenced by the renewed and growing interest in questions of cultural identity. He presents the Orthodox monastery as an iconic symbol of Russian cultural identity. Tikhon demonstrates his impression of the Pskov-Caves Monastery’s beauty upon his first visit, highlighting its peaceful setting, its secluded charm, and its flower gardens in the hermitage. Much of the beauty that impressed him was of a natural sort, but he also emphasizes the personal quality of his encounter with nature, implying a beauty of a supernatural kind. If the monastery is not actually Paradise, it is the closest thing possible:

Внутри монастыря неожиданно оказалось так уютно и красиво, что нельзя было не залюбоваться. Все здесь создавало впечатление если не сказки, поскольку очевидно

было явью, то чего-то *удивительного*. По вымощенной булыжником дороге я спустился на монастырскую площадь, по пути разглядывая *разноцветные* монастырские корпуса, разбитые повсюду цветники с *прекрасными* розами. А церкви здесь были такие *уютные и приветливые*, каких я нигде больше не видел. (emphases mine)

Inside the monastery it was surprisingly *comfortable and beautiful* – so much so that it was impossible not to be amazed. Everything here gave an impression – if not of *fairy tale* – because this was obviously real life – then at least of something *wondrous*. By the pathway over the well-kept cobblestones, I walked down to the main square of the monastery. Now and then as I passed, looking at the *colourful* buildings of the monastery, I saw that everywhere were *beautiful* flowerbeds with *lovely* roses blooming. The churches here were so *comfortable* and so *attractive*, I had never seen such beautiful churches.

Tikhon dwells on the impression of its buildings, walls, splendid liturgies, otherworldly dwellers, and legendary elders who enjoy great reputations for sanctity in their own lifetimes, and the surrounding woods, all in an aesthetic ideal. Through his detailed description of his impression, the reader is given an overall picture of the Pechory town in which the monastery is located, as a “surprisingly well-kept little town” with “lovely small homes, with turrets and neat small lawns and little palisades.” When the narrator has arrived at the monastery, we begin to see “the great stone walls” and “the old-wrought iron gates.” Inside the main cathedral of the monastery, “the

low whitewashing ceilings” dimly reflected the lantern light in which the faces of the icons “in their ancient frames looked at me attentively,” and even the long Orthodox service “unfolded for me as if in one breath.” Afterwards, the monks, “with graceful singing marched off majestically, two by two, towards the refectory”:

Все поражало меня: и дьякона с распущенными длинными волосами и *красивыми* орарями по плечам, и грозный наместник, и священники — пожилые и молодые, лица которых были совсем другие, чем у людей в миру. И архиерей — огромный, очень старый, *величественный* в своих древних облачениях, с *мудрым* и необыкновенно *добрым* лицом.

...I was completely struck by everything: the deacon with his long flowing locks and his *beautiful* stoles rippling over his shoulders. And the very serious head of the monastery and all the priests, some old and some young. Their faces were completely different from the faces of ordinary Soviet people outside of the monastery. The archbishop impressed me: he was a huge, elderly man, *resplendent* in his *ancient* raiment, and with a *wise* and usually *benevolent* face. (Shevkunov 16)

Every detail is intended to convey particular attributes and ideals that emerge from the popular perception of a monastery: peace, beauty, love, and harmony. At night, the monastery appeared to be even more “incredibly beautiful” and “not frightening at all, but both mysterious and peaceful.” In the guest rooms, the relations between the pilgrims, “as I could immediately see, were entirely friendly, generous and benevolent,” as were the relations between the brethren:

...монахи и послушники дружелюбно переговаривались, подшучивали иногда. Это мне очень понравилось, такой спокойной доброжелательности я в миру не встречал.

...the monks and novices talked to each other in a very friendly manner, sometimes even joking among themselves. I was very pleased by the atmosphere, because it was so calm and benevolent: I had never encountered such kindness in the secular world. (Shevkunov, 17).

The refectory is very generous towards pilgrims: “plenty of everything – more than enough for everyone.” And the food served there was “not luxurious, but ... quite tasty”. During the meal, an appointed monk would read aloud the lives of the saints with “ancient Byzantine names.” The cell in which the narrator stayed as a pilgrim was “spacious and neat,” furnished with “ancient bookcases with beautiful woodcarvings.” In the warm and inviting atmosphere of the monastery, “everything was there to help me relax and feel at home.”

Tikhon describes the monastery in the authorial persona of an approaching traveller. The intimate and personal dynamics are reinforced when he places his reader in the imaginary role of a pilgrim. This intimate perspective seems to beckon to the readers who desire to see with their own eyes a spot in which “heaven and earth came together.”<sup>cxli</sup>

When Gogol first visited the Optina Pustyn Monastery in the nineteenth century during its era of prominence (1850), he left his accounts of it in a letter addressed to Duke A. P. Tolstoy.<sup>cxlii</sup> Fr. Tikhon’s account of the Pskov Caves Monastery is greatly influenced by Gogol’s impressions of the Optina Pustyn Monastery’s beauty and isolation:



Благодать видимо там царствует. Это слышится в самом наружном служении... Нигде я не видал таких монахов, с каждым из них, мне казалось, беседует все небесное. Я не расспрашивал, кто из них как живет: их лица сказывали сами все. Самые служки меня поразили светлой ласковостью ангелов, лучезарной простотой обхожденья; самые работники в монастыре, самые крестьяне и жители окрестностей. За несколько верст, подъезжая к обители, уже слышишь ее благоухание: все становится приветливее, поклоны ниже и участие к человеку больше.

Clearly, grace dwells in that place. You can feel it even in the external manifestations of worship. Nowhere have I seen monks like those. Through every one of them I seemed to converse with the whole of heaven. I didn't ask how they lived; their faces told me everything. Even the servants amazed me with their luminous expressions, so pleasant and angelic, and the radiant simplicity of their manners; and the workmen in the monastery too, and the peasants and people living in the neighborhood. A few versts away from the hermitage, one can already smell the perfume of its virtues in the air: everything becomes hospitable, people bow more deeply, brotherly love increases.

L.J. Stanton points out that this sort of description was typical in nineteenth-century accounts of monasteries and their elders, describing their visits to a "hidden monastic paradise," codifying

the monastery as a place in which monks and nature are in harmony and people live in the primordial condition of wholeness.<sup>cxliii</sup> Landscape is important to the myths and memories of a culture, as symbolic places “have specific cultural meanings that construct, maintain, and circulate myths of a unified national identity.”<sup>cxliv</sup> Tikhon, like many of his compatriots, holds out great hopes for the possible role of monasticism in a national rebirth of spirituality. The Pskov-Caves Monastery is represented as a priceless feature of the Russian land, the iconic site that embodies the nation’s realization of Orthodox tradition. The narrator turns to it in his search for the Russian cultural and religious milieu that transcended and encompassed many centuries. Fr. Tikhon’s Orthodox novel carries the mission of establishing, reproducing, and nurturing Russianness. He carries on the Russian idea developed by the nineteenth-century Slavophiles who, in their efforts to determine and delineate Russianness, regarded religion as the cardinal determining factor.

In Anthony Easthope’s commentary on the idealization of Englishness, national cultural identity is understood as an ideology, a set of signifying practices.<sup>cxlv</sup> In the empiricist style, the narrative of Fr. Tikhon’s book points towards a conception of a free-standing, unconstructed, directly experienced subject. Yet the very landscape of the monastery and the town has alienated modernity. The tour of the Pskov-Caves Monastery serves as a point of physical and ideological orientation: it acts upon the reader’s sense of belonging, so that to dwell within it, even for a short time, will help to achieve a kind of self-realization, freed from its inauthentic and hectic urban existence. A similar contrast between secular and religious, between urban and rural, can be observed in Alexander Torik’s Orthodox bestseller *Flavian*, whose main protagonist escapes his noisy and stressful urban life, adopts Orthodoxy in a quiet small village, returns to his Russian roots, and feels re-authenticated in his ideologically charged landscape.

In this landscape the acting characters are also selective and symbolic, perfectly fitting into the nationalist project, as seen in the following description of the people who were attending the church service:

... я разглядел людей, наполнявших храм. Преимущественно это были простые женщины, старше средних лет, реже мужчины. Но молилось и немало молодых людей, во всяком случае, молодежь здесь встречалась чаще, чем в московских церквях. И конечно — странники, юродивые, все те, кто составляет ни с чем не сравнимый дух русского монастыря и посадского города вокруг него.

...I had a good look at the people who had come to the church. Most of these were simple peasant women, many of them — middle-aged or older. Men were rarer in the throng of worshipers. But there was also a decent crowd of young people, or at the very least, there were more young people gathered here than in the churches of Moscow. And of course, there were also pilgrims, wandering “holy fools”, and all those unique characters who make up the incomparable spirit of a Russian monastery, and in this case, the town connected to it. (Shevkunov 15-16)

The hierarchical evaluation of “familiar” and “traditional” practices appeals to the essentialist and nationalist construction of a symbolic landscape in which particular kinds of people carry out certain actions, producing a supposedly harmonious world. The Pechory town is presented in its imaginary and idealized aspect as a bounded space of preferred ideological landscape:

Печоры представляли собой удивительно *чистый и уютный* городок, с особым укладом, *сложившимся за века* вокруг древнего монастыря. Здесь счастливым образом сочеталась православная культура церковной Руси и бытовая аккуратность соседней Эстонии. Помимо того что в Печорах — в отличие от большинства советских городов — было необычайно опрятно и красиво, здесь даже в восьмидесятые годы молодые люди, собиравшиеся по вечерам на скамеечках, вставали, когда мимо проходил пожилой человек. Основную часть печерян составляли люди верующие. Сквернословия на улицах нельзя было услышать.

The small town of Pechory is a remarkably *clean and pleasant* place with its unique character that has developed as *a result of centuries* in association with the ancient monastery. Here the most felicitous combination between the Orthodox culture of old Holy Mother Russia and the day-to-day orderliness of neighbouring Estonia has arisen. And aside from the fact that in Pechory, unlike the vast majority of Soviet towns, everything was remarkably neat and beautiful, there even in the 1980s young people sitting on the park benches in the evening would stand up when an older person would walk past them. Most of the people in the town were pious believers. We would never hear a curse word while walking the streets. (Shevkunov 124)

Fr. Tikhon emphasizes that the ancient way of life there remained relatively unchanged, despite the enormous changes that have taken place in the Soviet period. The narrative of the unified Russian Orthodox culture with its search for traditions asserts a profound continuity running from the ancient times to the present day. The golden era of the seventeenth-century Holy Rus' is celebrated as a defining moment of Russianness, and Orthodoxy as its legitimate source. The never-changing borders of the Pechory town sustain mythical continuity as a "natural" space that contains a communality of Orthodox culture and national interests among all its inhabitants. It is a bounded historical entity, like the Holy Mother Russia. By evoking a putatively ancient, organic oneness, the landscape contributes to the nationalist project of forming and reinforcing national consciousness without openly claiming that it is doing so. The scenes that are held to epitomize Russianness are highly selective. The photo illustrations of Pechory town and the monastery are confined to old buildings with the church domes showing behind trees, rose-laden gardens, pastoral and vernal scenery, featuring quiet old ways of life; rarely do modern buildings intrude in these scenes.

The ideological landscape speaks of Tikhon's will to produce a purified space in which anything "out of place" stands out as un-Russian. This calls into play the opposition between the Orthodox and the Other, between the religious and secular. In this pre-eminent container of culture and identity, visitors are eschewed as unwelcomed intruders into order and pureness. In the chapter "Father Avvakum and the Religious Affairs Commissioner from Pskov," Tikhon depicts a loyal, upright and outspoken gatekeeper of the monastery, Fr. Avvakum, a heroic old veteran, who "had finished the war at the siege of Budapest," with this reference demonstrating Tikhon's customary admiration of army personnel. One day Fr. Avvakum announced that he would no longer allow non-believers into the monastery, because he was sick of the "размалеванные

дамочки-туристки под ручку с мужиками-безбожниками, от которых за версту разит табачищем” (simpering, shamelessly dressed young tourist hussies, walking hand-in-hand with their godless boyfriends who stink for a mile from cigarette smoke). He swears to put the “mess” to an end:

то коммунисты с баптистами, то новоявленные экуменисты,  
то мусульмане в обнимку с нехристями-жидами. Надо этому  
положить конец!

One day it’s Communists with holly rollers, the next it’s those  
newfangled ‘ecumenists’, and the next day it’s Zionists<sup>4</sup> locked in  
embrace with the Mujahideen! Time to put an end to it!  
(Shevkunov 257)

Presented half-heartedly in the form of the funny remarks of a grumpy old man, this unambiguous xenophobic orientation shows through the caricatures of various intruders, which maintains consistency with the “outcasts” in Fr. Tikhon’s documentary film: those who are not Orthodox cannot be considered “real” and respectable Russians. After Fr. Avvakum’s diligent purge of visitors, the monastery became much more pleasing in the narrator’s eyes, with only familiar locals:

Бродят и крестятся на храмы *благочестивые* паломники,  
*знакомые* бабки подходят под благословение, *странники с*  
*узелками* отдыхают после литургии, *юродивый* бегаёт вокруг  
колодца. (Emphasis mine.)

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<sup>4</sup> The word “zionist” is the translator’s choice who probably tried to soften the text by avoiding more offensive word of “Yid”.

Pious pilgrims were wandering around the churches crossing themselves, and familiar grannies had come to be blessed, and wanderers with their wanderers' bundles on their staffs were resting after the Liturgy, and the holy fools were running around near the well. (Shevkunov 257)

To the narrator's relief, the "normally pestiferous" tourists had disappeared. The narrator gasps in admiration of this perfect scene that is described as well preserved and never changed since the "ancient Holy Russia," so that he exclaimed that Fr. Avvakum must have "worked a miracle." In this seemingly "humble" novel, Fr. Tikhon did not forget his ideological battle which was veiled in "effortless" jokes.

#### [National Treasure of Elders](#)

A principle factor of the Pskov Caves Monastery's fame was the presence of the legendary elders endowed with spiritual gifts. Fr. Tikhon describes them as the living legacy of Russian Orthodox spirituality. His work offers a series of portraits of the venerable "everyday saints": the elder dwellers of the Pskov-Caves Monastery. The first elder presented is Fr. John Krestiankin, a highly regarded starets of the contemporary Russian Orthodox Church, who was Tikhon's spiritual father.

Hermitic monastic spirituality never truly interested Fr. Tikhon. His choice of Fr. John as the first saint on his literary iconostas is determined more by the symbolic authority this man enjoyed in popular consciousness and among Kremlin politicians. Throughout its history, the Pskov-Pechersky Monastery was famous for its elders. Tsars and presidents would come to the monastery just to speak with them: Peter I had been in the monastery four times, and Tsar

Alexander I had a talk with the seer Lazarus there. The last Tsar, Nicholas II, had also been there on pilgrimage. For many contemporary believers, Fr. John is a link to the core of Russian history. Every year tens of thousands of people turn to Father John for spiritual guidance or confession, and at times, to accomplish their dream to leave worldly life. The Russian newspaper *Arguments and Facts* -- one of the most widely read newspapers in Russia over the past two decades -- writes proudly that today, “the tradition of the elders in the monastery is being continued by Archimandrite John (Krestiankin).”<sup>cxlvi</sup>

It was Fr. John who received the dubious honour of blessing President Putin in 2000 when the acting president (who had yet to win the vote of the Russian people) came to visit the elder in the Pskov-Caves Monastery, accompanied by Fr. Tikhon. In April 2000, when the old man turned 90 years old, Putin sent him a congratulatory telegram. The newspaper *Arguments and Facts* notes of this: “Then many have noted that for the first time in the history a Russian President congratulated a monk. A few months later, in August, the president came personally to see Archimandrite John.”<sup>cxlvii</sup> The starets’ political significance is also strategically crucial for Tikhon, who welcomed loudly Putin’s coming into office.

Tikhon devotes much detail to the “down-to-earth,” physical details of the starets, through the presence of a quite secular-minded young observer: the novice-narrator. Fr. John did not make a great impression on the narrator at first, except that he was a benevolent old man in rather good physical condition, “вечно куда-то спешащий, даже суетливый” (always running here and there, a bit fussed, even...) (Shevkunov 25). Tikhon purposely defies the stereotypical projection of a lofty, stern-faced, and dignified image of an ascetic, setting the scene of the first impression in a motion, using words such as “at a run,” “drag off,” and “race,” as though in purpose of desacralization and creation of a perfectly ordinary little man hurried by his fellow monk,



striving to get on time to the church services, at the same time maneuvering to talk to the pilgrims who blocked his way:

Молодой монастырский эконоом отец Филарет, подхватив под руку отца Иоанна, почти бегом тащил его за собой, так что тот еле поспевал за своим келейником. Вслед за ними немедленно устремлялась толпа паломников, поджидавших батюшку на улице. Так, все вместе, они неслись через монастырский двор. Монашеские мантии и клобуки развевались, батюшка то и дело спотыкался, задыхался от бега, впопыхах все же пытаюсь благословить кого-то из паломников и чуть ли не ответить на какие-то вопросы. Отец Филарет на это страшно сердился, кричал своим пронзительным фальцетом то на батюшку, то на паломников, иногда даже отгонял их зонтиком. Наконец он проталкивал отца Иоанна в храм и побыстрее утаскивал его в алтарь.

Father Philaret, the young econom or steward of the monastery, would take father John by the arm and almost at a run drag him off somewhere so quickly that he could barely keep up with his cell attendant. Following this pair, immediately there flowed a crowd of pilgrims, waiting for their chance to speak to Fr. John, right there on the street. And so they all ran, racing headlong through the entire courtyard of the monastery, their robes and the Orthodox klobuk veils flowing, with Father John stumbling over himself now

and then as he panted, out of breath, trying on the run to bless some pilgrims and simultaneously managing even to answer theological questions! Father Philaret would get quite angry about this, and would yell – sometimes at Father John, sometimes at the pilgrims, whom he might even drive away with his umbrella. Finally he would drag Father John into the church and would lead him to the altar as quickly as possible. (Shevkunov 25)

The amiable, even funny, manner of the elder who enjoys high prestige in the Church, the accessible, lively, story-telling vocabulary without ecclesiastical didacticism, and the sympathetic representation of ordinary human life won the favour of many Russian readers. Using physical details and a modern, secular perspective, the work constructs a monastic life that looks “comprehensible” and “close” to the readers’ real lives, but in an idealized fashion. This seemingly casual, laid-back tone brings the church writer significantly closer to his secular audience.

However, when depicting the elder’s spirituality, Tikhon offers a rather conventional portrait of a starets in the traditional sense: first and foremost, the elder is represented as a spectacular wonder-worker and visionary:

...отец Иоанн на самом деле — один из очень немногих людей на земле, для которых раздвигаются границы пространства и времени, и Господь дает им видеть прошлое и будущее, как настоящее. Мы с удивлением и не без страха убедились на собственном опыте, что перед этим старичком ...

человеческие души открыты со всеми их сокровенными тайнами, с самыми заветными стремлениями, с тщательно скрываемыми, потаенными делами и мыслями. В древности таких людей называли пророками. У нас в Православной Церкви их именуют старцами.

Father John was actually one of those rare human beings on earth for whom the boundaries of space and time are shifted, someone to whom the Lord has given the gift to see the past and the future as clearly as the present. With complete surprise and not without awe we experienced this on ourselves. This man...was able to read the secrets of human souls, and all their hidden treasures, desires, deeds, and thoughts were open to him. In ancient time people like him were called prophets. We in the Russian Orthodox Church call such people elders. (Shevkunov 26)

Following the genre convention, the narrator articulates Fr. John's moderate attitude towards the charisma he embodies:

Сам отец Иоанн никогда не называл себя старцем. А когда ему что-то подобное говорили, только в ужасе всплескивал руками: «Какие старцы?! Мы в лучшем случае — опытные старички». Он и до конца жизни, по глубочайшему своему смирению, был в этом искренне уверен. Впрочем, равно как и многие,

знавшие отца Иоанна, были убеждены, что в его лице Господь послал им истинного старца, знающего волю Божию.

But Father John never called himself an elder. And when people would say something like that to him, he would wave his arms disparagingly: “What elders? We just happen to be old men who have experienced a few things!” To the very end of his life he was convinced of this, in keeping with his very profound inner humility. And yet many of those who knew Father John were convinced that in his person the Lord has sent us a true elder, someone who understood the Providence and the mysterious will of God. (Shevkunov 26)

In accordance with the standard starets paradigm, Tikhon lists the important gifts that Fr. John possesses as a starets: clairvoyance, prophecy, discernment, and mercy: “This man... was able to read the secrets of human souls, and all their hidden treasures, desires, deeds, and thoughts were open to him” (Shevkunov 26). For example, he successfully predicted that a gravely ill boy from Moscow would survive without surgery thanks to his mother’s faith in the starets’ words; on the other hand, a woman named Valentina ignored Fr. John’s warning and ended up dying in the hospital. These rather banal examples lack the capacity to stimulate serious thoughts about God’s existence, but naïve as they may be, such texts are indubitably popular among readers who seek simpler, clear-cut values to cling to in the rapidly changing circumstances of present-day Russia. As Yuri Lotman observes in relation to mass literature: “Such literature is particularly attractive to the mass consciousness because it replaces difficult, incomprehensive reality, which does not lend itself to a single interpretation, with easily assimilated myths” (13).

Bishop Tikhon eagerly portrays elder John as a representative of loyalty to the institutional Church, despite the personal, non-institutional character of elders' traditional charisma. Absolute submission to church authority is made the elder's core message:

Отец Иоанн с огромным благоговением, любовью и послушанием относился к церковному священноначалию. Осознание того, что истина на земле пребывает лишь в Церкви, была глубоко прочувствована им. Батюшка не терпел никаких расколов, никаких бунтов и всегда бесстрашно выступал против них, хотя прекрасно знал, сколько клеветы, а порой и ненависти ему придется испытать. Он был поистине человеком Церкви. Множество раз он наставлял нас действовать именно так, как решит Святейший, как благословит епископ, наместник.

Father John had great reverence, love, and respect for the hierarchy of the Russian Orthodox Church. He felt deep within his soul that higher truth on this earth can be found only in the Church. Father John would brook no schisms or rebellions, and would always fearlessly speak out against such things, even though he knew quite well how much slander and sometimes even hatred this would force him to undergo. He was truly a man of the Church. Many times he would command an act be done exactly as His Holiness the Patriarch would decide, or as the bishop would decide,

or as the abbot of the monastery would decide, even though he disagreed. (Shevkunov 44)

The starets looks seamlessly in line with the authority of Church hierarchy. Unlike Optina elders who “were radically different from the churchmen (including monks in the ecclesiastical hierarchy) whose claim to authority was institutional, the elders carried out their lives of personal contemplation and public ministry within the canonical bounds of Orthodoxy.”<sup>cxlviii</sup> Charismatic authority involves a type of leadership in which authority derives from the charisma of the leader. This stands in contrast to traditional authority secured by the hierarchical structure of the establishment. In *Spiritual Elders: Charisma and Tradition in Russian Orthodoxy*, Irina Paert examined the status and role of elders vis-à-vis other authoritative figures in Orthodox ecclesiastical life, such as bishops, abbots, and parish priests.<sup>cxlix</sup> She stated that startsy were a continual source of tension within the ecclesiastical community because they often countered the dominant centralizing tendencies of a strong hierarchically structured institution, allowing for alternatives to the parish and the bishop. Tikhon Shevkunov promotes a new type of starets who are more than willing to stay in line with the Church hierarchy and will command an act be done exactly as the official Church wants even when they themselves disagree: “Believers ascribed his charisma to him on the grounds that his image, based on details of his biography and social position, fit perfectly into the category (or, rather, categories) of the “true Russian religiosity” existing in the imagination of his promoters.”<sup>cl</sup>

Father Tikhon structures his work as a modern synaxarium. It includes four short stories with the subheading “From the Prologue” (the Russian Synaxarion of the sixteenth century), and names another two short stories about the New-Martyrs movement as “A Tale That Could Go Into a Future Prologue.” The distinctive heterogeneity of his novel’s content – lives of the saints, church teachings, edifying short tales borrowed from Eastern Orthodox monastic collections, and modern stories – makes the novel stylistically even closer to a prologue. Riccardo Picchio has stated in regard of Russian hagiography: “Frequently transcending the limits of vita genre, old Russian hagiographic compositions may conform to the schemes of other literary modes of expression such as sermons and chronicle accounts.”<sup>cli</sup> *Synaxarion* is a word borrowed from the Greek Συναξάριον, originally meaning “to bring together.” In the Orthodox Church, a synaxarion is a compilation of rather brief hagiographies, first used as an index to Bible readings and other lessons to be read in church. Over time, and without changing the name, it was expanded with complete texts of these lessons and transformed into the “Gospel” and “Apostle” books for the liturgy. The Byzantine synaxarion was first translated into the Old Slavonic in the twelfth century and was supplemented with local Russian saints’ vitae, such as those of Ss. Boris and Gleb, or of St. Theodosius of Kiev Caves Monastery, and the Life of Princess Olga. This process of broadening content continued until the eighteenth century, incorporating various local legends and apocrypha. Whereas a patericon is usually devoted to the monks of particular monasteries, such as the Kiev Caves Monastery, the Solovky Monastery, or the Holy Trinity Lavra, the Prologue was developed into a sort of Orthodox encyclopedia with many episodical rather than biographical entries. It contains short, comprehensible, and often amusing passages, which secured its continued success among common people, who might have never read the serious

works by ancient church Fathers, but still received Christian teaching through these simple stories.

Tikhon's novel contains four short Prologue stories as follows:

1. "A Story about People like Us – Only 1500 Years Ago" (113), a short allegorical fable about choosing the eternal goal of serving God rather than indulging in a transient, volatile world. It follows a modern story of how a group of young Soviets, including the narrator himself, chose to become monks; these stories echo each other and serve as a moral core. Both the title and the content of the prologue story suggest a close parallel between the ancient history and the modern-day history.
2. "The Tale of the Prayer and the Little Fox" (209), ostensibly from the Prologue,<sup>clii</sup> in which an intellectual monk, although superior in his brilliant knowledge to the simple peasant, proved less insightful than the latter, for he failed to recognize God in the fox whereas the peasant simply "believed" that it was God. This fable was placed after the chapter of "Theologians" in order to build a bridge between past and present and to be the moral of the modern story. In her relatively brief review of the book, Tikhon's like-minded ally Natalya Narochnitskaya called the Church, the village, and the army "the three pillars of Russia and Russian life" and asserts that monks of the Pskov-Caves Monastery, "the fragile old men and the young were braver and more honest than the renowned dissidents who do not shun getting help from overt external enemies of Russia."<sup>cliii</sup> Fr. Tikhon does not hide his hostility towards liberal intellectuals and well-educated theologians ("The Theologians" 199; "Father Gabriel" 126), depicting them as snobbish, proud, yet shallow people. On the other hand, military personnel, Soviet or



post-Soviet, are portrayed as upright, noble, and righteous (“The Great Abbot Archimandrite Alipius” 142, 144).

3. “The Tale of the Prodigal Bishop” (331), in which a good old bishop, much beloved by his people, commits the sin of fornication, but his sincere repentance moves the parishioners who loved and venerated him, and so God forgives him too.
4. “The Foolish Townsfolk” (401), in which the citizens of a town laugh at and ignore the advice of an old bishop, until he dies and a new, young, but abusive bishop is appointed. The townspeople suffer under the new bishop, as a punishment sent by God.

The last two stories are the two sides of a coin, depicting the author’s perception of an ideal relationship between church hierarchy and the people: the prelates are loving and wise, and those who do not obey them are to be condemned and punished by God. In all four stories, the protagonist-narrator disappears, since he has little narrative function there.

There are two stories from Soviet history that Tikhon regards as fit for a future Prologue:

- A. “On the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, All the Water in the World Becomes Holy. A story that may end up in a future Prologue” (В праздник Крещения вода во всем мире становится святой – История, которая может войти в будущий «Пролог») (253).
- B. “About One Holy Monastery. A Tale that Could Go into a Future Prologue” (Об одной святой обители. История, которая может войти в будущий «Пролог») (215).

Tikhon makes clear references to the Prologue, implying the bridging role of his work, suggesting that the Prologue is continuing and will grow in the future, and that Christian cultural ties between the past and present run without interruption. With this in mind, it is important to

examine the background of hagiography as a field of literary endeavour. The widespread enthusiasm for medieval Russian culture in post-Soviet literature is not spontaneous but can be traced back to the nineteenth century, especially the second half, when nationalistic sentiments inspired fascination with the past, and interest in medieval Russian literature and artistic productions became unprecedented. Fr. Tikhon's work plays a role in bringing traditional Russian culture to the attention of his contemporaries. His combination of nationalism and romantic idealization of the past helped create an atmosphere of intensified curiosity and attraction to medieval Orthodox literature.

Prologue stories were popular in pre-revolutionary Russia, and many nineteenth-century Russian writers, both political radicals and their religiously-minded contemporaries, turned to popular saints' lives. For example, both Nikolai Chernyshevsky and Maxim Gorky applied motifs borrowed from saints' lives to their depictions of the ideal human being.<sup>cliv</sup> On the other hand, Nikolai Leskov and Leo Tolstoy used the Prologue stories for a humanized moral reflection. Leskov was keenly interested in hagiographic stories; he owned several copies of the Prologue and reworked a number of its stories.<sup>clv</sup> His interest in the ancient Prologue plots, however, was not focused on how well those characters observed Christian rituals or conceived the doctrines, or performed ascetic feats; he was mainly fascinated by the poetic elements in them and highly regarded their literary significance.<sup>clvi</sup> He reworked them in a humanistic sense. His retold Prologue story of the woodcutter ("The Tale of the God-pleasing Woodcutter," 1886) relates the story of a simple, humble, and virtuous woodcutter's prayer that brought long-awaited rain to the people of Cyprus, saving the crops from drought and the people from starvation. His prayers proved more effective than those of the other Christians, most notably the bishop. In this story, "you can imagine a simple man completing such things that are even beyond the strength of the

clergy.”<sup>clvii</sup> This story reveals Leskov’s Tolstoyan taste, as such stories would be awkwardly “anarchist”<sup>clviii</sup> to Father Tikhon and consciously avoided in his effort to secure the absolute authority of the Church establishment. Leskov’s starets Pamba says that a terrible time comes when “монахи оставят труд и последуют пениям и гласам”<sup>clix</sup> (monks leave their work and follow the worldly singing and talking—translation mine); while Tikhon’s starets Alipius (Voronov) proudly announces: “I’m a Soviet archimandrite” (Shevkunov 141).

Behind Leskov’s interpretation of Prologue stories stands his unofficial, modern understanding of “праведник” (righteousness). Like Tolstoy, who was accused by the Church of wrong and harmful interpretations of the Gospel, Leskov asserted his right to disagree with the opinions held by the official Church. The plot of Tolstoy’s story *Three Elders* is also borrowed from the Prologue, in which a bishop bows to three elders and sees his rank as worthless, seeking only benefits for the people. The story delivers a message of the superiority of unlettered spirituality to formal religion. Both Leskov and Tolstoy, carrying on the humanistic tradition of nineteenth-century literature, sought to bring a liberating message that the desire to do good should be the highest moral law for human society, whereas Fr. Tikhon’s anecdotal stories of monastic life are developed around external hierarchical obedience and the attitude of peaceful monks toward authority. Readers would well have a similar “childish” reaction to that of the grumpy novice-narrator, were they to face the stern yet “loving” administration of the monastery; this constitutes the full complexity of life in Tikhon’s novel. The penetration of inner spiritual struggles to find a purpose and meaning in human existence, which was painful in Dostoevsky’s work, is absent in Tikhon’s “extremely tranquilizing” (an online reader’s remark) novel.

Leskov borrows only the basic plot from the Prologue and significantly modifies it by developing it into a brilliant literary “skaz” (a Russian oral narrative form that uses dialect and

slang in order to take on the persona of a character), while Tikhon's Prologue stories remain short and undeveloped. His reworking of the Prologue stories reflect both his thematic interests and the sociopolitical trends of his time. The hagiographical genre serves the underlying polemical purpose: inserted into the autobiographical narrative body, these prologue stories add an old-fashioned, allegorical, and everlasting sense to the secular fictional world of his work. The ancient stories, put together with his own autobiographical memoir, are meant to bring a sense of static time or a timeless eternal space in which the old story is always cautionary and able to explain reality, and a new story from the present day is just another illustration of the old meaning.

The various biblical parables throughout the book serve a similar function. In the chapter "Being a Novice," for example, Tikhon recalls his life as a novice in the monastery and compares it to the Apostles as Christ's novices:

Это напоминает лишь светлую отраду беспечального детства:  
жизнь состоит из одних прекрасных открытий в новом —  
бесконечном и неизведанном мире. Кстати, две тысячи лет  
назад апостолы, по сути, три года были самыми настоящими  
новоначальными послушниками у Иисуса Христа. Их главным  
занятием было следовать за своим Учителем и с радостным  
изумлением открывать для себя Его всемогущество и любовь.

Ровно то же самое происходит с послушниками наших дней.  
Апостол Павел сделал великое открытие: «Иисус Христос  
вчера и сегодня и во веки Тот же». Эти слова подтверждаются  
всей историей христианства. Меняются времена и люди, но

Христос и для поколения первых христиан, и для наших современников остается все Тем же.

It's reminiscent of those magic free moments in childhood, when everything that you do consists entirely of beautiful revelations in a new and endlessly undiscovered world. By the way, 2000 years ago, the apostles themselves basically served for three years as the first novices, in service to Jesus Christ. Their main task was to follow their Teacher, and to discover for themselves with joyous astonishment His omnipotence and love.

*The very same thing takes places in our days. The Apostle Paul made a great discovery: "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, and today, and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). These words have been proved throughout the history of Christianity. Times and people have changed, but whether for the generation of the first Christians, or for our own contemporaries, Christ remains the same."* (Shevkunov 93)

Tikhon attempts to absolutize Christian doctrines, presenting them as the eternal truth and the official church as the one and only representative of that ultimate truth, no matter how much time changes.

If the Prologue story was a familiar narrative form to the contemporaries of Leskov and Tolstoy, this is not the case for Fr. Tikhon's readers. For post-Soviet citizens who read secular classical Russian literature, the patericon and prologue are largely unfamiliar. Ordinary readers mostly

appreciate the novel's humorous and effortless narrative tone and the "first-hand" observation of an insider, whereas the quaint genre prototypes were mentioned only by literary critics.

The author/narrator occupies the position of an observer, or a chronicler of this "sacred history," simply adding more strokes to existing harmonious images and praising "eternal" values. In another chapter, "A Sermon Given on the 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday after Pentecost, November 19, 1995," the story from the Gospel of Luke of Jesus healing a woman with an incurable disease precedes a present-day story and serves as a moral for that story. In the Gospel story, the woman is ashamed to confess that she had secretly touched the Lord's clothes in hope of being healed:

В ответ на это Христос обратил к ней слова, которых было достаточно, чтобы объяснить случившееся чудо и ученикам, и женщине, и нам с вами:

— Велика вера твоя! Иди с миром!

Так во все времена переплетаются смиренная и всемогущая вера в Бога и гроша ломаного не стоящие временные человеческие законы, ложный стыд и боязнь людского осуждения.

Christ replies with words that were sufficient *to explain not just to His disciples, and to the woman herself, but to all of us, exactly what had happened...* And he said unto her: "Daughter, thy faith had made thee whole; go in peace and be whole of thy plague." Thus throughout the ages of humility and all-powerful faith in God

are interwoven with worthless temporary human laws, false shame and fear of human condemnation. (Shevkunov 203-204)

The story that follows this moral teaching describes a solemn public ceremony of meeting the Vladimir icon of the Mother of God, probably the most famous miraculous icon in Russia, that took place at Fr. Tikhon's Sretensky Monastery. Scholars, art historians, city officials, and high-ranking military officers were present, and the narrator (head of the monastery) took the initiative to invite those senior politicians and dignitaries to approach the icon and pray for whatever they desired, taking advantage of this "great opportunity". However, they refused to move, smiling "with embarrassment" in the awkward silence. The narrator then started to rebuke "those bureaucrats" standing "like stumps of wood" for the "fear of the Pharisees." He assumed with confidence that "each of them, if they had been all by themselves, would have happily come up to the great ancient icon and would have asked the Holy Mother of God for their greatest desire" (Shevkunov 205).

The 600<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the icon's transference occurred in 1995, when the Russian state had embraced the Church for only a few years. Those senior officials, products of Soviet times, probably had different conceptions of the world than Fr. Tikhon. However, to Tikhon, it seemed irrelevant whether they truly believe in the power of the icon or not; what seemed to concern him was that they had missed such a "chance of a lifetime" to benefit from the icon only due to the opinions of others. Finally a high-ranking police officer, "blushing as red as an old Soviet flag," stepped forward and prayed to the icon, which the narrator approves with the exclamation "Молодец, товарищ генерал!" ("Well done, Comrade General!"). The General's sister had been severely injured in a car crash, but was miraculously healed thanks to his prayer, demonstrating the power of physical healing that Christian faith can bring. N. Mitrokhin and G.

Lingquist have both pointed out that Russian people tend to regard their religion in excessively individualistic terms, regarding the holy elements as guarantees of personal well-being, even physical health. Many lay people regard Orthodoxy as a collection of rituals from which they pick and choose what works for them.<sup>clx</sup> Tikhon's interpretation of Orthodox religion often appears to be shaped to appeal this popular perception of Orthodoxy.

In *The Current State of the Soviet Mythology*, A.V. Chernyshov states that “the most natural and spontaneous reaction to the crisis of culture is to play with its signs that are evaluating the symbols, included in the basic cultural foundation. This means a change of stable positive signs into negative ones and vice versa.”<sup>clxi</sup> Fr. Tikhon encourages post-Soviet citizens to bow before icons, but what he preaches in the book is actually the same, if not worse, blind submission to political authority, Orthodox or communist, with the only difference that now the “hero” and the “villain” have switched places. The transition of Soviet iconography to Orthodox does not change the nature of the “individual/authority” binary.

To summarize, by adopting the form of the synaxarium, Tikhon's novel acquires a static time-space: events from a later period function as additional illustrations of what has already been presented. The examples are almost limitless, but the essence of his message remains unchanged. In this way, Tikhon has given his fictional world a sense of protection and safety.

#### Autobiographical Self

Although his modelling on ancient hagiographic genres is obvious, Tikhon's work is largely autobiographical, framed with first-person direct addresses to its readers in the beginning and the end. All the events in the novel that are claimed to be true are related by Fr. Tikhon himself. Most of the events are portrayed through his eyes, in his presence, or claimed to be heard by him



from others. The first chapter is dedicated to the story of his conversion and entry into the Pskov-Caves Monastery as a novice. The narrator describes his first impression of the monastery and the pilgrims and underscores the duties he had to go through, beginning with the lowest and most humble. However, instead of teaching the necessity of strengthening oneself in the field of asceticism, he light-heartedly describes his pouting face and grumpy words, creating a humorous portrait of a seemingly inexperienced novice:

Изредка, выбираясь из своего колодца подышать, я видел монахов, как мне казалось, праздношатающихся по монастырю и вспоминал лекции по атеизму и рассказы о зажавшихся эксплуататорах в рясах, лицемерах и ханжах, угнетающих доверчивый, простой народ. То есть в данном случае — меня.

Now and then, climbing out of my sewage canal to breathe, I stared at the monks who were all idling around the monastery (as it seemed to me), and suddenly remembered my lectures on atheism, all those stories we had been told about those fat black-robed exploiters of peasants and workers, those hypocrites, all holier than thou, preying on the superstition of the simple ignorant people – in this case, me. (Shevkunov 18)

The narrator's self-irony is intended not only to reveal his own spiritual immaturity and that of the average reader, but also to caricature atheism. With the plot unfolding, the narrator becomes less identical with the average non-religious reader. Sometimes, for example, he presents himself as a challengingly opinionated participating witness:

Дисциплинарное послушание наместнику в монастыре для всех нас было безусловным и само собой разумеющимся. Именно, подчеркну, безусловным, сколь это ни покажется светским людям странным, глупым и нелепым.

Disciplined obedience to the Father Superior in our monastery was unconditional for all of us, and indeed, it went without saying. I wish to stress that this obedience was unconditional – and I don't care how strange, foolish, and ridiculous this might seem to ordinary secular people. (Shevkunov 126)

The space of the monastery is filled with his own autobiographical perspectives. He gives a first-person account of his acquaintance with the elders, appearing at the side of the main actors-starts, emphasizing his long-time companionship with them and his obedience to them. He reveals what he had learnt from them and how he managed to peacefully accept their deaths, and thus provides a vivid picture of his modesty and righteousness. The originally impersonal genre of prologue, therefore, becomes an autobiographical memoir.

An autobiographical "I" in the hagiographical genre must not be seen as a unique literary technique. There was a long tradition of prefacing a Byzantine monastic typikon (the rules for the regulation of everyday life in a monastery) with autobiographical text, in which the monastery's abbot would usually encourage his fellow monks to live by the monastic principles and tell them how he had anticipated crucial points of the rules.<sup>clxii</sup> Other than that, hagiographers occupied marginal roles as narrators or eyewitnesses, with the only exception the fierily opinionated, bold hagiography/autobiography of archipriest Avaakum, in which the life of the hero / author appears as an example of unyielding commitment to the "old belief," and he himself

acts as an irreconcilable fighter and martyr. Fr. Tikhon, instead, plays an active part in the stories in the book, although he is not their central figure. He does not content himself with simply witnessing the miracles of the “everyday saints”. The first-person narrator is also a character in the story, and we can “see” him interact with other characters. The book presents his experience of how he becomes aware of his purpose in the world, though “the world” is understood as one that exists parallel to ours. At the beginning of the book, the narrator’s potential quest for the truth of life was thwarted by a repressive Soviet atheist education, but he gradually discovered it in the extended process of becoming a monk. That growth involves encounters with the elders, or startsy, carrying out his monastic duties, during which time he renounced secular love and careers, and eventually became an adherent of Orthodox monastic conventions and structures.

The book is an autobiography in which the “auto” part is implicit. Avaakum’s rebellious spirit must be something foreign to Fr. Tikhon. Imitating medieval autobiographical texts, Fr. Tikhon offers a humble apology for speaking about himself at the close of the novel, because generally within the hagiographic genre tradition, speaking about oneself is not considered proper behaviour:

Особо хотелось бы попросить прощения у читателей за то, что в книге пришлось говорить и о себе самом. Но без этого документальных рассказов от первого лица не бывает.

I would particularly like to ask forgiveness from my readers for having had to speak about myself in this book, but otherwise it is impossible to bear witness to stories I have experienced in the first person. (Shevkunov 490)

Tikhon immediately rebukes this accusation, asserting that he was “obliged” to bring himself into his text as well as he was present at the events related. The narrator assures his audience that he was an eyewitness of what he relates and emphasizes that he “objectively” records what is happening in life: “Мне не было нужды что-либо придумывать — все, о чем вы здесь прочтете, происходило в жизни. Многие из тех, о ком будет рассказано, живы и поныне” (“I have not needed to imagine anything, everything you are about to read really happened. Most of the people you will read about are alive and well today”) (Shevkunov 3) This assertion is aimed primarily at enforcing the story’s credibility, but also serves as a self-justification.

However, unlike the rather impersonal narrator’s “I”, indispensable for the act of narration in ancient hagiography, Fr. Tikhon’s “I” is strongly connected with the author’s actual-world existence. Therefore, his self-representation is not meant to compromise himself as author. In their seminal work *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives*, Smith and Watson note that the “truth” of an autobiography is relative; acts of remembering inevitably involve “rhetorical acts such as justifying their own perceptions, upholding their reputations, disputing the accounts of others, settling scores, conveying cultural information, and inventing desirable futures.”<sup>clxiii</sup> Life narrators address readers whom they want to persuade of their version of experience. When one is both the narrator and protagonist of the narrative, the truth of the narrative becomes undecidable, and the text tracks only the truth of discursive interpretation. In her article “*Different Lives*,” T. Solovyeva asserts: “Before us is what the author has experienced, read, heard and learned. Following the tradition of religious literature, ‘*Everyday Saints*’ is completely devoid of self-presentation, the author writes about himself only when it’s necessary to the plot; the narrator is static and does not receive development.”<sup>clxiv</sup> Tikhon’s work provides

an occasion to rethink the limits of autobiographical discourse and the strategy of self-representation.

Autobiographical narration plays the role of unifying the bonds of independent stories. Structurally, the novel consists of a series of heterogeneous stories, rather than continuous narrative; some are episodes of lives of the monks (or the “everyday saints”) of the Pskov-Caves monastery; others are parables from ancient monastic compilations. Tikhon also remembers adventures and dangerous situations in which his personal experiences seem not to be connected with the account of the righteous monks’ lives. The leitmotiv linking these fragments together is that they are all evidence of God’s intervention in this world. The content of the novel can be broken down roughly into three parts:

1. The novel begins with the narrator recalling his life in the Pechor-Caves Monastery as a novice. In this part, the narrator offers a kaleidoscope of the old generation of the members of the Russian Orthodox Church: the meek elder Father John, the difficult scrooge Father Nathaniel, the undisputed overlord Father Gabriel, and others, each with a purposefully accented personal trait.
2. The middle of the novel is a recollection of his life after he left the Pechory and settled in Moscow. It contains unknown, yet trivial episodes from the lives of Soviet celebrities in everyday situations in which petty coincidences were closely focused and interpreted by the narrator either as God’s miracles or as the inflictions of demons. The narrator reveals his personal first-hand knowledge of the generals, state prosecutors, actors, and other well-known people in the post-Soviet period. There are also other stories involving money, international flights, Interpol, and other things.

3. The last section of the work is dedicated to stories of the narrator's friends and fellow monks of the late 1980s, those who have not achieved ranks, but spiritually have always had strong senses of integrity. These more obscure characters in comparison with the famous elders of the first part, and their quirky traits, are the most successful artistically.

The organization of the plot material is directly dependent on the narrator's life trajectory. Like the medieval prologues, plot development over the course of the narrative is minimal, and transitions from one story to another are often indicated by sentences such as "Here is another case from my memory." This sort of composition does not allow for a coherent unfolding of the narrator's spiritual growth, while modern techniques of self-conscious narration is either absent from the narrative or remains at the level of caricature.

The novel features two different perspectives of the narrator: one of his past self as a young novice, the other of his current self as an older and supposedly wiser, more experienced, and authoritative monk. Both perspectives are present from the beginning, and the narration orchestrates dialogues between these two perspectives. However, there is nothing even remotely reminiscent of Mikhail Bakhtin's polyphony. This somewhat showcased dialogue includes no head-to-head battles of thoughts and ideas as we see in Dostoevsky's novels, because the narrator's two different perspectives are in an unequal position with the younger voice on the wrong side and the older one inevitably on the safe side of wisdom and concluding "truth." In the chapter of Father John, the narrator introduces the elder in a slapstick scene of the elder being dragged towards a liturgy, and he remembers friends and fellow novices would watch the scene taking place day after day and would laugh heartily. Eventually, he claims, they became firmly convinced that Fr. John was actually one of those "rare human beings on earth for whom the

boundaries of space and time are shifted, someone to whom the Lord has given the gift to see the past and the future as clearly as the present”:

...отцу Иоанну открывалась воля Божия о людях. Это мы тоже поняли далеко не сразу. Вначале казалось, что батюшка просто старый и очень мудрый человек. И как раз за этой пресловутой «мудростью» к нему и съезжается народ со всех концов России. И лишь позже мы с изумлением открыли для себя, что все эти тысячи людей ждали от отца Иоанна вовсе не мудрого совета.

Советчиков от человеческого опыта на свете немало. Но люди, появлявшиеся перед отцом Иоанном, как правило, в самые трагические, переломные моменты своей судьбы, хотели услышать от него не то, как им поступить мудро, а то, как им поступать единственно правильно.

Father John was able to see the will of God as it concerned other people. *But we novices didn't immediately understand this. At first it seemed to us that this priest was just a very wise elderly man.* Indeed, it was because of his famous “wisdom” that people would come from every corner of Russia to see him. *It was only later that these thousands of people from all of the country would discover to their own astonishment that they had really come not so much for wise advise, but for something even more profound.*

In worldly life we are always surrounded by people willing to advise us from their own experience. Yet the people who would appear before Father John, usually at the most tragic and fateful moments of their lives, wanted to hear from him not just how to act wisely, but how to act with certainty, in the only correct way.

(Shevkunov 27)

In this passage, the novices perceived Father John as merely a wise man, but “at last,” the same “we” realize and are convinced that the starets knew “the only correct way” for anyone to act, and this time “our” belief is the correct one, according to the medieval patriarchal value system in which *older* is equated with *better*. How did the revelation come to the narrator or his friends, and what exactly convinced him? We are told that a woman had firm faith in the starets’ word not to let her son have surgery, and her boy survived, while another woman ignored the starets’ advice and died after her surgery. These examples serve as proof of the starets’ prophetic ability.

This sort of juxtaposition of the perspectives of the old monk and the young novices also appears in the story of Father Nathaniel, the treasurer of the monastery. After listing the various jobs of the treasurer, the narrator argues against a widespread opinion in the church circle that the administrator is a “dry ecclesiastical bureaucrat.” Again, he attaches this view only to the novices, smartly avoiding mentioning other non-novice opinions:

Все эти обязанности, от одного перечисления которых любому нормальному человеку стало бы плохо, отец Нафанаил исполнял с таким вдохновением и скрупулезностью, что мы иногда сомневались, осталось ли в нем что-то еще, кроме церковного бюрократа.



Ко всему прочему на отце казначее лежала обязанность надзора за нами — послушниками. И можно не сомневаться, что исполнял он это дело со свойственной ему дотошностью: подглядывал, высматривал, подслушивал — как бы мы чего ни сотворили против уставов или во вред монастырю. Хотя, честно признаться, присматривать за послушниками действительно требовалось: приходили мы из мира в обитель изрядными разгильдяями.

All of these tasks and duties the mere listing of which would make a normal person quail and grow faint, Father Nathaniel executed with such inspiration and such scrupulous attention to detail that *some of us sometimes doubted* whether there was anything left of this man other than the consummate ecclesiastical bureaucrat.

Yet in addition to all of these duties, our Father Treasurer was also responsible for the general supervision of us, the novices. And you may rest assured that he executed these duties as well with his invariable meticulousness: he snooped, he spied, he listened in on conversations.... *To be fair, it must be admitted* it was truly necessary to keep an eagle eye on us novices: most of us had come to the monastery from the outer world as typical good-for-nothings...

The reader is reminded that the narrator relating his own stories was once a novice, so that perhaps he knows only the opinions of the novices. Here, in comparison to the story of Father

John's prophecy, the narrator presents himself in his commentary as an uninformed eyewitness with very limited perspective, oblivious even to what is occurring in his own community. The narrator discredited that "rumour" by emphasizing that since the novices are inexperienced young men, their opinions should not be taken seriously. The defence of the administrator's positive image for Tikhon is crucial, as this character represents Tikhon's conservatism and hostility toward Soviet dissidents:

И в то же время строго приглядывавший за нами отец Нафанаил всегда пресекал гласные проявления оппозиционности по отношению к государству и тем более — попытки диссидентства. Поначалу это казалось нам чуть ли не возмутительным. Мы думали, что казначей просто лебезит перед властями. Но потом мы постепенно узнавали, что отец Нафанаил не раз и не два сталкивался с засланными в монастырь провокаторами или переодетыми оперативниками. Но даже вполне понимая, что перед ним искренние люди, отец Нафанаил все же всякий раз обрывал столь любимое нами вольномыслие. И не только потому, что оберегал монастырь. А скорее потому, что берег нас самих от нашего же неразумия, фанаберии и молодой горячности, замешанной на самой простой гордыне. Он не дорого ценил слова, даже самые героические, и знал о советской власти и обо всем, что творилось в стране, не так, как мы — большей частью понаслышке да по книгам...

Yet, by the same token, in his ceaselessly vigilant looking after us, Father Nathaniel always stopped us from uttering any outright expression of opposition to the Soviet regime, or from getting involved in any attempts at being a dissident. *At first this seemed to us* to be disgraceful. Why was our Treasurer simply kowtowing to hated authority? *But gradually we began to find out* that Father Nathaniel had been tested on numerous occasions by spies and agent provocateurs or plainclothes KGB operatives, ever seeking ever any excuse to do real damage to the monastery. And yet even when he quite well understood that the expression of dissenting thought were genuine, Father Nathaniel would always interrupt our beloved free opinions. And this was not only because he was thinking of how to protect the monastery. More likely he was protecting us from ourselves, from our temptation to be too passionate or fanatical in our youthful excess, which was chiefly mixed up with nothing more than pride. He had no use for mere words, even for the most heroic words. Yet he knew all about Soviet authority, and about everything that was happening in the country – and not in the way we did, just from books and rumors. (Shevkunov 64)

Here, the narrator's perspective widens again: he knows "numerous occasions" of visits to the administrator by spies and KGB operatives and their secret conversations, but does not give any examples for which he was present. In the aforementioned example of Father Nathaniel,

dissidence as a “dangerous” tendency is, predictably, associated with “young novices” who must listen to the administrator, not because the latter was able to produce any convincing argument, but simply because he represents the older generation, so he knows “all” and “everything”, while “we” know things only “from books and rumors”. For Tikhon, the search for meaning is undesirable, private judgment is discouraged, and blind submission to administrative authority is purposefully confused with humility. The narrator argues that the administrator must be trusted and obeyed simply because both the “great abbot” and “the holy elder and miracle worker” Simeon trusted him. Therefore, the young novices need someone of authority like him to protect them from themselves. This protective, patronizing tone of the narrator makes his narration lose a vital sense of sincerity, reducing it to ideological persuasion, as can also be seen in the chapter of Father Gabriel:

*Это теперь мы, тогдашние послушники, понимаем, что наместнику не было никакого интереса да и времени зловредно придираться к нам, как тогда казалось. Попросту отец Гавриил не терпел расхлябанности, а еще больше — безответственности и небрежности в Божьем деле.*

*We now understand (although as novices we did not) that our abbot had neither the least interest in nor time for picking on us cruelly – although that’s how it seemed to us then. However, father Gabriel simply could not abide sloppiness and laziness – or worse, any irresponsibility or causal attitude towards the service of God.*  
(Shevkunov 121)

The author/narrator does not attempt to overwrite a past self that is incoherent or inadequate compared to the humble, benevolent ascetic that his current-self determined to embody. On the contrary, he deliberately demonstrates this gap between the “incorrect” past self and “correct” current self. We see how the narrator embodies a young novice, adopting the kind of knowledge and behaviours associated with a novice, inserting himself into a novice’s responsibilities and obligations. On the other hand, his current self is dissolved in the licensed voice of the Church and the elders. Besides his vocational identity, we see little of his personal traits. While his older self speaks the licensed language of the institutional Church, the image of his novice-self with his modern, secular perspective is a mimicry of the readers’. The narrator’s older self assesses his younger self’s action and reaction, noting his errors, yet generously forgives his “inexperience” in a soft, tranquilizing voice.

#### Self-fashioning Amid Hagiography

The section of the novel devoted to Fr. John spends much time recounting the starets’ insight into God’s will and demonstrates how God speaks through him. What is more impressive than the elder’s miracle-working, however, is that the narrator recalls how he himself became the abbot of Sretensky Monastery, an ancient and prestigious monastery in the centre of Moscow, as the result of a prophecy that is said to represent God’s will. Before that, he was promoted from a novice at the Pskov Caves Monastery on the country’s western border to a priest of a famous monastery in the capital, the Donskoy Monastery: “But my relationship with the head of that monastery, Archimandrite Agathadorus, had been completely ruined, entirely as a result of my own mistakes”. The narrator avoids extensive detail about this grudge, so that what the reader sees is only his determined move to lay the entire responsibility on himself: an exemplary

performance as the acid test of humility in Orthodox tradition. The next passage ensures that the reader understands this conflict in the “right” way: “Father John gently consoled me and urged me to have monk-like patience.” This makes it clearer to the reader that the narrator must be the party who was wronged, for it takes ascetic “monk-like” patience to forgive and forget, and as the narrator asserts, Fr. John always finds “the right words”. Although this passage seems on the surface an account of Fr. John’s gift of consolation, the reader also sees the ascetic growth of his spiritual son.

Tikhon emphasizes the authority of the elder: “he spoke as one having authority from God”, although, as a humble starets, he never actually said such high-sounding things as “I will tell you the will of God” and would say so only once when the starets predicted Fr. Tikhon’s promotion. In the 1990s, the Sretensky Monastery in Moscow was opened as a residence (подворье) of Pskov Caves Monastery. The elder prompted the narrator to go to Moscow and become the one in charge, because, as the elder revealed to the young man, that was God’s will. The amazed narrator “didn’t even know what to say”, but he was sure that it was from God. In the online Russian text, the section outlining the decision to put him in charge is missing:

В Москве вскоре представился удобный случай встретиться с патриархом, и я, с замиранием сердца, слово в слово передал Святейшему, что наказал мне батюшка: и о переводе меня в братию Псково-Печерского монастыря, и о создании монастырского подворья в Москве...<sup>clxv</sup>

When I got back to Moscow there soon appeared a convenient moment to meet with his Holiness the Patriarch. With my heart in

my mouth, I passed along to His Holiness word for word what Father John had told me to say: that I be transferred from the Donskoy Monastery to the brotherhood of Pskov Caves Monastery, that His Holiness bless the founding of a residence or representative church in Moscow of our Pskov Caves Monastery... and that I be put in charge of it. (Shevkunov 34)

The scandal of Fr. Tikhon's ordination was widely covered in Russian media, which claimed that before moving to the Sretensky Monastery, Fr. Tikhon forcefully drove out Fr. Georgii and the brethren there who had reconstructed the disused monastery into a functioning place of worship. As early as the late 1980s, Father Georgii Kochetkov, echoing Father Alexander Men's initiative of Orthodox reform, initiated liturgical and theological changes that deviated sharply from traditional Orthodox practice. His liberalism attracted a large number of intellectuals and brought many Muscovites to Orthodoxy, while conservative priests regarded his liberalism as unacceptable. Kochetkov's unbending personality also contributed to the campaign to quash him. In 1994, under orders from Patriarch Alexy II, Fr. Tikhon Shevkunov organized an armed assault against Kochetkov's community in the Sretensky Monastery, and was appointed the monastery's abbot after this incident. The media referred to his violent approach to solving internal problems of the Church as "the bulldog grip."<sup>clxvi</sup> This scandal is omitted in the book, which depicts the ordination romantically as God's will expressed through a peaceful elder's mouth, with no mention of violence.

The eleventh-century *Patericon of Kievan-Caves Monastery* recorded a story of the bishop of the see of Vladimir and Suzdal' Simon writing a long letter to his spiritual son Polykarp, who had left the monastery in order to become the abbot of another monastery. The letter rebuked

Polykarp for failing the tests of obedience and humility, suggesting that he cared more about advancement in the ecclesiastical hierarchy than about saving his soul. Although he soon returned at Simon's prompting, his restlessness and ambition made him want to leave again for another ancient and prestigious monastery, for which Bishop Simon criticized him. In Fr. Tikhon's neo-era hagiography, the spiritual son fulfills his ambitious dream and earns consolation instead of rebuke from his spiritual father.

In the Orthodox monastic tradition, the most important aspect of the relationship between a young monk and his spiritual father is that the disciple must obey his mentor absolutely. In medieval Russia, the authority exercised by the abbot in virtue of his office was never as strong as in the West because a widely applicable monastic rule analogous to that of the Western monasteries was absent. Instead, a special importance was attached to the individual training of each monk by a starets, or "spiritual father". The narrator demonstrates the virtue of ascetic obedience through his own example: in the chapter of Fr. John, he recalls his submission to his spiritual father in order to root out his own self-will, as a good monk is supposed to do: "For nine years Father John did not give me his blessing on becoming a full-fledged monk and taking my monastic vows" (Shevkunov 41). This was not because the narrator was not spiritually ready, but because his mother did not want him to become a monk, an allusion to another story from the *Patericon of Kievan-Caves Monastery*. The much-venerated Father of Russian monasticism, St. Theodosius, had a very strict and domineering mother who loved her son so much that she chastised him for his yearning for asceticism, but the latter remained firmly committed to his path. Imitating the holy man, Fr. Tikhon put himself in the same dramatic conflict with his mother: Father John kept him as a novice and would "only give his blessing on condition that my mother would give her blessing." If St. Theodosius had to go through a series of family dramas



to stick to his goal, Fr. Tikhon gets what he wants too, as in a fairy tale: “I had utter faith in Father John. And so I calmly waited.” His mother “unexpectedly” agrees to him becoming a monk, and the starets praises him, interpreting the narrator’s mother’s approval as a reward and an acknowledgement “that you were patient for nine years and never took matters into your own hands” (Shevkunov 41). The narrow-minded abbot with whom the narrator had fallen out and “had twice put off the occasion of my taking my vows,” finally had to “administer my monastic vows exactly on my birthday.” The narrator’s obedient monastic image is gradually formed from his associations with these “everyday saints” in different phases of his life.

Fr. Tikhon’s autobiography presents his idea of how a life should look. Therefore, his account represents only a small number of experiences that fit a general pattern, and this autobiographical pattern was influenced by the hagiographical tradition of telling life stories. The plot outline of this text contains many similarities to that of a typical saint’s life: when he was young, he felt an irresistible passion for the “truth of life.” He overcame his mother’s reservations and eventually entered a monastery with her consent. He searched for the right teacher, and the famous elder (Fr. John Krestiankin) became his spiritual father, who initiated him in the monastic way of life. After gaining Fr. John’s approval, he becomes a monk. In his early monastic years, he found it hard to understand the monastic rules, but he later achieved a certain level of moral perfection and became head of a monastery.

The narrator asserts that a truly obedient novice receives “a priceless gift from God – the holy carefree state that is better and sweeter than any other freedom” (Shevkunov 94). This “holy carefree state” gives the rationale to the narrator’s indifference to external activity and avoidance of a responsible choice and instead blaming all kinds of “alien forces.” Indulging in a miraculously blessed, affectionate, conflict-free “wonderland,” the narrator calls his readers to

rely simply on God's miracles rather than seeking out their own solutions to their problems. One need not choose painfully between family happiness and monastic vocation, nor worry about hurting friends or family; everything in the world is predetermined, and it would be useless to resist the blessings of the elders. Halfway through the novel, the reader learns that the young and promising narrator, fascinated by the ancient lifestyle of the Pskov Caves Monastery, had once had a fiancée:

Хотя к тому времени я стал часто бывать в монастыре, но сам о монашестве не помышлял. Напротив, всерьез собирался жениться. Невеста моя была, наверное, самой красивой девушкой в Москве. Во всяком случае, многие так считали, и мне это, конечно, льстило. Дело шло к свадьбе.

Although I was quite often in the monastery, I had no thoughts of becoming a monk myself. On the contrary, I was seriously planning to get married. My fiancée was probably the prettiest girl in all of Moscow. In any case, lots of people thought so, and that was very flattering to me. The wedding was already being planned.

(Shevkunov 309)

Even so, fate is relentless; though the narrator at first laughed at Father Nicholas' prediction that he would join the monastery, he later changed his mind:

Однако в Москве мои отношения с невестой как-то сами собой разладились, остыли, а потом и вовсе сошли на нет. Мы оба были даже рады этому.

However, when I got back to Moscow, my relationship with my fiancée somehow broke up of its own accord. Our feeling cooled, and then eventually disappeared. Both of us were actually glad about this. (Shevkunov 311)

The narrator does not seem to notice the conflict or complications in this story about his bride. He is waiting for the miracles he was offered, and human destiny passes before him as a mere object to demonstrate “higher values.” The confusion, fear, and struggle of human existence explored in classic Russian literature of the nineteenth century is replaced by a carefree, self-content attitude. Paert explains a reason for the popularity of passive piety among Russian readers:

people living in an increasingly insecure world are more likely to be attracted to the ideas of formulaic prayers, guidebooks, and the concepts of spiritual and moral discipline. The appeal of Orthodox elders, especially those who provided much stricter sets of rules and guidance, was that believers could renounce responsibility for their own decisions and trust in the preternatural powers of the holy men, thus minimizing (in their view) the potential risks they might encounter in an unpredictable social world. Trust in the charismatic leader provided individuals with a psychological sense of security in situations over which they had little control.<sup>clxvii</sup>

The online book reviews indicate that the readers were enchanted by the beauty of this mysterious world existing in parallel with ours, and in particular, by the narrator/author’s “great

love and humility.” On the official site of the book, many reviewers mention admiring Fr. Tikhon’s “spiritual courage,” “meekness,” and “special ascetic training” as well as the work’s depiction of the Church “from its inside”: “Agitation or preaching are completely absent. The author simply loves people, trusts them and believes in their purity,” one reviewer comments; another says, “In his book, he doesn’t try to convince anyone. He just tells the stories. About how he came to faith in God, about what wonderful people he had come across in life. He describes them with great respect and love, in human simplicity.” Still another reviewer remarks, “It’s clearly and convincingly shown what humility and obedience are, how to maintain and not lose them in life, with examples from the author’s own life”; while another says, “For us, Father Tikhon is the model of faith; he’s a hero of spiritual strength. He filled his work with spiritual power; and he fulfilled the Lord’s commandment: giving love to everyone.” Another reviewer notes, “What strikes me is the author’s unusually sincere description of the events of his life, not trying to hide his true emotions, feelings and experiences.” Yet another comments, “Now I know for sure that in our Church there are great spiritual fathers who you do not need to be afraid of, to whom you just need to go and learn wisdom from, to listen to them, to memorize each and every word of theirs”; and another one says, “The life of the monks, described with knowledge and love, was really bright and happy. It turns out that the monastery is not dehumanizing people. On the contrary, what dehumanizes us – the ‘laity’— in a much worse fashion is all sorts of modern living standards, mass culture, the cynicism of the market economy and globalization. And parallel to ours there is a completely different life. And thanks to the book, we finally see it.”<sup>clxviii</sup>

The abbot of Pskov-Caves monastery makes his first appearance on page 116. The Father Superior, Archimandrite Gabriel, a highly controversial figure in the Russian Church, receives 39 pages in the novel, and is introduced in the following passage:

Безграничным владыкой и хозяином Псково-Печерского монастыря в те годы был наместник архимандрит Гавриил. О его крутом нраве в церковных кругах до сих пор ходят легенды.

The undisputed overlord and master of the Pskov Caves Monastery in those years was our Father Superior, Archimandrite Gabriel. In ecclesiastical circles to this day legends are still told about his severity. (Shevkunov 117)

Fr. Gabriel was appointed abbot of the Pskov-Caves Monastery in 1975. In 1978, Patriarch Pimen ordered the dismissal of Archimandrite Gabriel; however, under pressure from the state Council for Religious Affairs, he later revoked that order.

In accordance with genre traditions, the novel reveals less of his psychological character than of his physical appearance, gestures, and remarks. Following the same strategy of estrangement that is used in the portrayal of Fr. John, the abbot first appears in a noisy scene outside the monastery's walls, as his cellarer is being forcefully drafted into the Red Army:

...неожиданно в коридоре слышались крики, чьи-то решительные шаги, и в кабинет без стука ворвался наместник Псково-Печерского монастыря архимандрит Гавриил. Громадный, в роскошной греческой рясе, с огромной черной

бородой, с настоятельским посохом, — он был вне себя от ярости. Офицер было вскочил, но отец наместник так свирепо рыкнул на него, что тот окоченел от ужаса. Схватив отца Анастасия за шиворот, словно Карабас-Барабас какого-нибудь Пьеро, отец наместник потащил его вон из военкомата. При этом он направо и налево грозил всем, кто попадался ему на пути, самыми страшными карами.

...all of a sudden, the corridor rang out with shouts, someone's decisive footsteps. Suddenly, without knocking, Archimandrite Gabriel, the abbot of Pechory Monastery, in a majestic Greek Orthodox ryassa with a flowing black beard, and with a ponderous and most impressive staff in his hands, raced in, beside himself with rage. The officer wanted to start up, but our abbot stared at him with such fury that all the officer could do was freeze in terror. Grabbing father Anastasius by the collar as if he were the puppetmaster Karabas-Barabas grabbing Pierrot the marionette, our abbot literally dragged him out of the Military Draft Board Office, all the while ushering dire threats to anyone in his way. (Shevkunov 117)

This passage depicts a legendary Orthodox hero, square-jawed, swashbuckling, and somewhat reminiscent of Leskov's Saville from the *Cathedral Folks*, with no fear of Soviet authority and absolute control of his staff. Over the course of the story, the narrator becomes less of an observer, but more omnipresent, functioning like a full-fledged novelist, describing in detail

scenes from which he was absent. He seems more engaged in the excitement of storytelling than in presenting standard moral teaching.

How did the abbot learn about his monk's whereabouts, intervene, and remain the monastery's abbot while being aggressive in front of Soviet authorities? The author-narrator admits that "no one has the least idea". His hint is clear, however, that the Church authority must have had connections with the Soviet higher instances and even with the KGB, as the intrusion of the KGB into the Church hierarchy was well known to contemporary Russian readers. Fr. Tikhon tries to demonstrate in his novel that in the Soviet era, the personal heroism of an abbot alongside his connections to the secret services could actually do good, saving his brethren and protecting them from the state authorities, which allowed some kind of secret deal between the state officials and the church hierarchy:

И хотя за этим последовал такой скандал, что отцу  
наместнику пришлось даже ездить улаживать дело в Москву,  
но в результате отец Анастасий ни на какие военные сборы  
отправлен не был и впредь его чекисты не беспокоили.

Of course after this an enormous scandal erupted, such that our  
abbot even had to go to Moscow to smooth things over, but in the  
end father Anastasius was never drafted, and was never bothered  
by any other KGB agents ever again. (Shevkunov 118)

The abbot is portrayed as heroically protecting his brethren from distracting military service and selflessly preventing the rest of the brotherhood from any interaction with the government officials: "Somehow he was able to arrange things so that he alone vouched for the monastery's

loyalty to political authority” (Shevkunov 118). Though it is unclear whether the Church hierarchy was this powerful in the Soviet era, Father Tikhon does make the reader believe it was. He chooses not to dwell on negatives so as not to weaken his carefree image of the Church. Despite his reputation for rudeness and ruthlessness, Father Gabriel was an example of the Soviet authorities’ exploitation of monastery management in order to undermine the monastic life from the inside, and the Pskov-Caves Monastery was one such example.<sup>clxix</sup> Its head, Archimandrite Gabriel (Steblyuchenko), and several of his followers mocked the monastic brotherhood and the pilgrims, and he was also credited with responsibility for several deaths.<sup>clxx</sup> Fr. Yakunin’s report *“On the Current Situation and Prospects of the Russian Orthodox Church of the Religious Revival of Russia”* stated that “The patriarch issued a decree of removing Archimandrite Gabriel from the post ... But the head of the state Council for Religious Affairs, Furov himself, deputy of Kuroedov, went to the Pskov-Caves Monastery in person with an audit, and everything fell into its place. On his return the patriarchal decree was annulled.”<sup>clxxi</sup> There are also widely circulated stories about his hospitality towards Soviet officials, and his monastery was a place in which, according to Fr. Georgy Edelstein’s blog, “any official could slurp French cognac and snack pressed caviar. Or sturgeon. The vicar of the monastery was similar to a godfather of a gang, or to the Fuhrer in a totalitarian regime.”<sup>clxxii</sup>

In his autobiography, Shevkunov presents his version of the drama and does not mention any pressure from Soviet religious officials. According to him, the abbot remained in his position exclusively because he was loved in the monastery and the brotherhood sincerely wanted him to stay:

Из обители ушли сразу десять монахов. Они написали патриарху письмо, в котором заявили, что покидают



монастырь в знак протеста против грубого, деспотичного поведения наместника, и требовали незамедлительно удалить архимандрита Гавриила из обители. Все эти монахи были в основном замечательные молодые люди. Они поселились в Печорах в домах прихожан и стали ждать ответа на своё послание....Вскоре в Печоры прибыла высокая комиссия из Патриархии с указом о снятии архимандрита Гавриила с должности. Престарелый псковский Владыка, митрополит Иоанн, созвал монастырский собор. Вся братия собралась в трапезной, и архиерей, приехавший из Москвы, поставил вопрос об отношении к наместнику. Повисло тягостное молчание. И тогда первым слова попросил казначей архимандрит Нафанаил. Он зачитал написанное им обращение к патриарху – с просьбой оставить наместника в обители.

Московский архиерей удивился, но спросил, не хочет ли кто-нибудь ещё подписать это послание. Снова повисло молчание. И вдруг с места поднялся самый почитаемый в обители старец, архимандрит Серафим.

- Где подписывать? – как всегда кратко спросил он.

Подошёл и поставил свою подпись. За ним подписали духовники и остальные монахи.

Ten monks got together and collectively left the monastery. They wrote a letter to the Patriarch declaring that they were leaving the monastery in protest against the harsh and despotic behavior of our abbot, and demanding that Archimandrate Gabriel be immediately relieved of his duty and removed from our community. All of these monks were basically wonderful young people. They moved into the nearby town of Pechory, staying in the houses of our parishioners and waited around for an answer to their petition....Soon a high commission arrived from the Patriarch with the decree of relieving Archimandrate Gabriel from his post. The aged hierarch of Pskov, Metropolitan John, gathered together a council of the monastery's monks. The entire brotherhood assembled in the refectory where the bishop who had arrived from Moscow asked our assembly how we felt about our abbot. A difficult silence fell upon us. And then the silence was broken up by our treasurer Archimandrate Nathaniel. He read aloud a letter he had written to the Patriarch with a request to keep our abbot in the monastery.

The bishop from Moscow was surprised at this but then asked if there was anyone else who would also wish to sign Father Nathaniel's letter. Again silence lingered in the room. Then suddenly the most revered elder in the entire monastery, Archimandrate Seraphim, stood up.

Curtly as ever, he asked: “Where do I sign?”

Then he walked up and signed. So did all the other monks.

(Shevkunov 119-120)

This passage and the next show that Shevkunov’s principle in any debate or controversy is to side with the authority:

Мы, послушники, боялись отца наместника пуще смерти. Да и осуждали его крепко, грешным делом! И немало удивлялись, как благодушно относятся к нему старцы.

We young novices feared abbot worse than death. Indeed, we used to roundly criticize him, sinners that we were! We were more than a little surprised to see how good-humoredly the elders of our monastery related to him. (Shevkunov 118)

The startsy, through whom “God reveals His will,” approved the abbot. Tikhon points out that because those discontented monks are “novices”, their opinions should not be taken seriously while “the elders” take the abbot “good-humouredly,” the suggested principle of judging right from wrong. While Roman Catholic monks take their vows vis-à-vis the monastic rules and the community personified in the abbot, Orthodox obedience is, to a much greater extent, a personal relationship between the novice and his mentor or advisor. Dostoevsky describes the service as an “instrument that has stood the test of a thousand years for the moral regeneration of mankind from serfdom to freedom and to moral perfection.”<sup>clxxiii</sup> Nonetheless, the chapter of Tikhon’s book focusing on Fr. Gabriel reveals that the authority of the starets could lend itself to misuse:

Скажем, разгневается наместник на какого-нибудь непонравившегося ему паломника или на глупого дерзкого туриста и закричи, грозно указывая перстом:

- Схватить его! Выкинуть вон из монастыря!!! Мы, разумеется, со всех ног кидаемся исполнять приказание.

If, for example, the abbot would get enraged by some pilgrim or foolishly rude tourist and would yell, angrily shaking his finger, “Grab him! Throw him out of the monastery.” Of course, we would race to carry out the command. But we would reach the unhappy person to whom it was directed, we would whisper calming words and peacefully accompany him to the gate.

(Shevkunov 130)

Since the abbot would pretend not to notice anything, “we for our part began to have an absolutely casual attitude towards such minor disobedience without the least twinge of remorse” (Shevkunov 130). The narrator was pleased with his display of obedience and does not feel sorry for the innocent pilgrim; his message to the potential reader/novice is that one does not have to feel sorry in such a situation as this is normal. Following the superior’s example, the novices grabbed and dragged the pilgrims and tourists without the slightest remorse, and the following passage further demonstrates the abbot’s disrespectful treatment of inferiors:

Он (монах) решительно шагнул к столу и бросился отцу Гавриилу в ноги.

— Виноват! Прости, отец наместник!

— Убирайся вон, самочинник! — загремел над ним наместник и даже отпихнул Аввакума сапогом.

He rushed to the table and threw himself at the feet of Father Gabriel.

“I’ve been wrong! Forgive me, Father Abbot!”

“Get out of here! Making up your own rules!” The abbot was so enraged as he thundered over the prostrate monk that the walls shook. He even kicked Avvakum with his boot. (Shevkunov 261)

To Fr. Tikhon, this is not only normal, but acceptable, and part of the tradition of which one ought to be proud:

Дисциплинарное послушание наместнику в монастыре для всех нас было безусловным и само собой разумеющимся. Именно, подчеркну, безусловным, сколь это ни покажется светским людям странным, глупым и нелепым. Даже у людей церковных такое прямолинейное послушание порой вызывает шок, возмущение, потоки гневных обличений. Целые тома исписаны на тему абсурдности и вреда послушания. Это не вина просвещенных авторов подобных сочинений. Просто они не понимают, что в монастырях своя жизнь, подчиненная особым законам. Цель и смысл этих законов далеко не все могут ощутить.

Disciplined obedience to the Father Superior in our monastery was unconditional for all of us. And indeed, it went without saying. I wish to stress this obedience was unconditional and I don't care how strange, foolish and ridiculous this might seem to be to ordinary secular people... Whole volumes have been written on the themes of the absurdities and harm of 'blind obedience', I do not condemn the enlightened authors of such tomes. But they simply do not understand that there is a difference in a monastery which is regulated by its own particular laws. By far, not everyone is capable of the goal and purpose of such laws (Shevkunov 126)

In another example, when a young seminarian touches the abbot's beloved censer, the abbot flies into such a rage that the seminarian "trembled frightfully", "froze in terror", "looked as if he was about to faint", the abbot "barked", "scoffed", "roared", but Tikhon claims that "we accept things like this as basically appropriate" (Shevkunov 128). He presents further examples of obedience, including his own:

В Церкви различают то, что называется благодатным духовным послушанием старцам и духовникам (если, конечно, это истинные старцы и духовники), и дисциплинарное, административное послушание церковному священноначалию. Помню, как в некоторых случаях отец Иоанн и другие старцы посылали за ответом на какие-то вопросы к отцу наместнику, говоря, что через него, как через игумена монастыря, Господь откроет Свою волю.

Но есть ли у монашеского послушания границы? Как говорил отец Иоанн, священноначалия следует слушаться всегда и во всем. Вплоть до того, когда повеление, например, игумена, кажется непонятым, нелогичным, даже опасным для жизни. На свете есть только один повод, когда послушник может, и не просто может, а должен, оказать неповиновение, говорил отец Иоанн. Это если приказание противоречит евангельским заповедям. Но такого, слава Богу, на моем веку не случилось.

The Church makes a distinction between what is called blessed spiritual obedience to one's elders and spiritual fathers or mothers, (if indeed these are true elders and spiritual fathers or mothers) and mere disciplinary administrative obedience to ecclesiastical hierarchy. I remember that there were several instances in which Father John and other elders would send questions to our abbot saying that through his guidance as our Father Superior in our monastery, the God will reveal His will.

But are there any limits to monastic obedience? Father John used to say that we should obey our holy superiors in everything and at all times. Always – even in such cases when it seemed to us that Father Superior was ordering us to do something completely incomprehensible, completely illogical and even dangerous and risky to our own life. There only one case on earth in which a novice may – actually not even may, but must – disobey, according

to Father John. And that is when there is a command that is contrary to the Gospel commandments. But thank the Lord, I have never seen or heard of any such command during my time in the Church. (Shevkunov 124)

Tikhon professes a passive and declarative behaviour, which is sharply contrasted with Fr. Arseny's active piety, idealizing long-outdated patriarchal values and assuming a kind of "justification by faith." Open challenge to the regime is brushed aside and viewed as "unspiritual," as seen in the chapter "Difficult Father Nathaniel." The narrator proudly boasts, in the chapter "Augustine," of tricking the superior by palming off a forgery as a genuine article and even being rewarded for it. Honest work possesses little religious value and thus is depreciated in his book. On the other hand, Fr. Tikhon consistently absolutizes the principle of obedience to authority, bringing it to the point of absurdity. The notion of identifying the Church with its hierarchical structure is a weakness of contemporary Russian Orthodoxy, and some critics have called Tikhon's book "the manifestation of fundamental ideas of Bolshevism-communism in an Orthodox packaging."<sup>clxxiv</sup> Irina Paert notes that "communism suppressed individualism and personal responsibility; the psychological need to find someone who took the responsibility for decision-making led many people to search for new authorities and guidelines."<sup>clxxv</sup> The presence of Soviet influence was expressed, in her opinion, in the spiritual and social passivity of many Soviet citizens who came to church during the 1990s, for whom Christianity was a substitute for the Soviet ideology and way of thinking.

In defence of the abbot's behavior, Tikhon argues: "Like a doctor of mine would like to say: 'There is no cure for personality'" (Shevkunov 121). Again he plays on the secular readers' feelings; so it should seem. However, are outbursts of anger and ruthlessness normal for a monk?



When the brethren of a Moscow monastery questioned why the abbot's behaviour was not seen as sinful and pointed out other theological errors as part of a review on Tikhon's website *Pravoslavie.ru*, they received no answer, and the post was removed within a few days.<sup>clxxvi</sup> Tikhon believed that the abbot was a person of "particular charisma": although he is rude, he gives his inferiors "the most valuable present that it is possible to give a monk," which is "the opportunity to be humble."

#### Where There Is Faith, Miracles Happen, And Vice Versa – The In-churching Project

Enjoying newfound social prominence, the Church aspires to re-Christianize Russia, with all segments of Russian society meant as its mission field. This project is called "воцерковление", literally meaning "in-churching," and it is the goal of many post-Soviet Orthodox literary works, including Fr. Tikhon's book.

On the first page of the novel, the narrator asks why a group of bright young men, from good families, with promising careers in the Soviet atheist era, would choose monasticism as their life cause, and then sets off to demonstrate the reason for his own conversion to God. For him, "all whom we trusted and loved and respected... were people of faith," such as Dostoevsky, Pushkin, Tolstoy, and several western philosophers and scientists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Meanwhile, "all the people in our histories with whom we had the most repulsive associations, those with a plainly horrible influence on Russia, those who evoked in us no sympathy whatsoever" were atheists, and the author listed "Marx, Lenin, Trotsky", all of whom were from Jewish backgrounds. Stalin, the driving force behind the anti-religious campaign in the Soviet Union, was absent from his blacklist, with Trotsky in his place, as Tikhon has often discussed Stalin's "positive contributions." The historical exhibition "My History: Twentieth

Century”, organized by Fr. Tikhon in Moscow in 2017 was devoted to the 1930-1940s and was dismissed as an “apology of the Orthodox Christian Stalinism.”<sup>clxxvii</sup>

According to E.E. Levkievskaya, the main feature of a historical myth is its “tendency to absolutize one or another ideological model and sacralise its actors to the extent of cultural heroes. In a historical myth sacralisation is applied to the political ally, and demonization to the political rivals, with their iconic historical figures.”<sup>clxxviii</sup> Tikhon’s black-and-white categorization of ‘good’ and ‘evil’ was further seen as “a question that gave our young minds serious food for thought.” He further elaborates on the theological question of whether God exists:

...или Пушкины, Достоевские и Ньютоны оказались столь примитивны и недалеки, что так и не смогли разобраться в этой проблеме и попросту были дураками, или все же дураки — мы с нашей пионервожатой Мариной?

Was it Pushkin, Dostoevsky, and Newton who had been so primitive and shallow that they had no idea of the realities of life? Were these geniuses really idiots? Or were we the idiots? We Soviets along with our elementary school atheism teacher Marina? (Shevkunov 6)

This is the only argument the narrator provides for his conversion. He resorts to name-dropping of “geniuses,” highly provocative language, and emotionally charged value judgements in order to make those intellectual giants of the past serve the purpose of his contemporary commentary. The seemingly neutral word “Soviet” is not used here as a mere historical reference, but as an

archetype with deep roots in the popular consciousness. In the late Soviet period, with the dissident movement unfolding and spreading, the word “Soviet” began to carry negative connotations, implying crudeness, dogmatism, and bureaucratism. Fr. Tikhon plays upon these connotations to fashion a dismissal of the “Soviet.” When he judges the “primitive and shallow,” his decision to side with the “geniuses” and mock the “idiots” is not a movement towards sophistication. He might find himself in the role of his atheist teacher Marina, confidently answering all religious, historical, and political questions. As A.V. Chernyshov noted, a society often reacts to a cultural crisis by playing on a mass level with its cultural symbols. In 1990, many figures of Russian and Soviet history received such reinterpretations: Stalin, Brezhnev, Voroshilov, Zhdanov, Kalinin, and representatives of Soviet literary officialdom changed from positive to negative, whereas Khrushchev, Bukharin, Raskolnikov, Sakharov, Stolypin, and emigre writers moved from negative to positive.<sup>clxxix</sup> Tikhon employed this polarizing play, adjusting the hero-villain list for his own ideological needs.

Fr. Tikhon’s *Everyday Saints* is designed for worldly people who are unfamiliar with the “correct” form of spiritual life, but need to fortify themselves with literary images of holiness. The task of Tikhon’s hagiographical novel is not to explain doctrine, but to immerse the reader in an “atmosphere” of faith, to build a special Orthodox “sensual” world. The Readers Review section of the book’s official website includes examples of “correct” audience reactions: “This book helped me to see a very different world that was always there, and you just have to believe in God and turn to it,” says one reader, while another says, “Reading the book, I cheer, laugh and cry. And most importantly, it is not just a pleasant pastime, this is certainly the beginning of faith.” A third review notes, “Reading it I laughed and cried, experiencing a whole range of feelings. The unknown and mysterious world of monasticism opened up from an unexpected

angle,” while a fourth says, “I laughed three times and cried twice, buried in my pillow. From the happy grief. From the sober happiness. Of my faith.” Some wanted to immediately find an elder to ask about how to live this life, while others hoped to go to the Pskov monastery, to experience this wonderful world in person: “Pechora is the place to soothe your soul, the bliss, simply a little paradise on earth!” says one reviewer. “It turns out, in the monastery one can live interestingly and happily and its door has always been open to us,” says another. “The book aroused different emotions while I was reading: joy, sadness, tears, laughter,” says still another, while yet another says, “From the first pages my soul was filled with amazing tranquility and a desire to do the good and to believe in God’s providence!”<sup>clxxx</sup>

In order to enter this world, no additional requirement of knowledge or hard work is needed; one will get whatever one wants as long as one obeys the elders:

И если человек продолжает правильно молиться (тут надо обязательно подчеркнуть — правильно, то есть не самочинно, а под началом опытного руководителя), то перед его духовным взором открываются поразительные явления и картины.

But if one continues to pray properly, (here I must stress “properly”, in other words, without arrogance, and under the supervision of an experienced guide), then before one’s spiritual gaze remarkable phenomena and images begin to appear.  
(Shevkunov 101)

In the preface, the narrator identifies himself and his fellow monks as well-educated, bright young men from mainstream society, by no means losers or escapers. He claims that he found an attractive “new world” that is “incomparable in its beauty, and that world had turned out to be boundlessly more attractive than the one we previously lived...where we live by laws completely different from those in ‘normal’ worldly life, a world of light and love, full of wondrous discoveries, hope and happiness” (Shevkunov 3). The narrator promises to show this incredibly beautiful monastic world which triggers the reader’s curiosity of how to enter it, of the narrator’s personal experience of it. The reason for the narrator’s decision to enter the monastery was somewhat unclear, just “suddenly”, this different, at first incomprehensible, monastic life becomes the only one that he can imagine himself to live:

Не знаю, что произошло, но мир потерял для меня весь интерес и привлекательность. То, что еще вчера казалось желанным и ценным, теперь открылось если не как бессмысленное (я не дерзал многое так называть), то совершенно далекое. Я не узнавал себя. И друзья тоже меня не узнавали... Открылась другая жизнь, по сравнению с которой все прожитое мною за двадцать четыре года не шло ни в какое сравнение.

I do not know what had happened to me, but suddenly the world had lost all its attractions and ceased to be interesting. All that yesterday had seemed desirable and valuable to me was now revealed to be not worthless (I certainly wouldn’t dare to say that), but irredeemable alien. I didn’t recognize myself, and my friends

didn't recognize me either...I understand that I had completely changed,...another life beckoned me next to which all my prior experience of twenty-four years paled in comparison. (Shevkunov 22)

The motivation is disclosed rather vaguely, with such a life-changing decision made mostly on an aesthetic level. The narrator describes his fondness of the old monastery's tranquil scenery, and the monks' otherworldly appearances. His outlook automatically changes once he enters the monastery, which is characterized as the realm of Orthodox traditions and the roots of the nation's historical identity. However, the various online reviews indicate that many readers were not interested in his motivation behind his choice and took it for granted.

The narrator, an exemplar for post-Soviet readers who are curious about conversion, recalls his college years, when he and his friends talked passionately about religion and about God. He elaborates on the necessity of institutionalized religion:

... с крещением и воцерковлением большинство из нас тянули:  
нам казалось, что можно вполне обойтись без Церкви, имея,  
что называется, Бога в душе. Все, может быть, так бы и  
продолжалось, но однажды нам совершенно ясно было  
показано, что такое Церковь и зачем она нужна.

...most of us put off the step of baptism and going to church. Most  
of us thought that it was quite possible to keep living without the  
church, as long as we had God in our hearts, so to speak... but then

suddenly it became utterly clear to us both what the Church really was and why we in fact do need it. (Shevkunov 7)

In his search for God, the narrator conducted several spiritualist experiments and, by mistake, established a connection with the devil himself, as he claims in all apparent seriousness. Turning to the Church for help, he is told that he has committed a “terrible sin” and that baptism is the only solution:

... тем из нас, кто не был крещен, не откладывая, подготовиться к таинству и креститься. А остальным прийти к исповеди и причастию.

...those of us who had never been baptized should get ready for the sacrament of baptism and should be baptized without delay. As for the rest of us, we must come to confession and Communion.  
(Shevkunov 10)

The Church was needed to protect against the evil eye and other demonic afflictions. In part because of his utilitarian and superstitious understanding of baptism, the narrator relates the process of his own baptism rather briskly:

Крестил меня замечательный батюшка, отец Алексей Злобин, в храме Николы в Кузнецях. Со мной крестились полтора десятка младенцев и несколько взрослых. Дети так истошно орали, а батюшка произносил молитвы настолько неразборчиво, что я ничего за эти полтора часа не понял.

I was baptized by a wonderful priest, Fr. Alexy Zlobin, in the Church of St. Nicholas in Kuznetsy, together with a dozen or so babies, and about a half dozen adults. The babies cried so loudly, and the priest read his prayer so softly, that during the hour and a half the sacrament was taking place I didn't really understand anything. (Shevkunov 10)

Not impressed by the baptism, the narrator, instead, devotes almost two pages to relating how the newly-baptized young man was immediately able to find the person he was looking for: his teacher and good friend whom he wanted to share the news of the baptism. The narrator interprets his good fortune as the direct "effect" of baptism: immediate convenience stemming from God's presence. The teacher then asks the narrator why he decided to be baptized, and the narrator solemnly declares:

— Потому что Бог есть,— ответил я,— я в этом убедился. И все, что в Церкви, — все правильно.

"Because God exists," I answered firmly. "And I have become convinced of this. And everything that the Church teaches is correct." (Shevkunov 11)

No matter how incidental and exceptional, miracles are expected in spiritual memoirs. The book essentially resembles a report of God's wonders that Tikhon has collected at the crossroads of life. The main goal of the book, as its preface indicates, is the discovery and description of those "special laws" that govern the miraculous religious world, and these miracles form the backbone of Fr. Tikhon's "joyous" discovery. Some examples of miracles and the supernatural that appear



in the work include the black puddle that was in fact the devil Mephistopheles; the flock of crows seen at the time of filmmaker Sergei Bondarchuk's death, interpreted as demons fleeing his soul as he took communion before his death; the séance at which the ghost of Stalin predicted Gorbachev's rise to power; and the Soviet marshal Zhukov's Alzheimer's-stricken mother-in-law suddenly regaining her mental health under Divine power, but later reverting into dementia. All of these serve as illustrations of the "special laws" the narrator set out to discover: where there is faith, miracles happen; and where there are miracles, faith grows.

These accounts of miracles may inspire a reader to retreat into such a wonderful "reality" in which protective forces accompany the protagonists, such that the reader may believe that one will be saved from troubles simply by crossing oneself. Faith thus becomes an easy way to happiness, as demonstrated in the chapter "What Was Happening in the Spiritual Realm at Those Moments?" In this chapter, a deacon is killed by a brick falling on his head:

Что такое случайность? Почему кирпич падает на голову именно этому прохожему —одному из тысяч? Подобного рода глубокомысленные размышления волнуют человечество тысячелетиями.

What is COINCIDENCE? Why does a brick chance to fall on the head of this one passerby in particular – this one of the thousand and not that one? Similar profound speculations have concerned mankind for millennia. (Shevkunov 191)

The deacon made young men, including the narrator, work hard in the hot sun as he rested in the shade of a pile of old bricks, but as he sat down, the pile wobbled and collapsed, falling on him

and killing him. The authoritative starets from the Pechory monastery explains that the deacon had not taken communion for years:

Мы... отправились в обратный путь, дорогой рассуждая,  
отчего и зачем в нашей жизни вдруг появились эти горы,  
новые люди и все эти необычные приключения.

We... set off on our way back down the mountain, still discussing  
why all these unusual adventures in these mountains and with our  
new acquaintances were happening to us. (Shevkunov 197)

These stories lead to the simple lesson that avoiding regular communion might cost a person his/her life. Such speculation is similar to the logic of Chinese villagers who believe that those who are struck by lightning during a thunderstorm are being punished for ill deeds; or, more simply put, “You reap what you sow.”

In a world largely without suffering, the only real villain present in the novel is killed by divine intervention in the face of his exploitation of people’s labours. The archimandrite regards suffering as reducing the probability of God’s existence in the eyes of readers who expect worldly benefits to flow from their belief in God. Such calculation would inevitably amount to a negation of the existence of suffering. Throughout the novel, the narrator prays only once, in the story “An Incident on the Road,” and a miracle inevitably follows.

#### Representation of Soviet Period and Stalin

In his 2016 monograph *Black Wind, White Snow: The Rise of Russia's New Nationalism*, Charles Clover says of Tikhon’s novel: “*Everyday Saints* is written in a mellow and forgiving spirit, devoted to the elder generation of loveable teachers and the narrator’s fellow brethren who were

full of humor and always ready to stand out for justice. It is mainly devoted to personal reminiscences of the quirks and loveable foibles of an old generation of churchmen – those ‘everyday saints’ Tikhon calls his teachers – who endured far more than he did at the hands of the Soviet regime.”<sup>clxxxix</sup>

Though it is true that Tikhon does not present the Soviet period as a dark age, as it is, for example, in *Fr. Arseny*, he is explicitly polemic in his depiction of the dark side of Soviet history. In a 2014 interview, when asked whether his newly designed film would expose or eulogize the Stalin era, Tikhon openly voiced his pro-Stalin stance:

Никакого мрачного нагнетания страстей в этом фильме, как я представляю, не будет. Даже ГУЛАГ мне бы хотелось показать по-другому. Я знаю ГУЛАГ Александра Солженицына, Варлама Шаламова, знаю по книге "Отец Арсений". Но есть ГУЛАГ отца Иоанна (Крестьянкина). Конечно же, это трагический, полный несправедливости и страданий мир. Но это и мир, про который отец Иоанн говорил, что годы, проведённые в нём, были самым счастливым временем его жизни: "Потому что Христос был рядом"<sup>clxxxii</sup>.

As I see, there will be no gloomy fanning of passions in this film. I would like to show even the GULAG in a different way. I know the GULAG of Alexander Solzhenitsyn and Varlam Shalamov; I know it from the book "Father Arseny". But there is also the Gulag of Father John (Krestiankin). Of course, it was a tragic world full

of injustice and suffering. But it was also the world about which Father John said that the years spent there were the happiest of his life: "Because Christ was close by." (translation mine.)

Tikhon's novel brushes aside death and suffering and promotes more harmonious memories. For him, the labour camp is a typical correctional facility, with the arrival of the "chemical workers" the only disturbance in his otherwise idealized Pechory (125). Tikhon dislikes "the buildup of dark emotions" in GULAG memoirs. Indeed, his starets, Fr. John, remembers the GULAG imprisonment as one of the most spiritually fascinating and thus most memorable periods of his life:

Батюшка говорил, что это были самые счастливые годы его жизни.

— Потому что Бог был рядом! — с восторгом объяснял батюшка. Хотя, без сомнения, отдавал себе отчет, что до конца мы понять его не сможем.

— Почему-то не помню ничего плохого, — говорил он о лагере. — Только помню: небо отверсто и Ангелы поют в небесах! Сейчас такой молитвы у меня нет...

Father John would say that these were the happiest days in his entire life:

"Because God was always close by!" With joy Father John would exclaim this, although without doubt he realized that there was no way we could possibly understand him.

“For some reason I can’t remember a single bad thing anymore,” he would say about his time in the camps, “I can only remember now how I used to pray in there: the heavens opened and the angels were signing in the heavens! I don’t know how to pray like that anymore...” (Shevkunov 40)

The key emotion that this passage arouses in readers is affection (умиление), a feeling of comforting, sweet mercy, humility, and benevolence, as they aesthetically identify themselves with the ascetics. In this suggestive atmosphere, Tikhon implicitly encourages his reader to imitate the holy man and take the history positively, to forget the victims of the past, of hunger, cold, disease, and cruelty. By contrast, Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and Shalamov’s *The Kolyma Tales* chose to remember those victims and their suffering, and their subversive remembrance is liberated from attempts to idolize political powers or secular interests.

In the twenty-first century, Stalin continues to excite the imagination of the Russian public. In the conservative-nationalist wing of the ROC, some even honour Stalin as a saint because he saved the nation from the Nazis and made it into a great world power. Their special hatred is directed toward Khrushchev, whom Tikhon describes as obsessed with a sinister and impotent envy of his predecessor Stalin’s glory, as seen in the chapter “The Great Abbot Archimandrite Alipius.” Mikhail Dzyubenko notes that “Soviet churchmen’s displeasure with Khrushchev is not so much because he closed monasteries; it is rather because Khrushchev gave people sort of personal freedom in some sense, and this led to a deep secularization of Soviet society. Stalin could still be considered, although not without a stretch, God’s representative on Earth, but applying this yardstick to his successor was already unthinkable.”<sup>clxxxiii</sup>

## Conclusion

From the late 1990s, both critics and readers have called on writers to reflect the history of their own day, or what Tolstoy called the “history of yesterday”: a depiction of the individual’s role in recent contemporary history, to present something positive or beautiful, to supersede the constant “deconstruction” in which writers had previously engaged. Tikhon responded to such demands for lively, colourful, and suitably flattering or at least not overtly disturbing accounts of Russian history in *Everyday Saints*, which enjoyed unprecedented success. He depicts the Church as a quiet haven in which peace can be found amid the stormy sea of life, and its historical ties as the heart of Russian national identity. There is nothing left to do in the Church, for everything is already completed. All one can do is enjoy the splendour of everything that has been accomplished, and then strive for completeness and peace in his/her own soul.

The book employs characteristic techniques of popular literature and aims for a readership among the general public. Rather than provoke self-reflection, the book reinforces popular perceptions, as M. Dzubenko notes: “every Christian, even those with a modest experience, can follow the author to testify that the Church is a ‘wonderful world, incomparable with anything else’, the prayers of the newly baptized are very effective, that following the church officials is full of meaning, and that Divine Providence is present in human life.”<sup>clxxxiv</sup> Jeanne Kormina notes that many Russians regard the starets as “an experienced priest and confessor, usually an elderly monk, who has many spiritual children living in different places who visit him regularly for confession and admonition. In addition, believers visit the starets to ask for his advice on complicated personal issues, because the elders are believed to have the gift of prophecy.”<sup>clxxxv</sup> The novel exemplifies the starets’ heritage in this “everyday” manner.

Mass literature should meet readers' expectations and avoid conflicts with those readers. Tikhon's work answers the desire of everyday Russian readers for solutions to their problems, by populating the world of his novel with providential coincidences that happen by the will of God and prophecies of the elders, as well as entertaining stories about Soviet celebrities told in a lively narrative style. The feeling of closeness of another world, the excitement of constant discoveries, the promised spiritual flights that "surpass any imagination", and the "astounding revelations about the world and about oneself" starkly contrast with the reader's relatively bland and monotonous reality. Tikhon's work not only represents the everyday lives of monastic brethren, but also demonstrates a positive attitude towards life and death. Adopting a mild and modestly humorous tone, Tikhon affirms monastic values but does not dismiss the lay world. In *The Book on Monasticism as a Secular Phenomenon*,<sup>clxxxvi</sup> D.M. Rogozhin attributes the success of Tikhon's book to its demonstration of a "new principle of social behaviour" that denies edification. The spirit of the book, according to Tikhon himself, is "not to call for order, but to represent it; not to destroy but to build." By making his work more appealing to readers, he broadens his potential audience.

### Chapter 3 Notes of a Priest's Wife: A Materialist Account of Everyday Parish Life.

In 2008, Russian essayist Julia Sysoeva, then-wife of Orthodox priest and missionary Fr. Daniel Sysoev, published her first non-fiction work, *Notes of a Priest's Wife*. Written in the style of documentary prose, it presents little-known details in the lives of the Orthodox clergy, and quickly attracted the attention of the Russian press. The newspaper *Independent Gazette* says of the book's primary selling point: "The Orthodox Church remained after 1917 a fairly closed system in our country, and their life, well-being, and the family circumstances of priests seemed to have gone into the very bottom of the system – so this kind of description could not be found, for example, in Chekhov, of course."<sup>elxxxvii</sup>

The life of contemporary Russian priests has long been shrouded in mystery. At a time when the Russian Orthodoxy has returned to a prominent cultural role – the Church has won political favour, material wealth, and social prominence, and 70-80 percent of all Russians identify themselves as Orthodox – the Church clergy has naturally come to the foreground of public attention. Because the ministers of the Church do not place much emphasis on their personal lives, ordinary lay people can only guess the details of the lives of parish priests and their families. The lives of clergymen's wives are particularly obscure, as they were once kept away from public attention. It is telling that the *Independent Gazette* article explains who "matushka" is, since not all post-Soviet citizens know church etiquette and practices. With *Notes of a Priest's Wife*, Julia Sysoeva breaks that tradition and lifts the veil of mystery to debunk several common myths about clergymen's wives. Its popularity led her to give interviews and write articles for periodicals and websites.

The widely circulated online advertisement of this book reads:



This book provides a look from within. It's a narrative by the person, who knows not by hearsay the backstage and the covered side of the clerical existence. Truth and nothing but the truth – that's what the author's intention is. Where do those priestly wives come from? Why do priest families always have lots of children? Why is a priest's wife behind the wheel still a shocking scene to many? Why are those individuals in robes with crosses that are seen walking in the subway and suburban commuter trains are 100% impostors? Does the cursed "housing problem" corrupt priests as well? Why do priests not like Cahors and drink it extremely rarely? And lots of other interesting questions.

Sysoeva's work purports to offer an insider's perspective on a sphere to which the common reader has little access. As readers attempt to incorporate Orthodoxy into their lives, they become curious about the priests and monks, but not so much of their public images as their everyday reality, which can, as the advertisement implies, come only from insiders. Therefore, Syseova highlights her status as a priest's wife, a truly qualified "insider."

Her husband, Daniel Sysoev, was a well-known public figure who had written over a dozen books, until he was murdered by an Islamic extremist inside an Orthodox church in Moscow in 2009, less than a year after his wife's book was published. According to Sysoeva, "Daniel has always stood by me, encouraging me to work toward self-realization. He wanted me to have more in my life than just children and kitchen pans. When I wrote the book *Notes of a Priest's Wife*, he was sincerely happy for me. I also worked for a long time as the head of the advertising department in a construction firm. My husband helped me with inventing advertising slogans,

shared his creative ideas.”<sup>clxxxviii</sup> The subtitle of the *Independent Gazette* article further notes, “The widow of the murdered priest Julia reveals to MK [the newspaper] the secrets of his personal and social life.”

As Bishop Tikhon’s autobiography has proven, “private” information on “public” figures is sought after in the popular press, and personality can be a marketable commodity. Similarly, Sysoeva’s status as the wife of a famous priest serves as a selling point that translates directly into market value. The popularity of autobiography, notes, and memoirs in the book market testifies to the tangled relationship between the private individual and the public world. Publishers play upon readers’ desires for facts and practical experiences. Corbett comments on the marketing side of production of non-fictional self-writing: “Like the novel, the self-representing text is subject to circulation as a commodity: when one writes, prints, publishes and markets an autobiography, one effectively sells oneself, one’s own experience.” <sup>clxxxix</sup> Commercially and culturally, Sysoeva’s non-fiction work is firmly settled in its position within contemporary popular culture.

Sysoeva begins with a rationale for writing and publishing her book:

Эта книга задумана как рассказ о жизни, быте и семейном укладе российских православных священников... Все видят храмы, но не все знают, что происходит внутри. Все видят священников, но далеко не все знают, как они живут. В России давно не существует сословных делений, но, пожалуй, единственное сословие, которое выжило и продолжает существовать — это духовенство.

О его жизни, быте, традициях практически ничего не известно нашим соотечественникам, не говоря уже о зарубежных собратях. Тем не менее, именно эта сторона жизни всегда вызывала неподдельный интерес, как правило, обрастая сказками и народными легендами. (1)

This book is conceived as a story about the daily routine and family life of Russian Orthodox priests ... Everyone sees the church, but not everyone knows what is happening inside. Everyone sees the priests, but not everyone knows how they live. Division of social classes in Russia are long gone, but, perhaps, the only estate that has survived and continues to exist is the clergy.

Practically little about their way of life and their traditions is known to our compatriots, let alone to fellow congregations abroad. Nevertheless, it was this side of the life that has always aroused genuine interest, and as a rule, has been overgrown with folk tales and legends.

As a family member of the clerical “caste,” she can legitimately claim to be a participant-observer in public history. Her documentary record of Russian priests’ lives plays a role in breaking through media-created “folk myths.”

Responses of literary critics to Sysoeva’s work were sporadic and equivocal, appearing mostly in newspaper articles but also occasionally in literary journals. Some such reviews criticized the book for a perceived lack of originality:

Age-old seminary anecdotes mixed with hearsay tales about the matushka's friends; it's a book for the liquidation of church illiteracy at elementary level, targeted at those 'outsiders.' Thus the composition and originality – the indispensable feature for any good texts all suffered.<sup>exc</sup>

What matushka (in Russian “матушка”, meaning the wife of a priest) Julia Sysoeva has written is good for novices, as well as for those who are tormented by curiosity. But for people living the church life, all of these are well-known.<sup>exci</sup>

Other critics approve her description of clerical life as truthful and realistic

Sometimes it resembles a badly-compiled collection of seminarian anecdotes and tales....Nevertheless, for the purpose of becoming familiarized with the everyday life of the Orthodox priests, the book serves as a valuable source.<sup>excii</sup>

Valeria Pustovaja asserts that the book has achieved its primary goal, which was to educate the public as “the first step towards overcoming the wild ignorance of our Orthodox people in terms of religious life.”<sup>exciii</sup>

Despite the perception that a memoir of a priest's life would be likely to adopt a preaching tone, Sysoeva's work remains relatively neutral. Indeed, sometimes its portrait of church life is a bleak one, which led to critics dismissing her work as subjective and biased:

Sysoeva dispels some of the myths – for example, that priests drink only Cahors, or that matushki, as a rule, cannot work, even after

their children have grown up. But there's a feeling that instead of an objective picture [of Russian clerical life] the author unwittingly offers you another bunch of stereotypes, only different ones... For illustrations of priests' family life, only extreme scenarios are used: either the matushka has a prestigious job, owning a car, the whole family living in her own apartment, and nannies sitting with her children, or the whole family mired in poverty, huddled in the corner, and the matushka dressed in rags. Why is there almost nothing about the life of ordinary, average matushki?<sup>cxciv</sup>

Many readers have said that reading a narrative written by a “Mother,” or матушка (matushka) in Russian, rather than a reverend Father, was particularly interesting because of its alternative viewpoint and promise of readability. By 2011, the book had gone through five print editions and has also been posted on the Internet.

#### Notes as a Genre

The genre of notes (записки) is associated with reflections on personal experience and an expression of the author's relationship to the subject matter,<sup>cxcv</sup> features it shares with memoirs and diaries. The genre began in the nineteenth century, and some of its representative works include «Записки сумасшедшего» (*Diary of a Madman*) (1835) by Nikolai Gogol, «Записки охотника» (*Notes of a Hunter*) (1852) by Ivan Turgenev, and «Записки из Мертвого дома» (House of the Dead) (1862) and «Записки из подполья» (*Notes from the underground*) (1864) by Fyodor Dostoevsky. The Soviet era saw works by Mikhail Bulgakov composed as notes, such as «Записки на манжетах» (*Notes on the cuffs*) (1923), «Записки юного врача» (*Notes of a*

*Young Doctor*) (1926) and «Театральный роман (Записки покойника)» (*Theatrical Novel or Notes of the Deceased*) (1937). Though notes, memoirs, and diaries are all closely related genres, Sysoeva's work is distinguished from notes such as Dostoevsky's by its greater emphasis on factual testimonies and the obscure image of its narrator, which place it in the realm of literary non-fiction or documentary prose. The word "notes" in its title, which implies a certain intimacy, functions more as a marketing technique than as a definition of its genre.

Sysoeva's notes consist in large part of documentations of ecclesiastical regulations and sociohistorical critiques in the form of direct comments and intertwined elaborations. She focuses more on her "friends" and "acquaintances" than on herself, as her autobiographical episodes are sparse and sporadic by comparison. She presents details on the daily lives of average priests, including where and how seminarians live and learn, why they must be married before ordination, how they meet their future wives or *matushki*, why they cannot remarry, and how they spend their leisure time. As both a priest's wife and a marketer/advertiser, Sysoeva is familiar with the interests of average readers and recognizes their desires for familial perspectives and inside information on the lives of priests and *matushki*.

Leona Toker notes that documentary prose consists of three types of material: public domain, private domain, and privileged access.<sup>cxvii</sup> The public information Sysoeva provides covers mundane, non-spiritual topics, including historical problems of the Orthodox priesthood, the schooling of future priests, and church etiquette. To some extent, her book presents an easy, all-encompassing introduction to Orthodox Church practices. However, she is conscious to distinguish her work from popular church manuals by exploring the issues in question from unusual angles, such as her definitions of the clergy and the Church:

Так что же было тогда духовное сословие? Начнем с того, что священник прежде всего был государственным чиновником, а Церковь кроме духовного окормления паствы выполняла еще и роль государственной организации, то есть роль современного ЗАГСа. (2)

So what was the clergy then? To begin with, the priest was primarily a government official, and the Church, in addition to the spiritual nourishment of the flock, fulfilled the role of a state organization, that is, the role of the modern registry office.

This strategy of going against accustomed or stereotypical thought patterns is applied throughout the work. In her examination of seminarian education, Sysoeva ignores the curriculum in favour of the content of the lunch menu, the conditions of the dormitory, and the ways in which the seminarians meet girls. Her discussion of ordination focuses only on the marriage requirement. She devotes whole chapters to the salary standards, housing conditions, and divorce regulations for priests, aspects of the religious life that have previously only been touched upon in academic literature and generally unnoticed by the public. As the main body of her work, public information on clerical life in general, rather than Sysoeva's own personal life, forms its foreground. The narrator's character is shaped mainly through her comments and reflections. Although she claims that her stories are true, their factual accuracy and authenticity of events are given weight by the perceived immediacy of her personal reflections. Therefore, her stories are actually more important for understanding her worldview than what he or she is trying to document, a strategy of the postmodernist school that conceives of the public sphere as a realm of inauthenticity and compromise.<sup>cxcvii</sup>

While the Church is preoccupied with its in-churching project, disseminating its ideals and attempting to direct the mass process of engaging with its rites and rituals, it is important to view Sysoeva's prose within this context of post-Soviet reality. Knowledge of the Church's rules is essential to keeping its symbols and customs alive; in her chapters on Church history and ecclesiastical regulations, Sysoeva's language is calm and dry, with tact and restricted pathos. In contrast to the authoritative and didactic purposes of the introduction, the most successful and appealing part of the work is its depiction of the familial side of clerical life, such as the courtship process for young seminarians, wedding scenes, and upbringing of children, particularly daughters, as the Sysoevs had three daughters together.

Citing interesting facts from the history of the modern Orthodox Church, Sysoeva begins her examination of the secular clergy with their studies at seminary. Russian clergy are educated in the seminary, and those who show special ability go on to the Academy, the clerical equivalent of the university. Seminary graduates may enter the ranks of "white" or secular clergy, get married and receive a nomination to a town or to a small remote village; others may remain laymen. Those of ambitious disposition may enter the "black" or regular clergy, remain celibate, and live in the monastery, eventually perhaps receiving appointments as archierei, or bishops, which are appointed only from the monastic clergy. Sysoeva says relatively little of the clergy with "serious perspectives," devoting her humour and affection to "average" students, like her husband, Fr. Daniel, who chose marriage. In the chapters "Послушания" (Obedience), "Бурсацкие щи или что готовит кухня" (Seminarian soup, or what is cooked at the kitchen) and "Как знакомятся в семинарии" (How people get acquainted in the seminary), she presents vivid sketches of everyday reality in the seminaries:



Семинаристы всегда бегут; не хватает им времени, вот и спешат. Бежит семинарист по лаврской аллее, под мышкой держит папку, папка падает на землю, и из нее высыпаются конспекты. Студент кидается их поднимать и в сердцах бросает: «Триста лет!» Торопятся приятели-семинаристы на занятие, и тут один из них хлопает себя по лбу и говорит: «Триста лет! Учебник забыл». (4)

Seminarists are always on the run; they do not get enough time, so they hurry. That seminarist is running down the laurel alley, holding a folder under his arm. Then the folder unexpectedly slipped off and fell to the ground, and the notes pouring out of it. The student quickly bent down to pick them up and angrily dropped: “Three hundred years!” The seminarians are hurrying to the class, and one of them suddenly claps his forehead and says: “Three hundred years! I forgot the textbook.”

In a style reminiscent of Pushkin’s, Sysoeva describes the efforts of female students to attract the boys’ attention. Though they are required to wear white tops and long black skirts, they still do their best to look charming:

Объектам же этого выбора [будущей невесты – L.Y.] все равно приходится прихорашиваться. Но как прихорашиваться, когда юбка длинная, а на голове платок? Проблема с платком у регентш решается просто, как все гениальное, — он может

превратиться в элегантный прозрачный шарфик, замысловато  
и кокетливо повязанный на тонкой изящной шейке...

В семинарии есть и свой стандарт красоты, ничего общего не  
имеющий с пресловутым 90/60/90. Красавица скорее должна  
походить на пушкинскую царевну-лебедя:

Днем свет Божий затмевает,

Ночью землю освещает,

Месяц под косой блестит,

А во лбу звезда горит. А сама-то величава,

Выступает, будто пава;

А как речь-то говорит,

Словно реченька журчит. (17)

The objects of this choice (of the future bride - L.Y.) will want to  
preen anyway. But how to spruce up, when the skirt is long, and  
the kerchief is on the head? The problem with the kerchief of a  
regent girl is solved simply, like everything ingenious: it  
transforms into an elegant, see-through scarf, intricately and  
coquettishly tied on her slim and graceful neck...

The seminary has its own standard of beauty that has nothing in common with that of the  
everyday world, instead evoking Pushkin's swan princess:

Brighter than the sun at noon,  
  
She outshines the midnight moon,  
  
In her braids a crescent beams,  
  
On her brow, a bright star gleams.  
  
She herself is sweet of face.  
  
Full of majesty and grace.  
  
When she speaks, her voice doth seem  
  
Like the music of a stream. (translated by Louis Zellikoff<sup>xcviii</sup>)

However, Sysoeva's own love story is absent from the narrative. The reader is left only to speculate that Fr. Daniel may have been one of the cheerful and forgetful students hurrying to their morning classes while being observed by a pair of invisible yet perceptive eyes.

The future clerical candidates Sysoeva describes are diligent, focused, self-disciplined, and resourceful, like young men in any other colleges. They are also reminiscent of those in the nineteenth-century Russian writer N.G. Pomialovksy's *Seminarian Sketches*, and indeed, one of the first chapters of Sysoeva's book is titled "Чему учат в семинарии, или Очерки современной бурсы" (What is Taught in the Seminary, or The Modern Seminarian Sketches), an apparent allusion to Pomialovsky's novel. In contrast to Pomialovsky's accusations of laziness and corruption among the students and school administration, Sysoeva uses a poignant, calm, and positive tone to describe a highly organized and efficient school structure: "Дисциплина железная, постоянный контроль со стороны начальства, учебные нагрузки запредельные" (There is iron discipline, the constant control by the authorities, and the training

loads are beyond limits). The old Tsarist seminary of Pomialovsky is not present, but both writers pay equally close attention to the use of student slang. Sysoeva delivers a collective image of the students by reproducing their language, describing their pranks, and portraying the slight tension between the freedom-seeking students and the stern school administration. These themes can be found in Pomialovsky's work as well, but in much more sinister colours. Within this collective image, the narrator achieves an inconspicuous self-disclosure by inserting her comments as lyrical digressions:

... в старом семинарском парке и стояли те самые ржавые забытые качели, давно без тормозов и неизменной кассирши, словно призрачное воспоминание из недавнего детства... Жалко, но у нынешних семинаристов нет этих скрипучих качелей, на которых, сливаясь со светом и воздухом, можно было на несколько мгновений вернуться в беззаботное прошлое и окунуться в романтику ожидаемого будущего. В мимолетную романтику, которая зыбким видением посещает нас единожды на пороге взрослой жизни. В те прощальные мгновения, которые нам уже не достанутся, и которые, дай Бог, как и мы в свое время, испытают наши дети. (6)

Those forgotten rusty swings stood in the old park of the seminary, long without brakes and the unchanging cashier, like a ghostly memory from the recent childhood ... It's a pity that today's seminarians do not have these creaky swings on which, fused with

light and air, one can return to the carefree past for a few moments and plunge into the romance of the expected future. Into the fleeting romance which in a dreamy vision visits us only once on the threshold of adulthood. Into those farewell moments that we no longer get, but which, God willing, our children may experience, as we did in our time.

The Sysoevs are absent from this lyrical passage. Ostensibly a depiction of a picturesque scene outside the famous monastery, it carries a deep emotional investment that reveals Sysoeva's personal experience, allowing the reader to almost see her shadow on the "forgotten swings."

The order of the material loosely corresponds to a priest's life cycle: education, marriage, children, job and salary, divorce. Sysoeva treats her material from a secular worldview similar to that of the uninitiated reader. Her language is simple, laconic, and often expressive. She processes her subject matter in accordance with the horizons of the target readers, avoiding abstruse theological lecturing, "лишь с точки зрения обывателя" (only from the point of view of the philistine). She understands that readers seek literature that accords with their worldview, but they also seek to be both instructed and entertained. An example of her highly visual mini-scenes involves her as a visible character and reveals a mixture of misunderstandings and misinterpretations on the part of those outside of church practices:

Если священник идет по улице в рясе и с крестом, на него всегда оглядываются, а если он еще и с женой, это вызывает уже почти истерическое любопытство. Кстати, еще десять лет назад многие наши сограждане даже не знали, что православные священники в основном женатые. Очень часто,

когда я появлялась на улице с мужем, нам задавали вопросы типа:

— Скажите, а разве священникам можно жениться?

Или какой-нибудь подвыпивший мужичок, отваливший от пивной, мог бросить реплику:

— Батюшка, а вам с женщинами ни-з-зя!

На что мой муж отвечал:

— С женщинами ни-з-зя, а с женой можно.

Да, видимо, наши сограждане, насмотревшись мексиканских сериалов, в которых обязательно присутствует какой-нибудь падре Бениньо, совсем позабыли родную литературу, например сказку А. С. Пушкина «О попе и о работнике его Балде». В сей знаменитой сказке попадья-то имелась.

If a priest walks down the street in a cassock and with a cross, he is always being looked back at, and if he is with his wife, then there is almost a hysterical curiosity. By the way, ten years ago, many of our fellow citizens did not even know that Orthodox priests were mostly married. Very often, when I appeared on the street with my husband, we were asked questions like:

"Tell me, can a priest marry?"

Or some drunk dude, stumbling out of the bar, could throw a line:

“Father, but you can’t be with waiwen!”

To which my husband replied:

“With waiwen – no, but with his wife – yes, he can.

Yes, apparently, our fellow citizens, having seen enough of Mexican serials in which any Padre Benigno is necessarily present, completely forgot their native literature, for example Pushkin's fairy tale "About the priest and his worker Balda." In this famous fairy tale, a priest's wife was present.

In this example, Sysoeva uses techniques associated with fictional writing, such as dramatization and dialogue, to portray an ordinary, insignificant anecdote from daily life. However, this episode is illuminated from such an angle so as to produce generalizations of the “mode” of ordinary people’s thinking, and the social image and self-identity of priests. These small scenes containing direct dialogue are a prominent feature of her writing style. They build up socially tense situations and unexpected encounters, highlighting the boundaries and dynamics concerning clerical and secular people’s conceptions and misconceptions and revealing the absurdity of stereotypes, always accompanied by Sysoeva’s arguments and assessments. In many of these sketches, Sysoeva seeks to “demystify” popular images of the clergy, but most of these feature other people as the main characters who serve to illustrate her opinions. Her text is heavily embellished with tales, anecdotes, and rumours popular among clerical circles, introduced in several ways, such as: “Вот какую историю мне довелось услышать” (That's the story I've heard), “Приведем еще несколько семинарских анекдотов” (I'll give a few more seminary anecdotes), “Рассказывали про...” (I was once told about ...), “По воспоминаниям

выпускников ...” (according to the recollections of some graduates...) “Вспоминают также ....” (They also remember ....), “Есть такая семинарская шутка” (There is a seminary joke...), “Говорят даже, что этот анекдот взят из реальной жизни” (they say, that this anecdote is taken from real life), “ходит легенда, что ...” (rumor has it that ...), “Знаю даже реальный случай, как...” (I even know a real case...), or “Говорят, что иногда даже летали предметы, семинаристы, дежурившие на вахте, видели и призраков, от которых волосы шевелились и мурашки бегали по телу” (They say that sometimes seminarians on duty flying objects and ghosts, from which the hair stand up on end and shivers ran over the body) (8).

Gradually, the narrator’s voice loses its calm tone and becomes more involved as she defends the rank-and-file priests and their families, though not necessarily the religion itself. For example, she says of the rule requiring priests to abstain from sexual relationships before marriage:

Многие читатели, наверное, усомнятся, что столь строгие правила по сей день существуют и даже выполняются. Придется некоторых разочаровать — правила действительно выполняются, нарушения встречаются достаточно редко и остаются на совести либо кандидата, утаившего от епископа свое препятствие (так это называется), либо епископа, знавшего о препятствии, но принявшего решение о рукоположении.

К слову сказать, это только в желтой прессе все священники развратники, а епископы гомосексуалисты. В нашей книге говорится только о реальном положении вещей без прикрас или очернения. (14)



Many readers will probably doubt that such strict rules still exist and are even being implemented. Some will have to be disappointed – the rules are actually being enforced, although violations are quite rare and remain on the conscience of either the candidate who has withheld from the bishop his obstacle (as it is called) or the bishop who knew about the obstacle but still chose to ordain.

By the way, it's only in the yellow press that all the priests are debauchees, and the bishops are homosexuals. In our book, we only talk about the real state of things without embellishment or denigration. (14)

Her sympathy toward the strict discipline of the seminary evokes the harsh treatment of soldiers in the Russian army. The standards of free will and dignity that she applies to appraise the seminarian administration are taken from “ordinary” secular society, whose liberal stance has its foundation in Soviet secular education:

Одним словом, почти все, как в армии, кроме туалетов. Вот туалеты воспитанники не моют, для этого имеются наемные уборщицы. В армии допускается опоздание с увольнительной на три часа, в семинарии никаких опозданий не допускается.

In short, almost everything is like in the army, except for toilet cleaning. The toilets are not washed by the inmates, for this purpose there are hired workers. The army allows lateness with

leave warrant for three hours, in the seminary no delays are allowed.

At other moments, the narrator aligns herself with conservative concepts born within the church community or parish reality, adopting a more explicit, sometimes aggressively “Orthodox” stance, such as in her recollection of an episode in a maternal clinic:

— «АБОРТЫ БЫЛИ?»

— «Нет, и не собираюсь».

Удивление.

— «Какую контрацепцию используете?»

— «Никакую».

Еще большее удивление...

— «Ах, ну да, вам же запрещено», — слышу в ответ.

— «Нам не запрещено, просто мы детей не убиваем», —  
пользуясь случаем, иду я в наступление. (28)

— “Have you had abortions?”

— No and not going to.

Surprise.

— What kind of contraception do you use?

—None.

Even more surprise...

— “Oh yes, you guys are forbidden to,” I hear back.

— “We are not forbidden, we just do not kill children,” I take the opportunity to launch an offensive. (28)

In the labour clinic, the narrator trusts and seeks help from a woman nearby, only after she has discovered that the latter was also an Orthodox priest's wife:

И я решила найти эту «семидетную» маму, так как была почти уверена, что она православная и поможет мне в моей беде, да и просто познакомиться с ней было интересно. (29)

And I decided to find this mother of seven, because I was almost sure that she was Orthodox and would help me in my misfortune; besides, it was interesting to just get acquainted with her. (29)

By contrast, another, secular woman in the clinic is rude and unfriendly:

Когда я аккуратно поинтересовалась, не она ли родила седьмого ребенка, «объект» очень обиженным голосом ответил: «С чего это вы взяли? Я что, похожа на женщину, родившую седьмого ребенка?!» В этой фразе отразилось негативное отношение, возвращенное в нашем народе по отношению к многодетным и многодетности. (Впоследствии выяснилось, что «обиженный объект» выглядел гораздо хуже, чем «семидетная» мама.)

When I asked carefully if she gave birth to the seventh child, the “object” replied in a very offended voice: “What makes you think of this? Do I look like a woman who gave birth to the seventh child?!” Her words reflected the negative attitude our people have towards large families. (Subsequently it turned out that the “offended object” looked much worse than the mom of seven.)

Apart from these examples, more often than not Sysoeva does not make herself the central character who stands out against the background, choosing instead to establish her place in the text as the observer reporting various lives and experiences, whether of fellow priestly families or of well-known figures. Her audience’s attention is focused on the story that is being told, not who is telling the story. M. J. Corbett emphasizes the anxiety one may experience when inserting oneself into the network of public circulation. When the words of a priest’s wife are being circulated, read, and interpreted, she must master her anxiety over public exposure and potential accusations of immodesty; therefore, she avoids full self-exposure. It is not her story she represents, but those of priests and their families as she sees them; her references to them by first names or by invented names suggests that she is protecting them from full public view. If in Tikhon’s narrated history, the “I” has a clear centering role, his religious authority providing the necessary legitimation for his self-representation in the spiritual autobiography, Sysoeva must carefully shape the persona she presents, often concealing the story of her family life under the history of the religious institution. This explains the structure of her work as a mix of half-sketch and half-autobiography: much of her narrative consists of pure statement of rules and explanations of “церковные правила”, “общепринятые нормы”, largely emptied of affective content. She expresses herself mainly through references to other “matushki”. When she opposes

the patriarchal family pattern that is upheld in priests' households, known as the "Three Ks," her worries of liberal *matushki* being accused of feminism is apparently related to her own situation, although any explicit links are absent in the text, and the sympathy towards those "poor *matushki*" that are surrounded by myths mirrors a thinly veiled self-pity:

Она жена священника и должна вести строго православный стандартный образ жизни — «Три К». Все, что выходит за рамки «Три К», — неправославно, а следовательно, непозволительно, такую матушку могут заподозрить в феминизме, модернизме и прочих смертных грехах. Все эти представления относятся к внутрицерковным предрассудкам, коих в Церкви, как и вне Церкви, всегда было предостаточно. Бедные матушки! Их со всех сторон окружают мифы. (36)

She is the wife of a priest and must lead a strictly Orthodox, standard way of life, or the "Three Ks". Everything that goes beyond the "Three Ks" is not Orthodox, and therefore, impermissible; such a *matushka* may be suspected of feminism, modernism, and other mortal sins. All these perceptions pertain to the church prejudices, of which there have always been plenty in the Church, as well as outside it. Poor *matushki*! They are surrounded on all sides by myths. (36)

In the section dedicated to education and courtship practices in religious seminaries and academies, Syseova does mention how she met her future husband, but only in passing as though to give another example of the rules of the church world. The story of her marriage appears as

part of the topic of marriage among the “white priests.” The sense of negotiating boundaries between public and private in her work is apparent. Rather than self-centered narratives, Sysoeva tells her stories as though between the lines, as part of the larger story of the life of Orthodox priests.

### Fighting for a Positive Image

As Sysoeva points out in an interview: “Священник тоже человек, у него есть физические силы, он не робот, он не может, как ангел, без сна, без еды, без одежды. А некоторые так воспринимают”<sup>сxcix</sup> (A priest is also a human; he has his physical strength; he is not a robot, he can not live, like an angel, without sleep, without food, or without clothes. Yet some people perceive him that way). The chapters «Матушка за рулём» (Matushka at the Wheel) and «Батюшка на личном авто» (Priest in his Private Car) reveal her intention to break the stereotypical images of the Orthodox priest and his wife who are put on a pedestal as embodiments of otherworldly transcendence and spirituality, and who are deluged with many great and unreasonable expectations from the church, their relatives, and their religious peers, imposed by tradition and by other parishioners:

В народе не без помощи художественной литературы и телевидения сложился устойчивый стереотип, что священник — это хмурый, чрезвычайно серьезный персонаж, вечно всех поучающий, который картинно возводит глаза к небу или смиренно разглядывает свои сапоги.... В реальной жизни жеманства и манерности в священниках крайне мало. Как правило, это очень веселые, живые люди, которые просто счастливы в своем служении и как дети радуются всему, что

по вере их посылается им Господом. Которые, конечно, имеют свои грехи, человеческие слабости, недостатки, но искренне верят в Бога и в то, что все ниспослано Им. Именно искренность и простота привлекают к ним многих и многих людей. (65)

A stable stereotype has formed among the people, not without the help of literature and television, that the priest is a gloomy, extremely serious character who lectures everyone perennially, who pretentiously lifts his eyes to the heavens, or humbly examines his boots.... In real life, the affections and mannerisms of the priests are very rare. As a rule, these are very cheerful, lively people who are just happy with their ministry and, like children, rejoice in everything that is sent to them by the Lord through their faith. Who, of course, have their sins, human weaknesses, shortcomings, but sincerely believe in God and that everything is sent down by Him. It is sincerity and simplicity that attracts many people to them. (65)

She seeks to portray a group of pure-hearted and devoted young men in post-Soviet society, dedicated to serving the Church as Orthodox priests. The personalities of matushka Sysoeva's friends-priests are not devoid of certain charms. Some of these include the upright Father Michael, who fought back against a gang that tried to bully his wife; the exuberant Father Hulagu, whose giant figure is like that of a bogatyri from Russian folklore, and who always starts dancing and singing songs in Hebrew as soon as he takes a drink; the meek Father Alexander,

with his matushka and numerous children living in a shabby hut with a leaky roof and cockroaches crawling everywhere, who arouses the reader's deep sympathy. Offering a unique vantage point for the de-mythologization of Russian Orthodox life, these stories "humanize" the clergy.

As part of this humanizing effort, Sysoeva focuses on the physical, earthly side of secular priests' lives, purposefully diverted from otherworldly spirituality. One Russian newspaper's review of her book describes it as a set of how-to strategies for girls who dream of becoming "the first lady of the parish," selecting such points as where priests come from, why brides should be chaste, whether priests' wives can wear high heels or drive; how much money an abbot makes, why priests do not like Cahors despite popular stereotypes, and why many priests have belly fat.<sup>cc</sup> The summary itself illustrates the degree of demand an Orthodox priest is in today at the "market" of marriage. Sysoeva's notes on Russian Orthodox clergy are not spiritual literature, but more of a collection of answers to frequently asked questions about "what the clergy's life looks like."

Establishing positive images of clergymen also involves restoring the "appropriate," traditional hierarchical relationship between the priest and his flock. In chapters such as "Немного об этикете", Sysoeva introduces and spreads the "correct," or appropriate, church etiquette, as an example to lay readers:

В православии существуют общепринятые нормы этикета, незнание которого может поставить человека в неловкое положение. Очень распространенная ошибка — обращение к священнику «святой отец». Человек, говорящий так, выглядит крайне невежественно и неприлично. В православии к



священнику принято обращаться либо «отец N», если известно имя, либо «батюшка».

Общепринято среди православных христиан вместо простого «спасибо» говорить «спаси, Господи», вместо «приятного аппетита» — «ангела за трапезой», а отвечать — «невидимо предстоит». Когда приветствуют священника, вместо привычного «здрасьте» говорят «благословите». С этими словами вместо рукопожатия берут у него благословение, особым образом складывая руки. (65-66)

In Orthodoxy there are generally accepted norms of etiquette, ignorance of which can put a person in an awkward position. A very common mistake is the address to the priest as “holy Father”. A person who speaks like this looks extremely ignorant and indecent. In Orthodoxy, it is customary to address to the priest either as “Father N”, if the name is known, or as “Batiushka” [a form of appeal to the priest in Russian – comment mine].

It is common among Orthodox Christians to say “Save me, Lord” instead of a simple “thank you,” and instead of “bon appetit” – “wish you an angel for the meal,” and the answer to which is “the invisible awaits.” When a priest is greeted, instead of the usual “hello” you should say “bless me.” And saying these words, instead of handshaking, you take the blessing from him, folding your hands in a specific way. (65-66)

The chapter outlines dogmatic ritual requirements to follow and hierarchical relations to observe. Sysoeva gives the reader instructions but does not link the rituals to their theological significance; unlike *Father Arseny*, her memoir does not interpret her religion from personal experience. She warns the non-religious or un-churched reader that if a person happens to greet a church father in the wrong way, he/she would “look extremely ignorant and indecent.” Such an educational text with its emphasis on external etiquette by way of advice on “how to” and “how not to” is characteristic of contemporary Orthodox literature, in order to provide readers with relevant knowledge of the customs of this new cultural setting to help them become “properly” involved in institutional religion and national identity. Most Orthodox literature informs its readers how to (re)incorporate Orthodoxy into their everyday lives and also objectively reflects the Church’s efforts to direct this process of engagement.

After graduating from the seminaries, the young men could be sent to remote locations to serve a half-collapsing country church, while their wives wait in old cold huts for their husbands to return (Sergei and Katia 42-43). If a wife in a secular family always knows when to expect her husband to come back after work, the *matushki* must be especially patient because serving the Church has no set hours:

Жизнь жены священника трудна, не каждая выдержит... А жена священника ради чего терпит? Только ради славы Божией. Особых материальных благ она не видит. Многодетная семья вряд ли сможет позволить себе отдых за границей, лето в очередной раз будет проведено на даче, если семья проживает в городе. А сельские семьи вообще невыездные. (36).

The life of a priest's wife is difficult; not everyone can stand it...  
And for what reason does the priest's wife endure all of these?  
Only for the glory of God. She does not see any special material  
benefits. A large family can hardly afford a trip abroad, so the  
summer would probably be spent once again in the country, if the  
family lives in town. And rural families have no chance to go  
anywhere for summer. (36)

Sysoeva expresses her concern that relates mainly to the physical side of the clerical life from a matushka's point of view: how much she sacrifices to care for her husband and multiple children, how hard it is to cope with loneliness and to fit into the husband's busy schedule beginning early in the morning and running until late at night, and how to raise a family on a priest's modest salary. These issues are common within the church circle, but what is unusual is that Sysoeva refuses to cite Christian moral values as a source of spiritual strength to overcome her hardships as many Russian priests' wives later would do in their "notes." For Sysoeva, if matushki are unfortunate, it is only in comparison to materially successful families. If, on the contrary, she had compared herself to less fortunate people in the parish in which she lives, she would be obliged to confess that her family were better lodged, better clothed, and better nourished than some of the flock. Paradoxically, the values Sysoeva upholds seem to be of those that Christians ought to resist. If she defines a priest as "a state official" (2) in the first place, such logic inevitably leads to this kind of self-pity.

Exposing the bleak lives of Orthodox priests had been a Russian literary tradition in the second half of the nineteenth century, particularly in the 1860s and 1870s. Both fiction and non-fiction of the time sought to demonstrate the harsh conditions experienced by the clergy and called for

increases in priests' revenues. Sysoeva carries on this tradition, evoking pity for these men and their families, as an insider from within this circle.

In "Современный патерик," Maya Kucherskaya similarly portrays the lives of country priests and their wives, as young couples, freshly graduated from the seminary and used to urban life, struggled to survive in extremely poor rural environments ("No Way Back" 108-112). D. Furman and K. Kaariainen point out the spiritual or idealistic streak of contemporary mass ordinations, comparing the young intellectual priests' passions to go to the countryside and serve the people to the equally dynamic, yet short-lived movement of the St. Petersburg populists of the nineteenth century who sought to overcome their alienation from the "real world," to discover the long-forgotten masses, and to defend an idealized past along with very real forms and practices of Old Russian life.<sup>cci</sup> They renounced brilliant prospects in favour of the difficult lives of country priests, as part of a movement intending to rekindle the spiritual lives of peasants. Many educated young men, either unable to find appointments in town churches or genuinely hoping to exert good influences, move to the country and settle down to live with peasants. However, not all such priests have been successful, as young people of this class who were educated in cities are often physically incapable of carrying out their assigned tasks. Russian Church historian N. Mitrokhin pointed out the spiritual crises many young urban intellectual neophytes have experienced when confronted with the reality of the church:

The sublime ideals of the newly converted intellectual, formed on the basis of reading Orthodox literature, were seriously tested during the first encounters with the real life of the Church. In particular, it concerned the phenomenon of the "elders." "Spiritual guidance" in itself was not mandatory for a member of the Church,

but the active part of the laity and many clergy representatives encouraged the neophyte to seek out a confessor. However, since none of the known confessors had a higher secular education, and some of them went through only four classes in all (and without a seminary diploma), yet they readily meditated on world problems and displayed no hesitation in instructing the spiritual children in serious issues (including marriage and divorce, choices of employment or education), so the neophytes often experienced a profound cultural shock – some spent years searching for “their” elders, others just completely abandoned the idea.<sup>ccii</sup>

As a church insider, Sysoeva avoids digging into these painfully tangled issues, as her goal is the positive portrayal of good priests from the state Church establishment, dedicated to their calling and expecting no material rewards.

Orthodox priests are prestigious figures in present-day Russia. A survey conducted in 2016 by the Russian Public Opinion Research Center (ВЦИОМ) shows that the Orthodox clergy is among the most trusted by Russian people professional groups, with “scholars” ahead of them.<sup>cciii</sup> The general public regards Orthodox priests as role models and applies high moral standards to them, though Sysoeva reminds her readers that priests are human beings with weaknesses and flaws like anyone else. However, Sysoeva’s work is intended not just to humanize the image of priests, but to respond to the historically negative views of Orthodox priests in nineteenth-century Russian literature and in the popular imagination. She seeks to defend the historical role of priests and to secure their positive images in a way that suits the Church’s roles as the moral guide of Russian citizens, the bedrock of the national spiritual revival, and the symbol of the

Russian nation. Her writing is agenda-driven and designed to conform to specific guidelines to insure orthodoxy.

In the first two chapters, “Вступление” (Introduction) and “Религиозные русские и новые священники” (Religious Russians and New Priests), Sysoeva outlines her position vis-à-vis the historical imagery of Orthodox priests. She chooses an archaic, obsolete word, “попадья” (*popadia*) to refer to herself in the book’s title, instead of the more common and stylistically less provocative “matushka.” Her use of the term “попадья,” serves as a challenge to perceptions of disrespect for Orthodox clergy and their families. “Попадья” is a “colloquial name for a priest’s wife in Russia. It can be used only in everyday speech, and never as a form of address, in which case it would be replaced by the word матушка that shows a deep respect of the parishioners to a priest’s wife.”<sup>cciv</sup> The word попадья implies an informal attitudes on the part of the speaker, indicating a lowering of dignity or social status for the priest, and subsequently for his wife. “Попадья” also appears in the Russian proverb: “Кому поп, кому попадья, а кому попова дочка” (Some like the priest, some – his wife, and some – his daughter), which is used in an ironic sense that could be seen as belittling clergy, lessening their moral authority and social responsibilities.

Попадья as a heroine appears in a series of the nineteenth century Russian household tales, such as "Speckled Hen" (Курочка Ряба), in which a priest, his wife, and his daughter, as well as many others in the village, fuss over a trivial incident of a broken egg.<sup>ccv</sup> Soviet writer A. H. Толстой later adapted the story but removed the priest’s family, while Tolstoy’s widely known version was one of the first stories that Soviet parents would read to their children.

When reminding the general public of the existence of “попадья” in old folk tales, Sysoeva bypasses the simple-hearted humour of Курочка Ряба and chooses a sharply satirical counterpart:

“The Tale of the Priest and of His Workman Balda,” a fairy tale in verse by Alexander Pushkin, which features a greedy priest and his sly and treacherous wife. The poem is based on a Russian folk tale that Pushkin collected in the village of Mikhailovskoe. Following the classical tradition, the tale begins with the words: “Жил-был поп, Толоконный лоб.” In the poem, a lazy priest, looking for a cheap worker, meets Balda (“Балда” in Russian means a stupid, simple, or not very serious person) and hires him. The peasant puts forward an unusual condition: the pay he asks for a year’s work was to be allowed to hit the priest three times on his forehead. The priest is happy to have found cheap labour and agrees to the deal. Balda moves into the priest’s house, but when the priest begins to doubt the profitability of the deal, his wife, the попадья, tells him to give Balda impossible missions. The priest asks Balda to collect debt from the sea devils. Unperturbed, Balda sets off to the sea, tricks and defeats the sea devils, and receives the money, after which he demands rightfully the full payment for his work and gives the priest three blows to the forehead. The tale ends with the words: “Balda said reproachfully, You shouldn't have gone rushing off after cheapness.”

A priest hiring a workman and being tricked or outsmarted by the latter seems to be a recurrent theme in Russian folk tales, such as “Поп и попадья” (The Priest and His Wife), “Поп, попадья, поповна и батрак” (The Priest, His Wife, His Daughter, and the Worker), “Поп и работник” (The Priest and the Worker), and “Поп и Николай Чудотворец” (The Priest and Nicolas the Miracleworker), to name a few. Many of these stories feature vulgar and cruel humour. One curious fact about these tales is the frequency with which the priest is portrayed negatively, with traits such as greed, drunkenness, infidelity, or simply bad luck. The rural priest, typically represented as a greedy little man with a big, fat belly, is inclined to squeeze the maximum profit from the hired worker, feeding him less and forcing him to work more. He often resorts to

cunning tricks to avoid spending too much on his worker: for example, in *The Priest and the Worker*, the priest gives work orders to the workman during lunch time in order to deprive the latter of food. In *The Priest and Nicholas the Miracle-worker*, not even Nicholas the Miracle-worker can stop the priest from chasing after money. The positive characters in these tales are, as a rule, smart or crafty men, mostly poor men, workers, or soldiers. In the conflict between the priest and his worker, the latter always wins.

The depiction of a priest as a greedy miser is firmly rooted in various peasant folklore genres of the nineteenth century, not only in fairy tales, but also in proverbs, songs, and riddles. For example, the proverb «Родись, крестись, женись, умирай — за все попу деньги давай» (Being born and baptized, getting married or dying – in all the cases give money to the priest), or the saying «Поп жадный, брюхо толстое, глаза завидующие, руки заgreбующие» (The priest greedy, had fat belly, avid eyes, grasping hands). The phrase “глаза завидующие, руки заgreбующие” appears in stories of the богатырь Alyosha Popovich who, according to the Soviet folklorist I. M. Sokolov, acquired an ironically negative image thanks to his nickname “Popovich” (priest’s son). Sokolov regards the negative portrayal of village priests from an economic point of view: “The economic dependence of the laborer-farmer on his host priest, and then the duty of the peasantry to keep the clergy at his own expense and pay for the necessary religious rites, was the basis on which a sharply negative attitude towards the clergy had developed, which is reflected in the satirical tales about priest-the-host and priest-the- bribe-taker.”<sup>ccvi</sup> The clergy depends on the parishioners for the money they earn from performing various services and ceremonies, and also have a small quantity of church land. In large towns the system of receiving payment from every parishioner for baptisms, marriages, funerals, or other events, in addition to two or three visits a year to each house, generates significant income for the priests. Though the



clergy opposed proposals of regular salaries for priests rather than direct payments from the parishioners, such an arrangement would improve the relations between the townspeople and the clergy.

Sokolov notes that A.N. Afanasyev's collection of *Russian Folk Tales* (1855-1864) contains only a small number of stories about priests, due to censorship, which led him to release *Treasured Fairy Tales*, a collection of stories containing impropriety and explicit erotic, even pornographic, details, abroad. Yet Sokolov points out that it would be incorrect to assume that these works would not be included in conventional publications due to their eroticism. Following the conventions of his time, Afanasyev could have made omissions or even slight stylistic adjustments that would have allowed him to publish them; and therefore, "The inappropriate expressions were just an amplifier of the social satire directed against the clergy." Both Tsarist and religious censors were strict about insubordination. The folk tale was a powerful vehicle for the expression of social values, particularly when the social values of the storytellers and their audiences were in conflict with the ideas of a dominating social group. Therefore, folk tales were seen as propaganda. The 1826 Church Censorship Statute, which was known for its severity in suppression, banned writings that "reject or weaken the indisputable authenticity of Orthodoxy and break the due respect to its doctrine, regulations, traditions and rituals."<sup>ccvii</sup> It strictly forbade books that failed to show "proper respect for the hierarchy of the Church, for its places and people."<sup>ccviii</sup> Although the Statute was reformed in 1828, its overall spirit of hostility towards free-thinking remained intact until 1917.

Pushkin included his "Tale about the Priest and His Workman Balda" in a letter to a friend in 1831 and confessed to him: "It's written only for home reading, the censors won't pass it."<sup>ccix</sup> Indeed, the tale was only published in 1840, four years after Pushkin's death, and in a censored

edition prepared by Pushkin's friend V.A. Zhukovsky. In this edition, Zhukovsky removed the priest as a character and replaced him with a merchant, and changed the title of the tale. Over the next few decades, it was published under titles such as "The Tale of the Merchant Ostolop and His Workman Balda." In 1882, P.A. Efremov restored the original text in his edition of Pushkin's works. The publication history of Pushkin's tale is an example of the conflict between Tsarist government censors and satirical folk tales, and the same is true of the Orthodox hierarchy and some of its proponents.

In the middle and late nineteenth century, Russian intellectuals believed that a better world would involve free play of the mind and heart. Nowadays, however, such profound and searching social thought is generally not tolerated in the Orthodox subculture. It seems to be relevant to cite Fr. Tikhon's comments on religious censorship:

Censorship is a normal tool in any normal society which should cut off all the extremes. Personally, I am absolutely for it, both in religious and in secular spheres. In regard of the state censorship, sooner or later people will come to the sober understanding of the necessity of this institution in the society. Let's remember how Alexander Pushkin in his youth verbally abused the censorship and rhymed it only with the word "fool"<sup>ccx</sup> [цензура-дура – from author]. But later he fought for censorship.<sup>ccxi</sup>

Though Fr. Tikhon does not say how Pushkin became a fighter for censorship, such a clerical effort to label Pushkin in traditional Orthodox terms is characteristic for one in his position.

In 2007 the conservative newspaper *Vedomosti* published “The Russian Folk Tale: A Blasphemy against Righteousness,” whose author indignantly noted that “all those villainous tricks in Russian folk tales were done to the priests while there were almost no stories about deceiving the tsar or the father.” The article concluded that such stories are representations of the evil of human nature: “people wanted to deceive the priests and to get away without punishment, because they thought the priests talking about righteousness were dumb and sinful, and the preached God, even if it existed, would never punish those who abused His servants.”<sup>cexii</sup>

Echoing this sentiment in opposition to negative literary depictions of Russian clergymen, Sysoeva chooses an example from classic Russian literature that supposedly displays a merchant’s wife’s contempt toward the Orthodox clergy, which in the Tsarist period was a closed estate:

В старой России, до 1917 года, общество жестко делилось на сословия. Браки между представителями разных сословий совершались крайне редко. В одном художественном произведении, уже не помню, в каком, мать-купчиха возмущалась до глубины души, что дочь осмелилась просить у маменьки с папенькой благословение выйти замуж за семинариста. «Чтоб дочь да попадье была!» — негодовала купчиха. (2)

In old Russia, until 1917, society was rigidly divided into classes. Marriages between representatives of different classes were extremely rare. In a fiction, I no longer remember in which, the mother-merchant was extremely indignant that her daughter dared

to ask her and papa to be married to a seminarian. “For my daughter to be a priest’s wife!” – said the merchant’s wife resentfully. (2)

Within this emotionally charged context the main idea that a reader can draw is the miserable social status of the clergy whom nobody wanted to marry their daughters to, rather than the “closeness” of this caste which was difficult to get into and complicated to leave. She then goes on to explain the reasons why there were some bad apples – which, by her standard, were revolutionaries and “angry atheists” – in the clerical circle of “old Russia”:

Дети священнослужителей должны были идти по стопам отцов не по призванию, а по происхождению. Отсюда карьеризм, цинизм и прочие извращения того времени. Среди поповских детей было много революционеров и озлобленных безбожников. Яркий пример писатель Помяловский — сын священника, прошедший стандартный путь поповича и впоследствии прославившийся скандальным по тем временам произведением «Очерки бурсы». (2)

Children of priests should follow the footsteps of their fathers not by vocation, but by descent. Hence came the careerism, cynicism, and all other perversions of the time. Among the priestly children there were many revolutionaries and angry atheists. A striking example is the writer Pomyalovsky, the son of a priest, who passed the standard path of a priest’s son and later became famous for his scandalous work, the *Seminarian Sketches*. (2)

What Sysoeva does not mention here was that in 1850 the clergy was freed of the obligation to educate its children in religious institutions and granted the right to educate and raise them in accordance with their capabilities and natural gifts. However, the social image of clergy did not improve. Sysoeva further regards the *Seminary Sketches*, wrongfully labelled as “scandalous at that time,” as further proof of the damaged reputation of the clergy: “Не стоит рассматривать «Очерки...» как историческое пособие” (Do not consider the *Sketches* as a historical guide), because “если принять все описанное там за правду, то не было бы у нас противоположных, положительных примеров” (If we accepted everything described there as the truth, then we would have had no opposite, positive examples). Instead, she claims in the Preface that her work can be trusted as a faithful and truthful portrait:

Эта книга — взгляд изнутри, повествование человека, который не понаслышке знает о жизни духовного сословия в современной России. Правда, и ничего, кроме правды — таков замысел автора. (1)

This book is a look from within, a narrative of a person who knows firsthand about the life of the clergy in modern Russia. Truth, and nothing but the truth – that is the author’s plan. (1)

However, narratives can never give completely accurate accounts of events, and the truth of a documentary prose work is ultimately the truth of experience of writing, because as soon as the story is told, events or facts become reflections of the author’s interpretation of reality or history, and there is always a certain point of view present.

The white clergy (parish priests and deacons) in the Russian Orthodox Church constituted a sizable stratum of society and was part of the state mechanism of the time, but its social prestige in the late nineteenth century was not high. Initially, during the reign of Tsar Nicholas I, the public generally showed little interest in the situation of the clergy. A pamphlet released in the late 1850s contained harrowing details of the abuses existing in the administration of the dioceses and the establishments for the education and formation of the clergy.<sup>ccxiii</sup> Though this pamphlet did create a strong impression, literary portrayals of the clergy continued to be incidental.<sup>ccxiv</sup> Another anonymous work, on the condition of clerical schools in Russia, appeared at the beginning of the 1860s.<sup>ccxv</sup> The ecclesiastical question continued to attract attention among the public and the government, until the government decided that something should be done: “The Press was thereby encouraged and set itself more vigorously to point out the abuses it noticed in the clergy and in their schools.”<sup>ccxvi</sup> In 1862, Nikolai Pomialovsky’s *Seminary Sketches* were viewed as another sensational exposure of a dark corner of Russian life. Before that time, the living conditions of the clergy, particularly of seminarians and rural priests, were presented mostly through humorous works such as Nikolai Gogol’s *Vii*. Later in the 1870s, Nikolai Leskov’s *Cathedral Clergy* featured “попадья” Natalia Nikolaevna, one of the most positively-portrayed female characters in Russian classical literature. The novel’s protagonist, Fr. Savely Tuberosov, who intends to write a story about the Russian clergy, remembers his beloved wife affectionately: “Добрые мне женщины наши представляются вроде матери моей, дочери заштатного дьякона, всех нас своею работою кормившей...”<sup>ccxvii</sup> (These kind-hearted women like my wife and the daughter of the peripatetic deacon, who fed all of us with their works...)

However, Sysoeva does not discuss Leskov, who is arguably the most important source for literary depictions of Russian Orthodox clergymen’s lives. She focuses instead on *Seminary*

*Sketches*, which presents a highly critical depiction of conditions in the church schools in the nineteenth century. The Seminary in Pomialovsky's novel is a shockingly gloomy, wretched, and evil place that corrupts and stifles young students' lives. Influenced by the context of the development of naturalistic literature, *Seminary Sketches* represents a turn away from the earlier introspective and reflective Romantic tradition, toward the critical unmasking social criticism of realistic works of the 1860s. The seminary in Sysoeva's work appears quite the opposite: the school administration is strict yet fair, and the students are amiable and cheerful. In the *Seminary Sketches*, the widow and daughter of a priest approach the rector of the school, begging him, in tears, to help the bride pick a groom from the seminarians. After the priest had died, his place was "reserved" for the family and could be transferred to another clergyman who would agree to marry his daughter. In Sysoeva's work, on the other hand, clergy marriage is the blessed outcome of tender and romantic feelings, as it would be for secular marriages too. Despite examples such as these, both works also show many structural similarities. Like its nineteenth-century predecessor, Sysoeva's work sheds light on the school subjects, student behaviours and specific language, the school administration, the school kitchen, and student marriages. Sysoeva's portrayal of the seminary, like that of the *Seminary Sketches*, values setting over plot. If the *Seminary Sketches* has a rich artistic structure, Sysoeva's work is a standard non-fiction work, her message being communicated directly by comments in the first person.

It is true that the *Seminary Sketches* contains harsh words about the religion and the Church. Many of its "blasphemous" commentaries on religious rites, the clergy, and the seminary superiors were cut out by the Church censors. Yet Sysoeva's labelling of *Seminary Sketches* as a "scandal" should be seen in the context of fierce post-Soviet ideological battles. In 2015, a round table on "The image of the Clergy in Modern Literature" was held in Moscow, at Red Square. In

his speech, Archpriest Vladimir Silovyev, chief editor of Publishing House of the Moscow Patriarchate of Russian Orthodox Church, called for a battle against “extremism in literature” that “belittles” the clerics, and cited Pomialovsky’s *Seminary Sketches* and Pushkin’s *The Tale of the Priest and of His Workman Balda* as examples: “The Russian Church suffered the most during two hardest periods – the synodal and the communist. This requires serious reflections on the topic; [however,] A priest is an icon of Christ; one cannot go away from it and that’s why some people hate Russian priests so much and others are so fond of the Russian priests.” He further commented that authors who write about the Church should not go to extremes, because there is an image of God in every human being, “and in every priest, in particular”; therefore, writers should strive towards presenting Orthodox clergy in a “fair and balanced” way. There have been many Internet forums addressing the topic “why there are no good priests in Russian classical literature.” While presenting the living conditions of contemporary clergy, its educational institutions, regulatory bodies, and traditions, Sysoeva consciously fights the popular image of “bad clergy” present in some of the nineteenth-century Russian literary classics, particularly Pushkin and Pomialovsky’s “toxic” stories.

Sysoeva’s “serious reflection” on Church history is more symbolic than theological:

революция и отделение Церкви от государства явились великим благом для самой Церкви, которая страданиями очистилась от той порочной системы, в которой пребывала долгое время. И само священство было как бы просеяно, как говорится в Писании, отделены были овцы от козлищ. Овцы стали мучениками за веру, а козлища отреклись от нее, —



веры, впрочем, у них и не было, а была только сословная принадлежность. (2)

The revolution and separation of the Church from the state were a great blessing for the Church itself, which by suffering was cleansed from that vicious system in which it had been for a long time. And the priesthood itself was sort of sifted, as the Scripture says, the sheep were separated from the goats. The sheep became martyrs for the faith, and the goats renounced it; they never had the faith anyway, for them it was only a class belonging. (2)

This passage is meant to convince the reader that time and the October Revolution have erased the problems within the Church, and that the new generation of clergy is already tested and “sifted,” thus trustworthy and suitable to be spiritual teachers and role models.

Sysoeva shows a similar reductive binary in her elaboration on the Church’s history of collaborating with the Soviet regime. She refers to the Russian/Ukrainian, past/present opposition to rationalize this dark historical period, explaining the Church collaboration as a result of the “unnaturally” large proportion of Ukrainian clerics within the Russian Orthodox Church. Her argument reflects the common discourse, popularly circulated within the Church, that fuels and is fuelled by the painful relationship between these two nations today:

Учитывая украинский пиетет к советскому правительству и требовательную религиозность, властям выгодно было допускать в семинарию и к священству именно украинцев, которые становились бы просто послушными

требоисполнителями, а не проповедниками и миссионерами. Поэтому русских священников в советское время было очень мало, а настоятелей и того меньше из-за влияния украинской национальной клановости, проталкивания родственников и при поддержке уполномоченных. Не будем рассуждать, какими были священники в советское время. (3)

Considering the Ukrainian fidelity to the Soviet government and their obedient piety, it was advantageous for the authorities to admit to the seminary and to the priesthood precisely the Ukrainians, who would become simply obedient executors, but not preachers or missionaries. Therefore, there were very few Russian priests in the Soviet period, and Russian abbots were even fewer because of the influence of the Ukrainian national tribalism which with the support of commissaries promoted only their relatives. We will not discuss what the priests were like in Soviet times. (3)

Using a religious/unreligious binary opposition, Sysoeva compares the Orthodox as «свои» (our people) to “others” or “contemporaries,” the non-religious, and displays a preference for the religious, whether clergy or laity:

... язык священников лексически богаче и больше насыщен фразеологизмами. В их речи полностью отсутствуют сквернословие, божба и чертыханье, к которым так привыкло ухо современного человека. (65)

The language of the priests is lexically richer and saturated with idioms and proverbs. In their speech there is no swearing, or foul language, to which the ear of modern man has got so used. (65)

... религиозные люди стараются отделять себя от светской жизни, поэтому и детям пытаются дать как можно более религиозное образование, то есть поместить их в наиболее приемлемую для семьи среду, к своим. Более того, наши общеобразовательные школы в нравственном отношении оставляют желать лучшего, и православные родители, отправляя свое чадо в школу, очень боятся, что оно научится не тем наукам, за которыми его туда отправили. Вот научится курить да матом ругаться, а еще опасность сексуального просвещения, которое из подворотни приползло и в школу, и уже на уровне министров обсуждается возможность введения в школьную программу подобных «предметов»... (31)

... religious people try to separate themselves from the secular life, so they are also trying to give the children as much religious education as possible, that is, to place them in the environment most acceptable to the family, with their own kind. Moreover, our public schools leave much to be desired in the moral aspect, and Orthodox parents, sending their children to school, are very afraid that they will learn not the skills which they have been sent there for; that they will pick up smoking and swearing, and there is also

the danger of sexual enlightenment that has sneaked from back alley to school, and the possibility of introducing such “subjects” into the school curriculum is already being discussed at the level of ministers... (31)

... Православные помешаны на воспитании детей и строго следят за их нравственным обликом, в отличие от светских людей, которые больше заботятся, во что одеть и чем накормить драгоценного отпрыска. Поэтому и разговоры православных мамочек на детской площадке или возле храма все сплошь о воспитании детей, проблемах в школе, детских садах, кружках и прочем. Мамочки вряд ли будут обсуждать, какую новую курточку или сапожки приобрели на прошлой неделе своему ребеночку...(31)

... The Orthodox are obsessed with children’s upbringing and strictly monitor their moral growth, unlike the secular people who care more about what to feed and clothe their precious offspring. Therefore, the conversations between Orthodox moms on the playground or near the church are all about raising children, the problems at school, or kindergarten, or in the school clubs and etc. Those moms are unlikely to discuss what new jacket or new boots were bought last week for their babies ... (31)

Nowadays, Orthodox priests enjoy respect and unconditional trust, and their families occupy admirable positions in the parishes as well: “Матушка на приходе — это все равно, что

первая леди в государстве” (A matushka in the parish is like the first lady in the country). However, though she stresses that priests are human like everyone else, Sysoeva is not uncomfortable with her status as “first lady of the parish,” nor does she insist upon being treated completely as an equal:

За рубежом в Русской православной церкви... священники вынуждены работать на светской работе, чтобы прокормить себя и семью... Во-первых, тамошние прихожане не содержат священника, так как он воспринимается равным. Здесь есть некое влияние протестантизма — ведь протестанты священства вообще не признают. С пастырями прихожане общаются на равных. А коли он такой же, как и все остальные прихожане, то почему приход обязан его кормить? У нас к священникам иное отношение. В России все же сохранено почитание священства как особого благословенного дара, который не каждому дается. (45)

In the Russian Orthodox Church abroad... the priest has to work in a secular job to feed himself and the family ... First, the parishioners there do not financially support the priest, because he is perceived as an equal. There is a certain influence of Protestantism in this – the Protestants do not recognize the priesthood at all. So the parishioners there talk with their pastors on an equal footing. And if he is no different than the rest of the congregation, then why does the parish have to feed him? We have

a different attitude here to priests. In Russia, still preserved is the veneration of the priesthood as a special blessed gift, which is not given to everyone. (45)

She approves the hierarchical relationship and the special veneration toward clerical persons. At the beginning of the 1990s, the Russian religious essayist A. R. Anzimirov warned that a lopsided veneration of clergy could pose risks, and called for a healthy attitude of “natural” respect:

Вместо естественного уважения к сану происходит сакрализация личности священно-служителя... критика [личность священника] расценивается как богохульство, любая глупость, сказанная человеком в рясе, воспринимается как истина в последней инстанции. Спонтанно возникающие формы выражения почтения к священникам со стороны часто напоминают паясничество.

Невозможно забыть один из вечеров, посвященных нашей истории, в одном из заводских домов культуры, где среди приглашенных был священник. При его появлении двое кандидатов наук умильными голосами принялись заверять батюшку, что они вообще-то не чувствуют себя вправе сидеть в его присутствии, после чего долго просили позволения дерзнуть выступить после слова, сказанного «святым отцом». Такое магическое отношение к обрядам, священнослужителям и церквам внешне напоминает религиозность неграмотных

средневековых крестьян, но это только внешнее подобие, так как у современного городского интеллигента описанный синдром есть следствие сознательной работы души по архаизации самосознания. Цель этой работы — отключить функционирование разума и подавить собственный здравый СМЫСЛ.<sup>ccxviii</sup>

Instead of a natural respect for the position, a sacralisation of the personality of the sacred minister takes place ... criticism [of a priest] is regarded as blasphemy; any nonsense said by a man in a cassock is perceived as the ultimate truth. The spontaneous forms of expression of priest reverence often resemble clowning for a cooled eye.

It is impossible to forget one of the evenings devoted to our history which was held in one of the factory clubs of culture, where among the invited was a priest. Upon his arrival the two with PhD degrees began to reassure the priest that they did not feel right to sit in his presence, after which they asked for permission to dare to speak after the “holy father” had delivered his speech. Such magical attitudes to rituals, priests, and churches outwardly resemble the religiosity of illiterate medieval peasants, but this is only an outward similarity, since for the modern urban intellectual this syndrome is a consequence of the soul’s conscious work on the

archaization of self-identity. The purpose of this work is to disable the functioning of the mind and suppress one's own common sense.

This “conscious work of the soul on archaization of self-identity” is precisely what Alexei Chaplin, archpriest of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church of the Moscow Patriarchate, exhorted his followers to do in an article for the Orthodox journal *Благодатный огонь* (*The Holy Fire*):

Главная проблема современного православия и, собственно говоря, России (потому что России нет без православия) – это то, что мы разучились быть рабами. Христианство – это религия сознательного и добровольного рабства. Рабская психология – это не какой-то скрытый подтекст, а норма мироощущения для православного христианина. Все современное общество поклоняется идолу социальных прав и свобод. И только православная церковь упорно утверждает, что человек – это бесправный раб Божий. Поэтому так неуютно себя чувствует современный 'свободомыслящий' человек в православном храме, где все проникнуто архаикой рабства... рабское сознание дает возможность нам правильно относиться и к часам патриарха Кирилла (если таковые вообще существовали), и к дорогим иномаркам священноначалия... Для раба престиж господина – это его личный престиж. Для того чтобы постичь истину, мы должны перестать 'включать мозги' и начать на деле себя мнить ничем и звать никем. Одним словом, мы должны возвращать в себе



раба. Путь к рабству Божьему лежит через рабствование человеку: детей – родителям, жены – мужу, христианина – священноначалию, гражданина – государству со всеми чиновниками и силовиками, включая президента.<sup>ссхix</sup>

The main problem of modern Orthodoxy or, to be more specific, of Russia (because there would be no Russia without Orthodoxy) is that we have forgotten how to be slaves. Christianity is the religion of conscious and voluntary slavery. The slave mentality is not some hidden subtext, but should be a norm of attitude for an Orthodox Christian. All modern society worships the idol of social rights and freedom. And only the Orthodox Church persistently argues that a man is a disenfranchised servant of God. That's why the modern 'freethinking' people feel so uncomfortable in the Orthodox church where everything is imbued with the archaism of slavery ... slave psychology enables us to correctly treat both the controversial wrist watch of Patriarch Kirill (if any existed) and the expensive import cars of the hierarchy ... For a slave, the prestige of the master is his own prestige. In order to comprehend the truth, we must stop 'turning on the brains' and start really to eradicate your self-consciousness and call yourself nobody. In a word, we must cultivate a slave within ourselves. The path to slavery of God lies through slavery to man: children to parents, wife to husband,

Christians to the Church hierarchy, citizens to the state with all the officials and law enforcement agencies, and the president.

His comments may seem aggressive, but they contain a dose of truth about the challenges facing the contemporary Orthodox boom: the deep contradiction between the archaic values that the Church upholds and the humanistic mindset Russian citizens have received from Soviet education. In post-Soviet society, Orthodox faith is influenced by so many side factors that it is losing its original metaphysical nature of a worldview and becoming something reminiscent of the conformist atheism of the Soviet regime:

... по мере ухода из атеистического «лагеря» конформистских элементов, понятие «атеист» должно становиться «идейно определенной», «чище», а понятие «верующий», напротив, должно становиться все более неопределенным, все менее говорить о реальном содержании мировоззрения.<sup>ccxx</sup>

... as the conformist elements left the atheist camp, the concept of “atheist” must have become ideologically more specific and purer, and the concept of “believer,” on the contrary, should have become increasingly uncertain, less and less relevant to the real content of a worldview.

### Breaking Gender Stereotypes

In August 2000, the Bishops’ Council of Russian Orthodox Church adopted *The Basis of the Social Concept of the Russian Orthodox Church*, its most important official document, which set out the Patriarchate’s position on crucial political and social questions. The tenth chapter of this

document presents the official position of the Church in regard to questions of morality, personal and family life, marriage, and gender relations. It states that the contemporary Russian Orthodox Church does not support the perception of women, whose social status was lower than that of men's. The Church establishes equality between men and women before God and considers the roles of women as one of the most influential aspects of contemporary society. However, some clauses retain a certain degree of ambiguity. According to the official document, men's and women's gender images are different, and these two make up the single whole of humanity: "A man and a woman were created for a completed unification with each other in love."<sup>ccxxi</sup> It also stresses that the ideal image of a woman is as a wife and a mother, and marriage allows women to perform their ultimate destination and complete the task that is given to them in God's plan:

Высоко оценивая общественную роль женщин и приветствуя их политическое, культурное и социальное равноправие с мужчинами, Церковь одновременно противостоит тенденции к умалению роли женщины как супруги и матери. Фундаментальное равенство достоинства полов не упраздняет их естественного различия и не означает тождества их призваний как в семье, так и в обществе. В частности, Церковь не может превратно толковать слова апостола Павла об особой ответственности мужа, который призван быть «главою жены», любящим ее, как Христос любит Свою Церковь, а также о призвании жены повиноваться мужу, как Церковь повинуется Христу.<sup>ccxxii</sup>

Appreciating the public role of women and welcoming their political, cultural and social equality with men, the Church is simultaneously opposed to the tendency of belittling the role of women as spouses and mothers. The fundamental equality of the two sexes does not abolish the natural distinction and does not mean that their vocations both in the family and in society are identical. In particular, the Church cannot misinterpret the words of the apostle Paul about the special responsibility of the husband who is called to be the “head of the wife”, loving her, like Christ loves his Church, and also calling the wife to obey her husband, as the Church obeys Christ.

The ROC, in trying to articulate a new, more positive relationship to modern society, still relies heavily on Scripture, using the language of tradition. Many official representatives of the ROC, monks, and priests, as well as popular religious literature cite the New Testament, patristic literature, and church elders as the everlasting authority on moral value to give preference to the ascetical stream of Orthodox tradition.<sup>ccxxiii</sup> In *The Orthodox Family*, Archpriest Evgeniy Shestun, abbot of the Church of St. Sergius of Radonezh in Samara, portrays the hierarchical structure of family as given by God, with an accompanying rejection of the contemporary world as thoroughly corrupted:

Сейчас семья переживает тяжелые времена, испытывает особое давление мира, сатанинских сил... Мы же видим, что отпадение людей от веры привело к тому, что муж перестал чтить Бога и поклоняться Ему, слушаться Его, жить по Его

воле и стал проявлять непослушание. Следствием этого стало то, что жена оказывает непослушание своему мужу. А у двух непослушных людей вырастает третий непослушный — ребенок...<sup>ccxxiv</sup>

Now the family is going through hard times; it undergoes particular pressure from the world, the satanic forces ... We see that people falling away from the faith has led to the fact that the husband stopped honouring God and worshipping Him, obeying Him, and living by His will, and became disobedient. The consequence of this is that the wife starts to disobey her husband.

And two disobedient people raise a third one — the child ...

Similarly, the late abbot of the Pskov-Caves Monastery, Alipy Voronov, who was described in Fr. Tikhon's autobiography as a fearless Orthodox warrior epitomizing the righteousness of Soviet monks, gave the following advice to women:

Если муж имеет такие недостатки, как пьянство, жена должна простить своему мужу эту слабость, потому что и сама не без слабостей. Какой бы ни был муж, но он есть глава в доме, он — хозяин. Апостол Павел пишет в послании к Коринфянам, что жена должна молчать в храме Божиим, то есть она не должна поучать в храме Божиим; должна молчать и дома, так как глава — муж, и у него спрашивать, что не понятно.<sup>ccxxv</sup>

If the husband has such shortcomings as drunkenness, the wife should forgive her husband for this, because she herself is not without weaknesses. Whatever the husband is like, he is the head of the house, and he is the master. The Apostle Paul writes in the Epistle to the Corinthians that the wife must remain silent in the temple of God, that is, she should not teach in the temple of God; as well as remain silent at home, since the head is the husband, and she has to ask him if something is unclear.

Ioann (Snychev), spiritual leader of the patriotic-Orthodox forces and late metropolitan of St. Petersburg regarded *Домострой* (Domostroy), a seventeenth-century collection of advice and rules, as providing today's church-going reader an "ideal picture" of family life in which wives submit to husbands, and male authority is seen as natural:

Та же часть сборника, которая посвящена вопросам семейного быта, учит, «как жити православным христианам в миру с женами и с детьми и домочадцами, и их наказывати и учити, и страхом спасти и грозою претити и во всяких делах их беречь... и во всем самому стражу над ними быть и о них пещись аки о своем уде... Все бо есьми связаны единою верою к Богу...<sup>сххvi</sup>

The same part of the collection, which is devoted to family life, explains "how Orthodox Christians should live in the world with their wives and children and household members, teaching and instructing them, and save them through fear and authority and protect them in all matters ... be the guard over them in everything and care about them just like care about yourself... Connect all of them by the one and only faith in God."

Although Metropolitan Ioann died in 1995, his vision is still alive and very popular with the majority of the members of the Synod, the ruling bishops, parish priests, and monks.<sup>ccxxvii</sup> The abundance of this popular ascetic literature in the traditionalist vein demonstrates that some form of traditionalism, combining theological, political, and moral conservatism, is enjoying a revival. According to Irina Papkova's *The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics*, this traditionalist-conservative attitude with its accompanying anti-Westernism and implicit anti-Semitism is prevalent among the elite of the ROC and active laypeople, a faction that is dominant in the ROC. The liberal Orthodox community, on the other hand, takes a position that differs from the traditionalists in significant ways, from religious tolerance to attitudes towards the West. Relatively marginal in terms of their weight in the ROC, their theological liberalism is closely linked with liberal sociopolitical views.

In the first chapter of her work, Sysoeva confronts the Orthodox Church hierarchy by sympathizing with Jewish society in Israel. She opposes Metropolitan Ioann's belief that women should be quiet, and speaks out on matters relating to ecclesiastical regulations and sensitive historical issues, such as Soviet church-state collaboration or the hereditary caste of the clergy in the Russian empire, boldly offering her opinions and comments. Traditionalists see these sociopolitical issues as meant for discussion by men only, while women are, at best, expected only to ask their husbands' opinions.

Historically, "egalitarian" is a modern word. Christianity was not always egalitarian, but began as a patriarchal religion with gender inequality embedded in its traditions, from the assertion in Genesis 3:16 of hierarchy within marriage ("your husband ... will have dominion over you") to the Pauline epistles that reaffirm gender imbalance: "Christ is the head of every man, man is the head of woman" (1 Cor. 11:3). According to Russian Orthodox traditions, women are not

allowed to enter into churches or touch icons and other sacred objects while they are “impure.” Similarly, in the Orthodox Church, women have access to all sacraments but one: the priesthood, which is reserved for men. These exclusions and limitations were conditioned by the gender laws of their time; nevertheless, the New Testament does provide contextual evidence that Jesus Himself treated women as equals and that all His actions and behaviours demonstrated respect for them. From a modern secular reader’s point of view, the strong patriarchal hierarchy that many official representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church promote, can be difficult to accept because of the established place of women within the secular sphere. Sysoeva’s literary non-fiction, when claiming to be an insider’s record, actually represents an outsider’s mindset. The chapters “Мода поповских жен” (Fashion of priests’ wives), “Три «К» — образ жизни” (The Way of Life – Three K), and “Матушка за рулем” (Matushka at the Wheel) discuss Orthodox requirements for priestly wives, outlining Sysoeva’s position on the gender stereotypes that exist within Russian Orthodox circles. For her, the Church puts women in a subordinate position, not only in families, but in society as well. She criticizes the ethical vision of a virtuous Orthodox woman: from her dress codes to her place within family. It is assumed that Christian women should dress modestly, wear head coverings, be submissive and quiet, and not assume authority. Sysoeva can hardly restrain her dislike of the “formless” dress for Orthodox women:

очень многие, выйдя замуж и обрета статус жены священника,  
превращают себя в молодых старух, нося жуткие  
«теткинские» юбки и кофты навывпуск, превращая себя в  
оплывших, малоподвижных клуш, упорно следуя непонятым  
внутрицерковным предрассудкам, не желая или боясь их  
разрушить. (33)



So many people, having married and becoming the wife of a priest, turn themselves into old grannies, wearing the terrible old-women skirts and sweaters, transforming themselves into formless, sluggish slobs, stubbornly following the incomprehensible church prejudices, unwilling or afraid to destroy them. (33)

She mocks those neophytes who “overeagerly” follow this dress code “prejudice”, accusing them of understanding only superficially the virtues of modesty and piety:

такая одежда — это выражение ее личных представлений о внешнем образе православной христианки, она должна придавать скромности и благочестия. У нее даже походка изменилась. Кто знаком с неофитами, прекрасно знает эту семенящую, робкую, вперевалочку, как бы всего стесняющуюся и комплексующую походку. А потом мне показалось, что за этой робостью и видимым благочестием скрывается очень строптивая и своенравная натура. (34)

Such clothing [headscarf and long skirt – explanation mine] is the expression of her personal perception of the external image of an Orthodox Christian. The clothing must lend modesty and piety. Even her walking has changed. Anyone who is familiar with Orthodox neophytes knows this pattering, timid, waddling, as if shy of everything, and complex gait. And later it seemed to me that behind this shyness and visible piety is a very obstinate and wayward character. (34)

Syssoeva objects to the virtual confinement of Orthodox women, especially матушки who have to raise many children, in the kitchen, isolated from the public sphere and therefore dependent upon their husbands. She prefers an independent life in which she can make use of her knowledge. She denounces the antifeminist view that she perceives behind the statements of “some clergy” that many social problems can be blamed on mothers who do not stay home to look after their children, and that women have abandoned their traditional role of buffers between the family and public life:

*Некоторые священники и домостроевски настроенные миряне считают, что женщина просто создана исключительно для семьи, детей и кухни и любые отступления от этого стандарта наносят непоправимый ущерб семье, особенно детям. (34)*

Some priests and ultra-conservative laymen believe that a woman is simply created exclusively for the family, children and the kitchen and any deviations from this standard cause irreparable damage to the family, especially to the children. (34)

Syssoeva’s repressed discontent moves her narrative from the lighter tone with which it described seminarian schools toward coldness, anxiety, and even bitterness as she focuses on the marital lives and child-rearing practices of priestly families. She tends to disagree more often. If she did not allow herself to appear in the chapters on the seminary, the reader now sees her driving her car, doing some jobs traditionally thought to be men’s jobs, instructing parishioners on what food to bring to their priests, among other things. Even her language becomes harsher and cruder, straying away from the standard literary language that she used at the beginning of the book.

This tonal shift illustrates her explicit disregard for the issue in question. She argues loudly that she has the right to be a free modern woman, to wear stylish, attractive dresses and fashionable makeup, to have a secular job outside the home, and to drive a car, and that parishioners who disapprove of her behaviour should not be judgemental:

она имеет право и на машине ездить, и работать, и одеваться прилично, ломая стереотипы. Так что, люди добрые, не смотрите, что матушка за руль влезла, и туфли на каблуках надела, и на деловой фуршет укатила, — имеет право, и нечего здесь осуждать. (35)

she has the right to drive a car and get a job, and dress up decently, going against the stereotypes. So, people, don't mind that the matushka has got behind the wheel, and put on high-heeled shoes, and has left for a business reception; she has the right to do so, and there is nothing to condemn. (35)

Sysoeva defends the right for Orthodox women, especially priests' wives, to live secularized lifestyles, which were guaranteed for all women during the Soviet period. However, she does not criticize the church establishment or its doctrinal grounding, defending her religion on the grounds that “Православие не запрещает женщинам следить за собой и хорошо выглядеть” (Orthodoxy does not prohibit women from dressing themselves up and looking good) (33) and “Православие не запрещает женщинам реализовывать себя в других областях жизни, в том числе и профессиональных” (Orthodoxy does not prohibit women from realizing themselves in other branches of life, including professional areas) (33). The elevation of ascetic behaviour is

interpreted as a deviation from true Orthodoxy; she openly blames the “parishioners”, “some priests”, “prejudice within the church”, “archaic-minded lay people,” and “Orthodox books”:

В представлении *прихожан* матушка не должна модно и современно одеваться или стремиться к какому-либо самовыражению, подчеркиванию своей индивидуальности... (33)

Я только против стрижки всех под одну гребенку, против *православных книг*, в которых говорится, что православная женщина-мать должна сидеть дома. В одной такой книге, написанной священником, мне довелось прочесть, что мать, пошедшая работать, приравнивается к матери-алкоголичке, бросившей детей. Вот такой радикализм. В силу этих причин жене священника тяжело найти в себе силы, дабы сломать устоявшийся стереотип домашней квочки. (35)

In the *parishioners'* conception, the *matushka* should not dress fashionably and modernly or strive for any self-expression which emphasizes her individuality ... (33)

I'm just against cutting everyone the same size, against those *Orthodox books* which say that an Orthodox mother must stay home. In one such book, written by a priest, the mother who went to work was equated with an alcoholic mother who abandoned her children. Such was the radicalism. For these reasons, the priest's

wife finds it hard to gain the strength to break the established stereotype of stay-at-home mother hen. (35) [emphases mine]

Sysoeva particularly objects to religious people who are, in her perception, people of her own circle, and therefore, supposed to show more understanding of, or solidarity with, a driving *matushka*, but are especially enthusiastic in their opposition:

...матушка за рулем почему-то до сих пор шокирует окружающих, причем не столько малоцерковных людей, сколько вполне *воцерковленных прихожан, своих*, так сказать.  
(35)

Matushka driving a car for some reason still shocks the people around, and not so much the religiously half-literate people, as the many fully *in-churched parishioners, our own kind*, so to speak.  
(35)

She accuses conservative parishioners of unfairly holding double standards towards priestly wives. She believes that there are many *попадья* who are still passively oppressing themselves to meet outdated patriarchal standards and live up to other people's expectations, and she demonstrates sympathy for the latter in a passage marked by self-pity:

...с обычной бабы что взять — ей простительно и рулить, и на работу ходить, ей и штаны простить могут. А вот жене священника ни штаны, ни место за рулем православные уже не простят, к ней другие требования. Она жена священника и должна вести строго православный стандартный образ жизни

— «Три К»... Бедные матушки! Их со всех сторон окружают мифы. (36)

... what can you do with ordinary woman – she is forgivable for driving, going to work, and even for wearing pants. But the Orthodox will not be forgive a priest's wife for doing any of these. There are different requirements for her. She is the wife of a priest and must lead a strictly Orthodox, standard way of life – the “Three K” ... Poor matushki! They are surrounded on all sides by the myths. (36)

While sharply criticizing patriarchal relationships within the Orthodox family, Sysoeva does not quote any Orthodox teachings on the subject, but instead uses the German slogan “3K,” which stands for “Kinder, Küche, Kirche” or “children, kitchen, church,” to summarize the Orthodox expectations for “good” women.. In German, “3K” refers to a female role model that seems antiquated today, and the term is vaguely equivalent to the English phrase “barefoot and pregnant.” The 3K propaganda was greatly stressed when Hitler came to power, and in the 1950s and 1960s the phrase continued to be used in feminist and anti-feminist writing. Notably, the first version of Naomi Weisstein’s classic feminist essay was titled “Kinder, Küche, Kirche as Scientific Law: Psychology Constructs the Female.” Labelling patriarchal family values with this phrase, Sysoeva dismisses those values as alien, artificial, and stuffy. The derogatory connotation is as obvious as Sysoeva’s polemical overtones. She prefers “народная мудрость” (folk wisdom) of «Я и лошадь, я и бык, я и баба, и мужик» (I’m the horse and the bull, I’m the woman and the man). Quoted from a popular song of the 1940s, this expression represents an ironic self-portrayal of Soviet women telling them that they had to be universal, because they were faced

with the heavy-duty works intended for men, and could never expect help from the latter. The narrator would choose the hard and lonely life of many Soviet women rather than following the Church pattern of 3K; she proudly describes fixing her stove, buying construction materials, and running errands in her car. She portrays herself as an independent, hard-working, and, perhaps, self-willed woman as opposed to the needy *matushki* who are used to waiting for other people to care and help:

Образ жизни «Три К» — это для многих еще и своеобразный защитный комплекс, раковина для нежной улитки. Мол, у меня есть «Три К» , и не хочу ничего знать, хочу быть женщиной! (35)

For many the “Three K” is also a peculiar protective complex, a shell for the gentle snail. They would say, I have “Three K”, so I do not want to know anything, I just want to be a woman! (35)

The life of a priest’s wife seems more demanding than the narrator had expected, and she can barely cope with its demands: “Вот такая проза жизни: либо жена священника — «Три К», либо и лошадь и мужик в одном флаконе; третье дано, но редко” (Such is the prosaic life: either to be the priest’s wife with “Three K”, or to be both the horse and the man in one person; the third way is given, but happens rarely). Her disappointment with her marital life is apparent, which may explain why she remarried only a few years after the murder of her first husband, Fr. Daniel.

In social debates of women in patriarchal religions, Sysoeva’s work appears to fall on the side of liberal feminism. On the opposite end of the debates there is an alternative view of female

agency performed through docility, obedience, and patience. In *Islamic Veiling in Legal Discourse*, Anastasia Vakulenko pointed out that “qualities such as modesty, docility and patience which are willingly and consciously cultivated in the course of such ‘habituated learning’, are not at all those usually approved by the traditional liberal autonomy framework. For the traditional feminist in particular, modesty, docility and patience signify submission to patriarchy, false-consciousness and a near-total lack of freedom and choice... for religious women, docility and patience are not natural or social givens, but acquired qualities which require much will-power and determination to cultivate.”<sup>ccxxviii</sup> Such qualities, therefore, are in accord with women’s own interests and agendas, as a matter of self-fulfillment and spiritual betterment.

In 2012, four years after the publication of Sysoeva’s book, K.B. Luchenko, who was a member of the Publishing Council of the Russian Orthodox Church and a columnist for the newspaper “Church Bulletin” until 2009, published «Матушки. Жены священников о жизни и о себе» (Matushki: Wives of Priests about Life and Themselves). This work is a collection of Luchenko’s interviews with nine Orthodox priestly wives who discuss their relations with their spouses, their childhoods, and their child-rearing experiences. Works such as Sysoeva’s and Luchenko’s suggest a continuing interest in Orthodox priestly families, especially the question of whether priests’ wives are ordinary Orthodox women or whether they have higher and more significant roles to play. Although Luchenko does not answer this directly, she structures her interviews to depict her subjects as guardians of their families, with advice on building strong marriages and raising well-behaved and religiously-minded children. Their stories paint pictures of the ideal Orthodox family pattern, “the domestic Church,” that the ROC envisions, in which the husband and wife, together with their children, share Christian faith and grow in the



knowledge of God towards spiritual perfection. In Luchenko's book, the matushki's accounts mainly focus on their spiritual-emotional communications with their spouses. They are seen as successful builders of harmonious families and strong emotional bonds between family members. Their accounts of their lives are very much in the Orthodox perspective of understanding everything in life as God's Providence and being grateful for every little success. Sysoeva's work is firmly grounded on earth, so that one does not feel the presence of the divine or any hint of God's plan in the life she describes. Though she gives details about the daily routines and financial problems of clerical families, she does not reflect their language or their mindset. More often than not, when trying to convince the reader or to justify her action, she builds her argument on a secular basis. The reflection of reality encountered in her text presents a curious mixture of understandings and interpretations of a person who engages with Orthodox practices but doesn't seem to get comfort from this experience. The narrator admits that she does not belong to the majority in the church circle with regard to many questions: "Существуют общие традиционные представления о внешности православной женщины, особенно матушки, которых большинство все же придерживается" (The traditional ideas about the appearance of an Orthodox woman, especially of a matushka, are still commonly shared, most people adhere to them) (33). However, she is determined to challenge these notions. She states coldly, as a given fact, that "среди матушек не принято работать, она должна полностью посвящать себя детям и семье" (34) (Matushka is not supposed to work; she must fully devote herself to the children and the family). Even so, she insists on her right to a secular job. Luchenko's work does not contain such tension; the matushki whom she interviewed are representatives of the "majority," with a distinctly positive and life-affirming attitude different from Sysoeva's. They restrain from complaints, avoid judgement, and demonstrate their emotional support for their

husbands and their great efforts in fostering true religious feelings in their children. They pass on their positive energy to other people and their world as a whole, preferring to show Orthodoxy by the way they “feel” about it rather than by following rules and regulations or knowing the history: “мне всегда нравилась красота церкви, богослужений. Нравилось ощущать себя в Церкви” (I always liked the beauty of the church and its services. I liked the feeling of myself in the Church) (12).. They admit that marrying a priest is challenging, but do not appear to show the frustration that Sysoeva does when she says, “не всякий это выдержит” (not everyone can bear it). They seem happy with their marriages, admitting that, despite various practical inconveniences, the spiritual side, love, care, and emotional nurturing is what matters. None of them complain about financial difficulties, or question the rules of women’s dress codes and daily routines, because these should be, in their opinion, secondary. For example, Mother Olga regards her daily routines as hulls that are insignificant and disposable:

один раз меня старший сын спросил: «Мам, а почему вы с папой не ругаетесь, а говорите на такие темы?» А мы обсуждали всегда и церковную жизнь, и культурную, и общественную, что мы увидели, что прочли. Но не быт, в том смысле, кому мыть посуду. Быт – это только как оболочка, шелуха. Вы же не будете серьезно относиться к шелухе! (12)

once my eldest son asked me: “Mom, why don’t ever you argue with dad, but instead talk about such topics?” And we always discussed church life, both cultural and social aspects of it, talked about what we saw and read. But not about the domestic, everyday routine, in the sense of whom to wash dishes. That part of life is

only like a shell, or husk. You will not be serious about the husks!)

She's flexible with who is doing what, as long as the couple are supporting each other. For Sysoeva, everyday routine is given fact, trivial, unromantic, yet one cannot escape it. (Chapter "Быт – он и в Африке быт".) (Drab Realities of Everyday Life)

The first matushka Luchenko interviews is a Russian writer and poet Olesya Nicolaeva, who describes the material difficulties she faces and consciously explains why she focuses on such "trivial stuff." Nicolaeva's experience of priestly life is positive; though she acknowledges the problems, she is confident that she can deal with them, and sees her life as spiritually fulfilled. She does not mind driving and does not worry about the possible reactions of the parishioners, and does not even see that there would be such pressure:

Наша жизнь всегда была очень насыщенной – работой, заботой о детях, общением с людьми, но когда мой муж стал священником, она стала невероятно богатой трудами в поте лица своего, событиями, человеческими судьбами, с которыми пришлось соприкасаться вплотную. А вот всякими материальными удобствами и развлечениями она сделалась сразу невероятно скудна. Мы жили под Москвой в писательском поселке Переделкино, и мне пришлось послужить моему мужу в качестве шофера – я возила его то на богослужение, то на беседы с прихожанами, которые проводились в храме, то на лекции в Православный университет.... Я так подробно останавливаюсь на этих, вроде

бы мелких, бытовых трудностях, но ведь они – составляют тот фон, на котором происходит и без того очень напряженная жизнь священника. (3)

...что касается автомобиля, то в условиях мегаполиса, когда на поезде легче доехать из Москвы в Петербург, чем добраться от одного конца города до другого, автомобиль стал необходимостью, особенно при наличии большой семьи. Все мои дети теперь тоже водят машину: ездят на работу, возят своих детей.”

Our life has always been very busy – working, caring for children, talking with people. But when my husband became a priest, life became incredibly rich in events and human destinies, with which we had come in close contact. But in terms of all sorts of material amenities and entertainment, she became extremely scant. We lived near Moscow in the writers’ village of Peredelkino, and I had to serve my husband as a chauffeur – I took him to the services, to the meetings with parishioners in the church, or to the lectures at the Orthodox University.... I’m being so detailed with these seemingly small domestic difficulties, because they make up the background against which the very intense life of the priest is taking place. (3)

As for the car, in a metropolitan city, where it is easier to travel by train from Moscow to St. Petersburg, than from one end of the city

to the other, the car became a necessity, especially if there is a large family. All my children now drive cars, to go to work, or take their children.

She admits that she continued working as a writer after becoming a matushka, which is not the case for most Orthodox priests' families, but she does not see stay-at-home wives as potential threats to the validity of her own choice. She admires them and enjoys being with them, appreciating the warmth of a traditional family:

... если бы мой муж стал священником еще в совсем молодом возрасте, сразу после нашего венчания, и не нависала бы над нами тень нашей писательской профессии, которая оказалась востребованной и в лоне Церкви, то наша жизнь, быть может, была бы более похожа на жизнь священнической семьи: батюшка бы служил в храме, вел духовную работу с прихожанами, а матушка просто растила бы детей и держала двери своего дома распахнутыми, потчует духовных чад мужа и пирогами, и блинами, и борщами, и картошечкой с соленым огурчиком. Я знаю такие семьи священников, и сердце всегда радуется возле них. (5)

... if my husband had become a priest at a very young age, right after our wedding, then the shadow of our writer's profession which turned out to be in demand in the bosom of the Church as well, wouldn't have hung over us, and our life, perhaps, would be more similar to the life of a priestly family: the husband would

serve in the church, conduct spiritual work with the parishioners, and the wife would simply raise the children and keep the door of her house open, treating the spiritual children of her husband with pies, pancakes, borscht, potatoes and pickled cucumber. I know such families, and my heart always rejoices near them. (5)

Gender roles are not a problem for her either. She simply does what she is good at, whether it is considered a “male” or “female” task, and does not seem to experience any outside pressure:

А что касается меня, то мне почему-то всегда «мужские» занятия удавались лучше, чем женские, и устройство машины мне понятнее и интереснее, чем, скажем, выкройка, узор для вышивания или какой-нибудь тип вязания. Ну что ж, оказалось, что именно такое устройство больше подходит именно к моей жизни.

For some reason, the “male” jobs have always worked out with me better than the female ones, and the mechanism of a machine is more understandable and interesting to me than, say, a sewing or embroidery pattern, or some type of knitting. Well, it turned out that this is the kind of arrangement that suits my life.

Nicolaeva also claims to debunk myths and expose misconceptions, as Sysoeva did, but she interprets Orthodoxy as a liberating religion that cheers people up and brings them comfort:

Моя цель была в том, чтобы попытаться кое-какие мифы развенчать, кое-какие языческие взгляды разоблачить, кое-

какие наветы упразднить и хотя бы отчасти через гостей, которых я приглашаю на передачу, дать образ Православия как религии любви и радости, творчества и свободы....

My goal was to try to debunk some myths, to expose some pagan views, to abolish some slander and, at least in part, through the guests whom I invite to the show, to present the image of Orthodoxy as a religion of love and joy, creativity and freedom....

Some of the matushki Luchenko interviewed discussed problems that have concerned Sysoeva, such as the parishioners' constant attention and the pressure of being a role model, but they also demonstrate how to be confident and grateful in these situations. Matushka Olga admits that it is hard to be a priestly wife, but she manages to always see the “silver lining” in an unpleasant situation:

Любой женщине, и матушке, конечно, может быть и хотелось бы, знаете, чтобы муж, как слесарь на заводе, отработал смену и домой, к жене и детям. А тут – вся жизнь в храме и весь ритм жизни определяется богослужебным календарем. И это как раз то, что роднит семью мужа и мою: вся жизнь – это Церковь, служение Церкви. Остальное второстепенно. Так и жили – батюшка уезжает перед Вербным воскресеньем и приезжает на Светлой – пока дети не подросли. Потом батюшку перевели в Люберцы, это еще поближе к дому... Три года отец Александр служил в люберецком Троицком храме, а

потом его перевели в собор в Подольск, это уже совсем рядом, счастье! (11)

Any woman, including a matushka, probably wants her husband, you know, to work his shift and go home to his wife and children, like the locksmith in a factory. But here his entire life is spent in the church and the pace of life is determined by the liturgical calendar. This is exactly what connects the family of my husband and mine: the whole life is for the Church and the ministry of the Church. All the rest is secondary. That's how we lived – my husband would leave home before Palm Sunday and come in Holy Week – until the children grew up. Then he was transferred to Lyubertsy, it's closer to home ... For three years Father Alexander served in the Lyubertsy Trinity Church, and then he was transferred again to the cathedral in Podolsk, which is very near to us, what a happiness!

She asks little, and is always grateful for what she has, seeing it as God's grace to her. Her decision to quit her job as a translator was difficult, but she did eventually quit, not because she feared other people's judgement and forced herself to blindly follow the "prejudices," but because she voluntarily chose another family pattern that corresponded with her values and priorities, according to her own conscience. Nevertheless, she does not judge those who refuse to follow that pattern; she understands their choice, because she herself has gone through the same struggle:



Когда я перестала успевать совмещать заботу о доме и семье с работой, пришлось уйти с работы, хотя это был очень болезненный выбор. Я любила свой отдел, свою работу. У меня были очень интересные командировки: к примеру, в Женеву на конференцию, из Женевы в Германию, на другой форум. Из Германии в Индию. Хорошо? Не очень. Потому что мама вычеркнула месяц из жизни семьи. И я поняла, что не имею права упустить детей и дом – я должна быть с ними... Домашний труд – это хождение по кругу. Нам, современным женщинам, трудно с этим смириться. Вот моей бабушке было легче, потому что она знала, что ее жизнь – это дом, семья, хозяйство. А я говорила мужу: «Ты пойми, если я для чего-то выросла именно в этих условиях, получила именно это образование, значит, у меня есть какие-то таланты, это для чего-то нужно, я могу быть полезной не только у плиты». (12)

When I no longer had time to combine care for the house and family with my work, I had to leave the job, which was a very painful choice. I loved my department, my work. I had very interesting business trips: for example, to Geneva for a conference, from there to Germany, to attend another forum. From Germany to India. Is it good? Not really. Because the mom deleted a month from the life of the family. And I realized that I had no right to leave the children and the house on their own – I should have been

with them ... Housework is like walking in a circle. It is difficult for us, modern women, to accept this. It was easier for my grandmother, because she knew that her life was home, family, and house chores. And I said to my husband: "Please understand, if for some reason I grew up in these conditions and got the education, that means I have some talent and that is needed for something, I can be useful not only in the kitchen." (12)

By contrast, Sysoeva could not see any meaning in being a full-time homemaker:

Прозябая на кухне, приходится забыть обо всех своих дипломах и способностях. А далее следует погрязание в быту и безразличие ко многим сторонам жизни, не касающимся церкви и семьи, когда кроме кастрюль, бесконечных стирок, детских уроков и походов в церковь ничего больше нет. (34)

Vegetating in the kitchen, you have to forget about all your diplomas and abilities. And then follows the stagnation in everyday life and indifference to many aspects of life that do not concern the church or the family, and besides pots and pans, endless laundry work, children's lessons and going to church, there is nothing else left.

Mother Olga and Mother Svetlana Sokolova succeeded in building very strong family ties:

Он не прибивет в доме полку, но выстроит приходской дом. Не забьет в доме гвоздь, но перекроет крышу в храме, и сам храм

у него блестит как новенький. Что такое для него семья и дом? Место, где можно отдохнуть, набраться сил, согреться общением, напиться энергией взаимной любви, что называется, отдохнуть душой. Я всегда знала – батюшка со мной, значит, все в порядке. Но основная жизнь священника протекает вне дома, вне семейного круга, он только отчасти принадлежит семье, свои силы и энергию он отдаст в первую очередь людям... многие браки распадаются из-за нежелания потерпеть и нежелания друг для друга поработать...

He won't fix a shelf to a wall in our home, but will build an entire house for the parish. He won't drive a nail in the house, but will do the roofing for the church, and the church shines as brand new. What is family and home for him? A place where you can relax, gain strength, warm yourself in communion, get nourished by the energy of mutual love, as they say, relax your soul. I always knew if my husband was with me, then everything was in order. But the main part of a priest's life is outside the house, outside his family which he only partly belongs to. He gives his strength and energy first of all to the people ... many marriages break up due to unwillingness to put up with it or unwillingness to work for each other...

In the most common form of marriage among younger couples, both partners are invested in their careers and try to share the family roles equally. However, many of the choices they make

defy compromise. They are often worn out by multiple demands and the difficulty of juggling all the aspects of their lives. Traditional marriages in which the man is the primary breadwinner and the woman devotes herself to childrearing, homemaking, and providing comfort and emotional support, are still fulfilling to many couples, because they learn to understand and feel with each other. For these *matushki*, marriage illustrates their capacity to make compromises, to be more flexible, to learn, change and grow:

Мы узнавали какие-то церковные ограничения потихонечку, постепенно. Надо в храм ходить – начали ходить. А когда походили, оказалось, что есть посты. Начали поститься. А потом вдруг узнаем про молитвенные правила.

We learned the church rules gradually, quietly. We were told to go to the church regularly – and we did. Later it turned out that there were fasts to observe. And we began to fast. And then suddenly we learned that there were rules of prayer.

Their simple yet moving language evokes their deep spiritual attachment with their spouses at each phase of life. In contrast to Sysoeva, these stories show that “traditional” Orthodox marriages can be happy, but they offer their own challenges. Undertaking different roles in the family, *matushki* and their husbands work together to build their marriages, share their interests, deal with crises together, and make their homes safe places. The blaming, judgemental kind of rhetoric often seen in Sysoeva’s work is absent. The online advertisement of the book plays upon the popular conception of a *matushka*’s role: «Жизненный опыт матушек – во многом опыт ежедневных жертв. Но проблемы у нас у всех общие. Как их преодолевают матушки, жены тех священников, к которым мы часто обращаемся за советом?» (The life experience

of a matushka is in many respects the experience of daily sacrifice. But the problems are common among all of us. How do they overcome them, the wives of those priests from whom we often seek advice?) Representing the traditional Russian virtues of compassion and meekness, matushki are still expected to be role models for modern women. They play visible roles today in spreading Orthodox family values. The book argues that their lives are not miserable and boring, but are rich and diverse in a spiritual sense. Each of them has a vivid personality, but they are all happily married. Luchenko's book closely follows the Church's interpretation of good Orthodox family. The life stories of the matushki represent the positive ideals of traditional Orthodox family: kindness, tolerance, and forbearance. Luchenko's book creates the impression that this strand of the Russian tradition is being vigorously revived today.

Nevertheless, Luchenko's interviews have proved less popular than Sysoeva's notes. For the average reader, Lucheko's book sounds "too religious" or too serious. The matushki are, as one may expect, pious and selfless, but the reality represented there is far from what the reader experiences in his or her life. How an author overcomes the restrictive or dogmatic tendency in its presentation of reality determines the quality of his/her work, even in a religious book, because the reader is seeking to be both instructed and entertained.

Carrying on the tradition of women's prose (женская проза), Sysoeva presents a feminist voice inside the church community. She represents an opposition to the predominantly male patriarchal Orthodox writing. In the book she demonstrates that the church has been instrumental in upholding and validating a patriarchal structure. Sysoeva's writing challenges the traditionally prescribed role of women which prevented women from giving their opinion about history or politics and confined women to the domestic sphere. Her work serves as a socio-political

manifestation of the liberal-democratic wing of the Orthodox Church community who are relatively small in number in post-Soviet society.

### Conclusion

Luchenko does not avoid the cliché of sentimentality, while Sysoeva's notes are more successful in recreating the sharpness of the *matushki's* immediate experiences. Alongside her lightly humorous and down-to-earth depictions of Russian priests, Sysoeva populates some of her stories with caricatures and, at times, parodies. She discusses the Church's problems frankly and sincerely, in vivid imagery. She is sensitive of what might arouse readers' particular interest in a clerical person's life: his drinking habits, his salary standard, his wife's fashion, or his daughter's teenage rebellion. Her language may sometimes sound confusing or chatty, but overall, her book is a typical example of popular non-fiction.

In comparison to the exposés of writers like Pomialovsky, Sysoeva's work reveals other stresses and strains within the clerical circle. She demonstrates that the life of the Russian clergy is still in need of improvement, but the hierarchy seems insensitive and unresponsive to the plight of the average parish priests: the non-married black clergy is still solidly in control of Church administration, while the married white clergy who work in the parishes remain financially strained and overworked. Their children now want to make a living outside the Church's own institutional structure of parishes, schools, and monasteries. While the words of "moral, spiritual, grateful" themselves might transport the *матушки* in Luchenko's book onto a higher plane above and beyond the daily grind, Sysoeva's portrayal of a priest's wife stubbornly challenges the notion of the lofty spheres.

## Conclusion

Introducing the language of sin, atonement, and redemption, incorporating miracles, visions, faith-healing, and other supernatural phenomena, the Orthodox bestsellers make their explicit religious statements in the form of appealing stories. All three works were written in non-fictional styles, in the popular genres of memoir, notes, and autobiography. The charm of these works partly derives from their perceived “historicity.” Readers want to learn “true” stories about their native culture and the spiritual essence of their nation.

*Father Arseny* demonstrates that in the after-war period, when people stopped believing in the ostensible goals of the Soviet regime, religion did not vanish, but despite or even because of the intense effort to eliminate it, it continued to grow. The failure of the Soviet secular Utopia to address basic human needs in dealing with death or loneliness opened the door for religion and testified to the persistence of religious belief. The memoirs attributed to Fr. Arseny’s followers are to some extent inherently subversive because they can undermine social, political, and cultural certainties. On the other hand, Bishop Tikhon remembers the starets Ioann calling his imprisonment during the Stalin era a memorable experience because “God was close.” The Russian Orthodox Church has historically tended to refrain from publicly criticizing state injustices; even today, the church culture of guarded public statements continues. Bishop Tikhon prefers to accommodate dominant cultural values rather than inform them.

Though Russian society may seem outwardly religious, the complex dynamics of religious belief are often reduced to national cultural identity. In this way, the Orthodox bestsellers reflect the cultural discourse on religion in contemporary Russia. Due to its historical role, the ROC has always held great symbolic power. The concept of Russian Orthodoxy as the backbone of the

nation's cultural identity is a successful construction that appears to have stabilized over the past twenty years and become a natural part of the living cultural discourse. Nobody seems to force writers to reproduce this discourse; yet it has been self-reproducing and self-perpetuating, and therefore has become a consistent theme of the discursive setting of all of three bestsellers discussed here.

Although autobiographical memoirs may convey certain objective facts, ultimately they are selective and strategic, because the story, the narrative expression of the self, is designed to make a point or produce a certain effect. In *Father Arseny*, the life stories of the spiritual children mirror the culture of the religious community wherein the stories are created and told. Fr. Tikhon's autobiography was written to create a harmonious, idyllic picture of the Orthodox monastery as the root source of Russian cultural identity.

In *Fr. Arseny*, it was the personal charisma, the courage and heroism of the main protagonist that moved his followers to turn to the Orthodox religion. In *Everyday Saints*, the religion moves from casuistry and consoling to national identity, with the institutional Church in the foreground. Fr. Tikhon closely allies himself with the values of traditional Christianity: morals and ideals conform to invariable principles, while transcendent authority epitomized by the institutional Church is absolutized. Fr. Tikhon fears and suppresses critical thinking: his conservative and inflexible teachings are not open to debate or exploration, but require rigid obedience. This approach allows little space for a civil society in which different interest groups can organize themselves and publicly debate spiritual and social values. Many Russian Orthodox instinctively associate "freedom" and "democracy" with chaos, and "pluralism" with ethical relativism, desiring a theocratic society in which a strong church and a strong state can guarantee social stability and cultural vitality. Their goal is to build a society that would glorify God, and thus the



whole social order must be put under the subjugation of biblical, hence moral, rule. Patriarch Kirill launched the program of “in-churching” (воцерковление) which assumes that all Russians are Orthodox at heart, whether they are aware of it or not. Therefore, the mission of the Church is to show them that they are, in some sense, already Orthodox by virtue of being Russian, and to help them become aware of this inherited identity. Bishop Tikhon’s book is greatly informed by this vision. For a Protestant, people who do not know enough about the gospel are only nominally Christian. However, from the Orthodox perspective, such a person is ready to be baptized and incorporated formally into the Church. Therefore, Bishop Tikhon recollects how he himself received baptism in search of protection from the evil eye. Tikhon’s work is not without merit, but does often seem to be a servile exercise in insincerity. When he closes his own eyes and tries to see with the eyes of the Church, his work suffers aesthetically. Behind the popularity of Fr. Tikhon’s book is a disturbing phenomenon of the wave of conservative Orthodox patriotism that has gripped much of Russian officialdom and populace. They respond well to his nationalist rhetoric of defending the Orthodox Church and the nation from foreign corruption. The majority or the main body of the church consists of Papkova’s “traditionalists” or Mitrokhin’s “fundamentalists” who build their political platform on Slavophile ideas of the nineteenth century, which contrasted Russian values of social solidarity and religious piety to Western individualism. Some extremists even honour Stalin because he saved the nation from the Nazis and made it a world superpower. Tikhon’s apocalyptic preaching in his documentary film asserts that the end of time is near and the ultimate battle between the Orthodox East and the morally decadent West, that spreads its corrupting influence in Russia, has already begun. Fr. Tikhon’s eager transcription of popular discourses testifies to his desire to fortify the controlling force of institutional religion. Tolstoy and Dostoevsky have noted in their works that the chief

end of man is more than just to glorify God: the individual should not simply embrace the traditional doctrine of institutional religion, but seek God through his works and actions, and sin and redemption are more complex than church tenets suggest. This oppositional sensibility toward religion reflected in their works is muffled in contemporary Orthodox literature, which can seem shallow by comparison.

When reviewing Russian literary works of 2012, Abudallaev bracketed the year with two works on extreme ends of the ideological and generic spectrum: Pussy Riot's provocative "Punk Prayer" and Archimandrite Tikhon's *Everyday Saints*. The critic insists that the work should be understood as a cultural "event" rather than as a literary work, for it is highly symbolic, illuminating "the changing scale measuring what is significant on the cultural scene in Russia today,"<sup>ccxxix</sup> and seeking to remake the narrative of the national past to serve the desires and anxieties of the present.

All of the post-Soviet bestsellers discussed in this study are edifying and explanatory. They answer the question of "what it looks like" to be an Orthodox monk or to live with an Orthodox priest. They teach the readers how to follow the rites and various church requirements, how to approach a priest "properly," or how to behave at a liturgy. When comparing the two post-Soviet Orthodox bestsellers with *Father Arseny*, we can see that *Father Arseny* does not dwell on how to walk or stand in a place of worship or where to put one's hand; his spiritual children were deeply affected not by the rites or the performance of obedience, but by Fr. Arseny's personal virtue, spiritual strength, boundless love, and compassion. Unlike Fr. Tikhon's fondness for name-dropping both inside and outside the church circles, in *Father Arseny* there are no potent prophecies or admiration of the prestige of church officials. Fr. Arseny won people's trust and respect because of his decency and goodness, his love for others, and his selfless devotion to the

Christian ideals. In Fr. Tikhon's interpretation of faith, everything is predetermined, so that instead of striving, one only needs to go to a starets and follow his advice, whatever it may be. Independent reflection and evaluation are discouraged as signs of disobedience.

Difficult issues such as the opposition between tradition and freedom, the challenges of modern humanism and atheism, the impact of science on religion, and the intellectual tendency to unbelief or skepticism, are not unique to Russia but were addressed in the West as well. However, Russians were not satisfied with others' answers to those questions, but sought Orthodox answers. All three writers discussed here felt the need to address those questions, although their stances may be conservative. Sysoeva contests the Church patriarchal family pattern, while Fr. Tikhon elaborates on the role of the tradition of obedience in a modern society. In *Father Arseny*, Christianity challenges Marxist social thinking and challenges the corruption in the world that was, in turn, corrupting man. Fr. Arseny also calls for a rethinking of Christian doctrine to accommodate new knowledge, as increased secularization challenges inherited religious traditions. The author seeks to recover the values of the abandoned Orthodox religion and incorporate them into Soviet people's lives, reflecting on how a communist can be a moral person in the world he experiences.

The religious ideas in these books sometimes seem medieval, without the baptism of modernity. They represent ancient traditions not only in content but in form. The intensified interest in Russian medieval cultural forms is related to the strong wave of nationalism that had emerged in late Soviet society. Both *Everyday Saints* and *Father Arseny* were influenced by hagiography. Fr. Arseny provided physical and spiritual salvation, hope, and inspiration to countless others. The salvation depicted in this work is that of human nature rather than personal salvation: the awareness of selfhood is deactualized, because the personal is thought to be logically linked to

self-interest and egotism. Whoever poses his own salvation as his goal is alien to Orthodoxy. Fr. Arseny is approached as an object of empathy and an ideal to be followed. Fr. Arseny's struggles in the labour camp are presented as allusions to Christ's spiritual struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane, acting as a God-forsaken human personality. The problem of personality is in departing from the issue of free will. Such language sounds alien for the Orthodox bestsellers that do not even attempt to unveil the "mystery of the Person" (Dostoevsky).

The overwhelming majority of the population trust the Orthodox Church and hope that the Church will do something good "for everyone." Although it is unclear what exactly that "something good" would be, the general public responds strongly to religion. The enthusiasm of Russian readers for Orthodox literature and the critical involvement in the discussions those works generate are inspiring, demonstrating a deep concern with the spiritual aspect of life and the belief in a positive meaning for everything. According to John P. Burgess, "Russia is a country deeply damaged by decades of communist rule. But Russians think of themselves as a great nation and civilization, not just a second-rate European power still recovering from a failed political experiment. Orthodoxy offers them a sense of what is valuable about their culture and how they are part of, yet different from, the West. This is the deepest source of its power in Russia."<sup>ccxxx</sup>

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