

Two Understandings of Christianity

by Alexander Men



*What follows is the text of a lecture which Fr Alexander gave on 25 January, 1989 in Moscow¹. His first topic takes its starting point in the contrast between two monks depicted by Dostoevsky in *The Brothers Karamazov*: Zosima, the famous spiritual guide, a lover of nature and experienced man of the world who believes the Christian path is to be lived in the world and therefore sends his young protege Alyosha Karamazov away from the monastery and back into the world to deal with the troubles of his family; and the ascetic Ferapont, living a life turned in on himself, full of hatred and portrayed by Dostoevsky as semi-crazed. These two monks represent two different models of Christianity: the one open to the world, like the famous monastery of Optina Pustyn, and the other withdrawing from it. Fr Alexander draws a telling portrait of the present weaknesses and distorted ideology of many adherents of the Russian Orthodox Church today and shows how this tendency is rooted in Russian history. The second theme of the lecture is to weigh up and assess the relative importance of the inner life and of outward works in the Christian life in general, arguing for a balance of each. The talk concludes by drawing out the point that has been running like a leitmotif through the lecture: a plea for pluralism and understanding in the religious life.*

DEAR FRIENDS! Perhaps the subject of this talk of mine may seem strange to some of you, but I want to remind you of a scene from Dostoevsky's novel, *The Brothers Karamazov*, and you will realize that my subject has not been idly or casually chosen; it is a topic that has a deep relevance to the history of spiritual

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culture, to the history of literature and to the history of Christianity in Russia and in other Christian countries.

You remember, I'm sure, two characters in *The Brothers Karamazov* who are polar opposites: the starets Zosima and his antagonist Ferapont. Remember how the starets Zosima is described by Dostoevsky as a radiant personality with broad and enlightened views about the world, human destiny and about people's attitude to eternal life and to God. Some literary scholars think that Zosima is modelled upon the famous starets Amvrosy of Optino, who was canonized at the time of the thousandth anniversary of Christianity in Russia [1988]. Other specialist historians reject this idea because there are important differences between the real, historical Amvrosy and the character which Dostoevsky imagined. Even so, there definitely is a connection between the prototype and the literary character. The monastery of Optina Pustyn was not a typical one, and indeed it was unique in the history of our Church. That was why so many cultural figures made a point of going there: Khomyakov, Kireevsky, Dostoevsky, Solovyev, Leo Tolstoy, Leontyev, Sergei Bulgakov and many others.(2) They didn't stream off to any other monasteries, but specifically this one which was so unusual and unexpected. In one of the issues of the literary almanac *Prometei*, there is an article entitled 'Optina Pustyn - why did so many famous people go there?', written by the well-known poet Nadezhda Pavlovich,(3) who started publishing her work in Blok's lifetime. She worked at Optina Pustyn and managed to meet the last starets there. She shared her impressions with me of her meetings with this amazing character. In her article, Pavlovich names many more of them whom I have not mentioned.

The startsy and other inhabitants of the monastery were concerned with the same problems which preoccupied the cultured section of society at that time. That's why both Tolstoy and Dostoevsky were able to discuss with the startsy not only their own personal problems but also general human and cultural issues. Yes indeed, the place was exceptional. That was why Dostoevsky created his Zosima with Optina Pustyn in mind for he found there a kind of open variant, an open understanding of Orthodoxy and an open understanding of Christianity.

But in this same monastery, which is described in Dostoevsky's novel, there is another character - starets Ferapont, a famous ascetic, a powerful old man who walked around bare-foot, dressed in a rough belted overcoat, like a beggar. He hated starets Zosima and even on the day he died, had no shame about denouncing him over his grave. If you haven't read it already, read this great epic novel, and you will see how within one Orthodoxy, one Church, one culture and even one monastery, two seemingly completely antagonistic elements clash - and clash quite sharply. The situation which Dostoevsky describes gives us as it were the first intimation that within Christian culture not everything is identical and not everything can be reduced to some sort of unity.

I do not intend now to discuss those divisions within the Christian world which have happened over the last twenty centuries - the split which occurred as early as

the first councils of the church, divisions between Arians and Orthodox, between Orthodox and Monophysites and finally the great and tragic schism of the Christian world between West and East: that is between Catholicism and Orthodoxy. This division took place in spite of the fact that each side adopted the same names: the Eastern church called itself Catholic and the Western called itself Orthodox, but still the schism took place.

Of course, two understandings of Christianity clashed there too. If we turn to history, then we shall see yet another great clash within Western European culture: the rise of Protestantism. This again was a new interpretation of Christianity: Catholicism and Protestantism are two different understandings of it. And finally, within Protestantism itself, the orthodox and radical movements clashed with each other. I do not intend to discuss this because it is a large special subject. For the present I shall be dealing only with problems related to that culture in which we Russians have grown up and were educated and which is closest and most comprehensible to us.

Orthodox culture derives from two sources. The first source is the fundamental and most important one, namely the Gospels. That source is the teaching and proclamation about God-manhood, in other words, about the mystery of the eternal and the mystery of the human. It is the teaching that humanity is exceptionally important and valuable for the Creator. It is the teaching that humanity is raised above all creation because the Eternal itself made contact with it, because human beings are created in the image and likeness of the Creator and in them lives a kind of programme for the future: to develop from beings akin to the animals to beings akin to heaven.

But there was another tradition too, born long before Christianity, and that is the tradition of ascetic practice. It is an exceptionally important tradition. It contains some of the richest experience of self-observation and the richest experience of inner practice, that is, of spiritual work designed to make the human personality grow. But this ascetic tradition, which came mainly from India and Greece and which was adopted by the church several centuries after the appearance of Christ, came to regard the surrounding world as something alien and external to it, something which had to be recoiled from and shunned.

Were there good grounds for this tendency? Of course there were. Every one of us can readily understand how energetically a person seeking depth, stillness, contemplation and eternal wisdom must push away the cares and noise, the superficiality and futility of life which surrounds them, if they are to find themselves. And then by picking out a few words from the Gospels (true, taken out of context) such as 'He who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life' [John 12.25], this tendency began to predominate, firstly in monastic circles and in certain strands of the church, but then, gathering ever greater strength thanks to its inner spiritual energy, this tendency began imperceptibly to be the

dominant one, and almost overshadowed the other source, the principle of the God-man. If in the Gospel it says, 'He who hates the world', it also says in the same Gospel of St John that God so loved the world that he gave his own Son to save it. This is the contradiction, and this is the dialectic in which we have to distinguish the two understandings of the world.

In practice, of course, it was not so straightforward. And so the other-worldly type of Christianity which shunned the life surrounding it, shunned history and creativity and culture, developed along its own lines. It could not, of course, be totally consistent, and it did create things of cultural value. We know that within the walls of monasteries of the ascetic tradition there were great artists, chroniclers, masters of historical narrative, and architects. But this culture developed there in spite of the basic tendency which set Christianity outside the world and above it.

And then in our own national culture, these two lines have clashed, and the clash grew into antagonism. For educated society at the beginning of the nineteenth century, this other-worldly Christianity was identified with Orthodoxy itself. And what is more, Orthodox circles themselves easily slipped into the same identification. That is why almost all initiative was left to the secular world. Social justice, the structure of society, agonizing problems such as serfdom - all were left to the sphere of the state and were disregarded by the church. These matters seemed to be of no concern to Christians. Hence the indifference, the apathy to things of this transient world, and hence the bitter inner split. Though the process had begun in the eighteenth century, the division deepened throughout the nineteenth century. Even Christian writers like Dostoevsky did not fully understand the true tradition of the church. And what of the church people who were far removed from society? There grew up two languages, in the literal sense - a church language and a secular language. The church language absorbed a mass of Slavonicisms (you will find, for example, a large number in the works of Leskov). This was why Russian versions of the Bible in the nineteenth century were immediately outdated for they didn't correspond either to the language of Pushkin and Gogol, or to that of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. Secular language developed along its own lines.

At that time, in the reign of Nicholas I [1825-55], a person who became well-known as a writer was Archimandrite Fedor Bukharev. He was a monk who lived at the Trinity St Sergius monastery and a learned theologian and biblical scholar. He published a book entitled *Orthodoxy and its Relationship With the Contemporary World* in which he first broached the question of the need to bring the two understandings of Christianity together. He pointed out that the problems which concern everyone - culture, creativity, social justice and many more were not matters of indifference to Christianity; rather the contrary, that in the resolution of these problems, the spiritual ideals of the Gospel could be important and might be an inner resource for their solution. But Bukharev was attacked,

abused in the press and reduced to such a state that he left monastic orders and the service of the church, became a journalist and soon died in poverty and oblivion. But his memory lasted long. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Pavel Florensky made a collection of his letters. But to date, his works have not been published in full.

Then Tolstoy came along and posed the problem in a completely different way. For him, the traditional understanding of Christianity as a sum of traditions which had grown up from the Gospels was only a useless burden, the dead weight of centuries. He proposed casting all of it aside and returning to the original nucleus. One might say that he was following a Protestant line. But that's not really so, for Tolstoy as a thinker never was a Christian. His ideas were different and much more Eastern, closer to the Eastern philosophies of India and China. That's why his conflict with theology and with the church was not an indication of the conflict between the two understandings of Christianity but merely a side issue. Then Vladimir Solovyev came along, a great figure of world philosophy. He was a person who, in an era dominated by materialism and positivism, had the ability to raise questions about spiritual values in such a way that the most cultured people of the time were compelled to acknowledge the seriousness of the problems. He was a man who was at the same time a poet, critic, philosopher, theologian, historian, and historian of philosophy, and publicist. People like that with universal gifts are born only once in a century. In his *Lectures on Godmanhood*,⁽⁴⁾ he put the question like this: is the Good News of Christ really only a method of salvation for the individual soul? Is it only a personal route for someone on the way to perfection to achieve eternal bliss after their death? Indeed, if that were so then this is no different from several other religious systems. We find essentially the same thing in Islam and in Eastern religions. Solovyev saw things from a completely different point of view: Christianity is the line which joins higher things with lower, the divine with the human. If this is what Godmanhood means, then there is nothing in history which is a matter of indifference to spirituality. Therefore, the Christian ideal can absorb into itself everything, including social problems, the moral problems of society, and even problems of art. Solovyev created a great synthesis whereby the two understandings of Christianity could be united. His follower in the twentieth century was our well-known compatriot Nicolas Berdyaev, a bold, enlightened thinker with a most brilliant mind. The whole world knows him and international conferences gather to discuss his works. Unfortunately, his works were not published in Russia and to many Russians his name for a long time has hardly meant anything at all.

Berdyaev wrote several articles which had the same title as our lecture today - 'Two Understandings of Christianity'. He clarified and reformulated the subject. He defined two points of view: personal salvation and creativity. These two points of view are as it were hostile to each other. To one group of Christians, the most important thing is simply inner self-perfection leading to salvation. Everything

else is rejected. Creativity is left to the secular world, outside the domain of the church: it is left, as it were, outside the spiritual realm, without the light inherent to the impulse of the Gospels. This position led to a strange outcome: humanity was demeaned. The great word 'humility', which Christ spoke about, was turned into a synonym for compromise, appeasement and a wretched collusion with evil.

Collusion with evil means, in the final analysis, working for evil. Hence the unwillingness to make any kind of protest and the unwillingness to take any bold initiative. Submission means acknowledging evil. And although Christ said of himself that he was 'gentle and lowly of heart' [Matt. 11.29], he never taught us to compromise with evil. This was the source of human demeanment which offended Berdyaev so exceptionally. He said that faith and spirituality should elevate people, and help them to stand tall because people are made in the image of God and are the most valuable of beings. The gospel preaches about humanity, about the greatness of humanity on which the light of heaven shines. So Berdyaev treated humility in a completely different way: as openness to everything, as the readiness to accept other points of view, as the readiness to listen to and hear the voice of other people and the voice of God. This understanding of humility is the opposite of pride, for pride hears only itself. Pride, locked up in itself, feeds on itself, as the saying goes, lives in its own world, in its own prison. So Berdyaev sought to find a way of uniting these two opposing trends which were tearing the church apart.

This propensity for the two understandings of Christianity to clash continues even today. You can easily find it in literature. In Leskov's story *The Mountain*, you will immediately see two types of Christian: one is the artist Zenon and the other is the crowd which hangs around the patriarch's palace. There are also many legends and stories which Leskov makes into serious parables. Even Belinsky, in his letter to Gogol which you certainly remember from school, described his understanding of Christianity - true, in a very incompetent, irritable and inaccurate manner. He said that Christ proclaimed freedom, equality and brotherhood and so on - in short Belinsky treated Christianity as an egalitarian liberation movement of social opposition.

Why is it important for us to be aware of this now? - important for all of us, believers and non-believers? Because today our culture is getting back those lost and half-forgotten values from the past and, together with them, the age-old values of the Russian Orthodox Church and of Christianity as a whole. And people who lack a clear understanding of the richness and deep antinomies of the phenomenon that is Christianity, think that Christians are all the same and that the church is something which has one clearly defined official view and a systematic ideology fully worked out in theory and practice. And they will be discouraged when they see that within this historical stream are many diverse and even contradictory currents. And we must bear this in mind. It must be borne in mind by those who wish to start on the Christian way and by those who are interested in

Christianity simply as a cultural phenomenon and who want to understand it and make their own minds up about it. In periods of social freezes and social storms, as in war, people get quickly divided into two groups: those for us and those against us, believers and non-believers and so on. This is an over- simplified picture. And for those people who are just joining the church the picture still seems valid. But it may happen that a pagan, someone far away from the church, may become spiritually closer to a Christian than their fellow believers. It's a paradox but it's true. This can happen because there isn't one single interpretation of Christianity which wholly corresponds to it.

There was a time when the antagonistic and seemingly irreconcilable principles of other-worldly, culture-denying Christianity and the Christianity which strives to share in creativity were in fact united in the church. But that was long ago. When Christianity first appeared in the ancient world, it faced the question: how to treat all this heritage? How to treat the philosophy, art, literature and in general all the great edifice of ancient culture? Should we say it's all rubbish? That it's all out of date? That it should all be thrown away? Many people said precisely that. Many were willing to go down that road.

The main answer given by the classic Christian thinkers, who are known as the patristic writers or the Fathers of the Church was, however, a positive one. Christianity could and should be open to all these questions. That's why the Church Fathers were most often the outstanding writers, thinkers, poets and social activists of their time. They did not consider that such things were alien to or unworthy of Christianity.

So in the case of John Chrysostom you will find not only discussions about injustice in his writings but also in his life too efforts to fight social oppression and the unjust distribution of material goods. You will find in the writings of Augustine the famous words that a state without law is in principle no different from a band of robbers. That was written in the fourth century. You will find among the writings of Basil the Great a special work on the meaning of pagan literature for Christian youth. You will find in the works of Gregory the Theologian (also the fourth century) marvellously humorous letters and poems which he wrote to his friend.

But often something else creeps in to this general orientation. In the great legacy of the Church Fathers there is a special section, a special part and that is the legacy of the Desert Fathers, of the supporters of monasticism. It was collected in the huge anthology the Philokalia.⁽⁶⁾ This is a magnificent and, in its own way, eternally valuable book which has much to offer people. But then this tradition of the Philokalia began to be accepted as the only one. Yet it was intended for people who were called inoki [Russian for 'monk']. Inok means 'a person living a different way of life'. This means a person who deliberately lives apart from the world, not at all because he despises the world but because he personally has chosen for himself that special way. This was when the mistaken idea grew up

that the legacy of the Church Fathers was to be regarded as the rejection of culture, whereas in fact this was not the case at all.

The return of contemporary Christian thought (by contemporary I mean over the last one hundred years) to the traditions of the Church Fathers, is the return of Christianity to an open model, which participates in the whole movement of human society. Berdyaev called this 'the churching of the world'. But understand me correctly: that word doesn't at all mean that some historical church incidentals are imposed on the secular culture of the world. It means that there is no such thing as the secular.

I myself, I don't know what the word 'secular' means. It is a conventional historical term because there is a spiritual element in everything - or not, as the case may be. Even though the title under a picture may say 'The Virgin Mary', if the picture is painted in an uninspired way, if it has something superficial, banal and flat about it, then it won't have anything to do with spirituality. And it's very important to understand that there isn't some literature which is spiritual and some which is unspiritual or 'secular', but rather there is literature with spirituality and literature without spirituality, there is good literature and bad literature. And truly good literature will always have a bearing on the eternal problems.

We can say the same of all types of art and also of the most varied kinds of creativity. Christianity has nothing to fear in all this. It's open to it all. The narrow, other-worldly model is a legacy from the past. It's something mediaeval (in the worst sense of the word) which, alas, is still extant. It often attracts new recruits who think they become true Christians if they put on black head scarves and walk around with a special mincing gait. None of that's necessary. That's parody, that's a caricature. There's a complex relationship between the inner and the outer. There is a tendency for some people to say: my spiritual life is going on here inside and I don't need anything from outside. But this is a serious mistake because somehow or other, a person expresses all their experiences. No one can be a bodiless spirit who looks indifferent and only experiences things somewhere deep inside them. No. Everything is expressed, is embodied, in gesture, facial expressions. Experience is a matter of body and soul together.

But at the same time what is outward, for instance, rituals are slippery customers, they are like dangerous underwater rocks: they have a tendency to become sufficient unto themselves. It is very good when a person makes the sign of the cross when they stand before the icon of God. But it's possible that person may gradually forget the important thing and just continue to cross themselves. Indeed, in popular speech, the words for 'to pray' and 'to cross oneself' have become interchangeable. When a grandmother says to her grandson: 'Say your prayers, say your prayers', she is not thinking about what is going on in his heart. She is thinking about him waving his hand and making the sign of the cross. In this way, the external can gradually squeeze out the internal. Is this a danger for

Christianity? Not at all. This danger is not specific to Christianity. Pharisaical mechanisms are at work in all spiritual movements, because the externals are always easier. That is why the Pharisees of gospel times observed thousands of rituals but inside, their spiritual lives were often dead. And this pharisaical external piety can exist in all places and all times. In the dialectic tensions between these two elements: the external and the internal, what is open to the world and at the same time concentrated, lies the deepest truth of the scriptures. And when we look deeply into it, we find there eventually the ultimate and final formula.

A spiritual community of people who are moving towards the supreme aim will undoubtedly still look like an exclusive group, but at the same time, this community is open to all and to the whole world. The foundation of the church goes back to ancient Old Testament times. When God called Abraham, he said to him: separate yourself, leave your country, leave your father's house, become a wanderer. This meant cutting himself off; but at the same time, God said to him: but through you will all the tribes and peoples of the earth be blessed. This contradiction, this paradox in the Bible, is still alive today. Yes, the person who wishes to develop in a deeply spiritual way must build some sort of defence around their soul. Otherwise, the noise of the world will deafen it. But at the same time anyone who does not wish to turn his soul into a small reservation, into a stuffy lamp-lit little world in which the spirit cannot live, must ensure that their defence is not absolute. It's like breathing in and breathing out. It's like talking to many people and talking to one. It's like solitude and company. It's like day and night. It's like what joins things together.

So the conclusion at least for me is clear: neither of the two understandings of Christianity is wrong, but each as it were takes one side and wrongly develops it. Fullness of life lies in the synthesis of the two. Florensky, the well-known theologian and philosopher, said that complete truth when it comes to our world is fragmented into contradictory parts and we see only this fragmented world, but somewhere in a higher dimension all these paradoxical, disunited and antinomic fragments are united in one. That's the mystery of life. That's the mystery of the two understandings of Christianity.

I hope, after this short digression, that you may feel that the variety and even the contradictions within the Christian church, and even more, the contradictions between the different Christian denominations - Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox - are not a sign of decay and breakdown but rather manifestations of parts of the whole, the united whole which we have to reach at greater depth. Then what seems to us to be impossible to unite will be united. Then the source, the profound source of spiritual life will nourish not only individual souls or small groups of individual souls in their interior lives but will also go beyond the limits of the merely personal and become for us a social force, a force in society, a force that will help us live in this world, and bring to the world our value as human

beings and the light which each of us has been given to the degree that we are in communion with it. It follows, therefore, that this is not just a question for literary scholarship although you will find in it many literary aspects. Nor is it purely historical, although, of course, it has a direct relationship to history. It is a subject for today.

And it seems to me that such pluralism, such interaction of different points of view, is an important pre-condition for the vitality of Christianity. And perhaps it was providential that Christianity was split into different tendencies, because without this it would probably have been something uniform and forced. It is as if, knowing people's tendency to intolerance, God divided them so that each person in their place, in their own garden could bring forth their own fruit.

And the time will come when all the different fruits will come together into one stream, in which will be preserved all the best in the spiritual culture of humanity and of each person who is made in the image and likeness of God.