VALUES IN COLLISION: THE BYZANTINE TRADITION, SCHOLASTICISM, AND THE BIRTH OF THE RUSSIAN INTELLIGENTSIA

For centuries, reconciliation between Roman Catholicism and Byzantine Orthodoxy has eluded the proponents of Christian unity. Their frustrations may stem not only from failure to agree upon such matters as the preeminence of the Bishop of Rome, the wording of the Nicene Creed, and the use of leavened bread in the liturgy, but from a fundamental disagreement over the legacy of Greek philosophy. As for the connection between Byzantium and Moscow, considerable debate still swirls about the question: Is it the case that to be truly Russian is to be Orthodox, if not in a religious, in some vaguely cultural sense? In the following pages, I apply the Byzantine origins of Russian religiosity to the intellectual predecessors of the Bolsheviks. The object is to learn how nineteenth-century Russian secular and religious thinkers valued the utility of reason in understanding the world.

1: The Framework

At the core of this essay are the following questions: 1) What cultural reverberations emanated from the conversion of Russia to Christianity? 2) Did Kiev's Byzantine Orthodoxy preclude Russia from experiencing anything akin to western late-medieval Scholasticism? 3) If the Byzantine Christian fathers were conversant with ancient Greek philosophy, including Aristotelian logic, but convinced that human reason fell far short of capturing either the workings of God or the wonders of faith, did their Russian successors share this conviction? 4) How did nineteenth-century Russian thinkers, from within and outside the church, conceive of Western Scholasticism? 5) Did any nineteenth-century Russian philosopher arrive at "secular wisdom"? 6) Were the Slavophiles merely rationalizing when they argued that Russian culture is primarily religious, not backward? 7) In general, have Russian intellectuals and their critics resorted to mysticism as a cloak draping a culture still in its embryonic stage, and exhibiting a marked preference for the bold synthesis [razum] over Cartesian understanding in detail [um]? 8) Did the absence of both an indigenous philosophical tradition and a religiously-driven intellectual make educated Russians, living during the middle of the nineteenth century, susceptible to Western, especially German, ideas? 9) What did its
creators and innovators expect from the educational system for the Russian clergy? 10) Did the seminary curriculum foster a native theological tradition?

This inquiry into the distance between scholasticism and Russian thought carries us beyond the apophatic assaults on logic from the hesychasts to the present and the already well-documented ability of reforms viewed as Hellenizing to stir the Russian religious mind from Avvakum through Vladimir Solov’ev and Nikolai Berdiaev. Furthermore, it departs from the position, articulated by August von Haxthausen and others, that the Russian Orthodox Church played a minimal role in educating its adherents, or that this same institution was filled with influential clerics oblivious to Western intellectual developments. Worthy of attention is a more balanced view. As set forth by Robert L. Nichols, it holds that from the time of Peter I, the Russian Orthodox Church made valuable educational and professional contributions, and that its clergy were by no means indifferent to Western intellectual trends.

The discussion can advance by shedding a few historiographic conventions. First, the Russian Orthodox Church, and Russian religiosity generally, have been subject to broad criticism. It engulfed the Church’s political role, structure, and contribution to Russian civilization. Gregory Freeze traced the difficulty to Orthodoxy’s connection with the autocracy. "The intelligentsia, whether of liberal or radical persuasion, generally tended to dismiss the church and clergy as little more than ordained gendarmes, particularly in the prereform era." However, he exculpated the Russian priestly estate from the charge of indifference to the civil plight of the faithful.

Second is the layered mysticism which suffuses the analysis of Russian Orthodoxy. Foremost were its ties to Byzantium, the impact of hesychasm, and the insularity of Russia:

In terms of political ideology, the concepts generated by Russia’s belonging to the Byzantine Commonwealth and promoted by Patriarch

1. A discussion of the dichotomy between the Western metaphatic approach (affirmative theological truth) and the Orthodox apophatic tradition (negative theology based on the notion that God is beyond experience and logic) is available in Vladimir Lossky, The Mystical Theology of the Eastern Church, trans. members of the Fellowship of St. Alban and St. Sergius (London: J. Clarke, 1957), p. 25.


4. Gregory L. Freeze, "The Orthodox Church and Serfdom in Prereform Russia," Slavic Review, 48, No. 3 (Fall 1989), 361.