CHAPTER 2

Irrationalism in Ancient Russia

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Old Russian sources linked, as Gregory of Nyssa once did, one's mind with one's heart. The “mind” is the centre of a person's spiritual, rather than his rational, life, whereas the heart is the centre of wisdom. It can help a person to find a spiritual perspective, but can also hinder the process. The motif of the heart as a repository of wisdom is characteristic of the Middle Eastern tradition. One can find this conceptualisation of mind in the New Testament, too, where the notion of the 'mind' appears in the Bible for the first time. For Paul, this idea stands close to what we might now identify as 'conscience'. With a certain epistemological bias it is quite close to the definition of ‘intellect’, but does not fully coincide with it. Those who are free from the “bondage of corruption” (Romans 8:21 KJV) or “bondage to decay” (NRSV) are considered “light in heart”. By contrast, the “heavy of heart” are deprived of spiritual freedom and cannot rise over earthly passions. The Old Russian miniaturist who illustrated Psalm 4 in the Kiev Psalter of 1397 depicted the “heavy hearted” as motionless, pressed down to the earth, indifferent to the call of the angel bending down to them. According to the Old Russian twentieth century treatise ‘On human nature, the seen and unseen’, it is only the interaction of heart and reason (literally, “of heart with thought”) that permits one to attain spiritual and corporeal harmony, which, in its turn, brings forth the “mind”; the latter, for the author of this treatise, is a consequence of reason and the heart working in alliance. This sort of ontological epistemology dominates not only in Old Russian thought, but also in later Russian religious philosophy, and one of its most evident manifestations is the image of “suffering reason”, so clearly demonstrated in the letters of Tsar Ivan IV (Ivan the Terrible).

The contradiction between the human understanding of the ‘visible’ and ‘invisible’ worlds is sublated at the level of the essentially Eastern Christian holistic worldview, which connects the human being and the Universe in communion within the Divine Grace. There are many media by which the pious may encounter the presence of God, not only in worship and reading of the Holy Scriptures, but also by mere observation of sunrays shining through the summer foliage, or an infant smiling, or by following any everyday human activity. It is impossible to know God since he remains outside the boundaries of existence, that is, time and space of His own creation. The only way of coming nearer to God is by means of theosis, which brings humans into their
original state of unity with God. By receiving mysterious signs from God, those sparks of heavenly fire, a human soul ignites itself with “the light of Mount Tabor”, and then the same light is perceived as gleaming everywhere. The doctrine of the world’s divine nature became deeply perpetuated in the Russian culture, and from written tradition it came down to oral lore. This is well-illustrated by the folktale about the peasant hut (izba) published by F.I. Buslayev. The story says that once upon a time people began to freeze in the winter, and they hadn’t yet learned how to put up a hut. So they turned to the Evil One, who taught them. “They timbered a blockhouse of four walls, with no gaps at all. Then they hacked a door and entered the hut – it was warm inside, but not suitable to live in such darkness. The people again turned to the Evil One. He tried and tried, but all in vain – it was still dark in the hut. The people then prayed to the Lord. And the Lord said to them – hack out a window! They chopped a window and it became light. You know it! How silly it is to ask for light from the Devil!”¹ This way of getting to know God is impossible without practice.

Ascetic practice is based upon the doctrine of passions. In Eastern Christian tradition, it was elaborated by John the Sinaite, alias John Climacus or John of the Ladder after his ascetic treatise, ‘The Ladder of Divine Ascent’ (‘Climax’ in the original Greek). This ‘Ladder’ consists of thirty homilies or exhortations according to the number of hidden years of Jesus’ preparation for his earthly ministry. These homilies (named “steps” or “rungs”) were addressed to monastics who strained after spiritual self-perfection, and on that way were to come up against the formidable obstacle of so-called “passions”. According to John of the Ladder, the means necessary to struggle against them are provided by “remembrance of death”, “joy-making mourning”, which brings meekness, “stillness of body and soul”, dispassion and perfection. In Rus’ the ‘Ladder’ became known in the twelfth century or even earlier. Its advance was encouraged by the fact that portions of the text on certain occasions were read in churches. This work also influenced the way Nil Sorsky (otherwise known as Nilus of Sora) taught on passions and the way to approach God (theosis). He was tonsured in the Russian monastery of St Cyril of Beloozero (Kirillo-Belozerskii monastery) but spent many years on Mount Athos and in the monastery of Stoudios. After his return to Russia, Nil founded a skete, or an isolated cloister, on the River Sora. At first those who lived in the Sora cloister followed the monastic Rule of Cyril of Beloozero, but soon Nil composed his