

Catherine and the Russian Religious Renaissance

Robert Wild

The Communist Revolution in Russia was of such enormous consequence that it overshadowed other important events in Russia shortly before it in the latter part of the nineteenth century and long after it in the twentieth century. One such series of events has come to be called the Russian Religious Renaissance (RRR), and in this short note I want to reflect briefly on Catherine de Hueck Doherty's role in it. I will spare you references and many quotations and simply say that my presentation is based on the work of scholars and that the facts related here are fairly widely known to those studying in this field.

The Silver Age

After what was called the Golden Age in Russian art and philosophy exemplified by such well-known writers as Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, and Khomyakov, there followed what has been called the Silver Age, a spiritual and cultural movement of even greater intensity. There was an explosion of novels, poetry, music, philosophy, and "religious philosophy," a mix of philosophy, theology, and spirituality. When the Communists took over a number of the most brilliant members of this Silver Age were exiled by Lenin but not executed. Some scholars speculate they were not executed or sent to camps because in their early periods they dabbled in Marxism, and so contributed in some way to the final advent of Communism. But these intelligentsia, in the early part of their thinking

careers, quickly saw the many enormous economic, philosophical and religious flaws in Marxism. They helped the Marxist movement a little but not much, and not for long.

Some of the most brilliant of the philosophers and theologians – Sergius Bulgakov, Nicholas Berdyaev, S.L. Frank, and Vladimir Lossky – made their way to Paris where they were either directly or indirectly involved in establishing the Theological Institute of St. Sergius. Names more familiar to North Americans who were not born in Russia are Alexander Schmemmann and John Meyendorff. They were educated at St. Sergius and brought some of its Russian treasures to North America via St. Vladimir Seminary in New York. Scholars are now saying that the full flowering of the Silver Age really occurred *outside* Russia, as a consequence of an open contact with the western intellectual traditions, and because they now had the complete freedom to write and express their creative ideas. For the purposes of this article it is significant that historians called this a *religious* and not a philosophical, cultural or artistic renaissance.

RRR refers mostly to *intellectuals* who taught and wrote in the areas of theology, philosophy, history, sociology, law, and art. Understandably, its history and scope is limited to those of the Russian Orthodox Church. In bibliographies some works of *spirituality* are included, but the main thrust of literally hundreds of books and articles (mostly in Russian) are centered on the concerns of the *intelligentia* in Russia before their expulsion.

I want to put forward an argument seldom considered: those exiles who developed Russian spirituality *but who had converted to the Catholic Church* should be equally included in the RRR. The contributions of Catherine and others who became Catholics may not be completely Russian because of their new allegiance. However, there were Russian Catholics before the revolution, and Russian Catholicism should be considered as part of Russia's contribution to the modern Christian world.

The real inspiration for this article – for making a plea that Catherine be included in the RRR which flowered outside of Russia – came as a result of my visit to the Oriental Institute in

Rome. It was one of the remarks of the vice-rector, Fr. Constantin Simon, S.J., that convinced me that Catherine, though a member of the Catholic Church, should be included among those who have brought the treasures of Russia to the West.

Fr. Constantin had just finished writing the history of the Russian Catholic Church and was very familiar with Catherine. He said that Catherine's writings had done more to bring Russian spirituality to the West than all the writings of the intellectuals. (This was his opinion, of course, and many will think it is exaggerated.) But this convinced me that Catherine and those who brought Russian spirituality to the West, even though they were not Orthodox, should also be considered as part of the RRR.

Nicholas Zernov, in his book *The Russian Religious Renaissance of the Twentieth Century* (Harper and Row, 1963) includes examples of Russian spirituality in the RRR, and I wish Catherine to be included in this group. The ones mentioned here were part of Catherine's life as well.

Spirituality in the Silver Age

Staretz Silouan was from Russia, although his spirituality flourished in the Russian monastery of St. Panteleimon on Mt. Athos. Still, this is the West, and his spirituality grew in a garden free from the influences of the Soviet Union. Through the publication of his writings (*The Undistorted Image*) we have benefited by an authentic expression of Russian spirituality. It was one of Catherine's favorite books, and she often read from it publicly and commented on it.

We owe the publication of Silouan's works to another religious genius, Archimadrite Sofrony. Also from Russia (b.1896) he travelled to Paris and thence to Athos, and became a disciple of Silouan. Later he developed his own unique form of Russian spirituality by establishing the monastery of St. John the Baptist near Maldon, Essex, England. I had the privilege of meeting him there; and after his death some other members of our Madonna House community also visited. One of the new aspects of his spirituality – and therefore of the Russian spiritual renaissance – is that St. John's is a commu-