

## The Way of a Pilgrim: A Synopsis of Recent Scholarship on a Spiritual Classic

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### **Introduction**

The well-known Russian spiritual classic *Otkrovennye rasskazy strannika dukhovnomu ottsu svoemu*<sup>1</sup> – or *The Way of a Pilgrim* as it is commonly known in the English-speaking world – is a collection of four simple stories recounting a pilgrim's (*strannik's*<sup>2</sup>) journey through Russia, Ukraine, and Siberia as he attempts to understand and acquire the practice of unceasing prayer. This text is the best-known and most popu-

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<sup>1</sup> *Otkrovennye rasskazy strannika dukhovnomu ottsu svoemu* in the original Russian has been translated as *Sincere Stories told by a Pilgrim to his Spiritual Father* or *Candid Narratives of a Pilgrim to His Spiritual Father*. It is commonly known in English as *The Way of the Pilgrim*. For convenience, I shall henceforth refer to it as *The Way of the Pilgrim*.

<sup>2</sup> A *strannik* (Russian) or *strannyk* (Ukrainian) was a typical figure in ancient Russian society (see Michel Evdokimov, *Pèlerins russes et vagabonds mystiques* [Paris: Editions du Cerf, 1987]). This term “denotes a religious wanderer who wanders from monastery to monastery in search of spiritual enlightenment, rather than a pilgrim who travels to a specific holy location” (Anat Vernitski, “‘The Way of a Pilgrim’: Literary Analysis of a Religious Text,” *Slavonica* 9 [2003]: endnote 2, p. 121). The *strannik's* journey is continuous, thereby emphasizing the process of the spiritual journey rather than an end result. Continual prayer, which the *strannik* seeks, is by nature a never-ending process (see Vernitski, “The Way of the Pilgrim,” 116). The *strannik's* state of constant wandering and voluntary homelessness allows him to identify with Christ by being in the world, but not of the world. For the purposes of this paper, *strannik* or wanderer will be used inter-changeably.

lar book on Eastern Slavic spirituality among English-speaking readers.<sup>3</sup>

*The Way of a Pilgrim* is said to be “the only text of its kind, describing the mystical-religious quest for a way of practicing prayer.”<sup>4</sup> It is an instruction for those wishing to follow a path of prayer. The story depicts “the radical deepening of the *strannik*’s knowledge of poverty of spirit and of the living experience of divine presence that interior prayer opens him to.” The experience of “both exterior events and graded stages of inner self-revelation” leads him “to an ever-more radiant awareness of the Christ-fire burning within him and in ... creation.”<sup>5</sup>

This article will explore various aspects of *The Way of a Pilgrim*. The first section outlines the story and structure of *The Way of a Pilgrim*. Theories about the authorship of the work are then presented in the second section. A brief historical overview regarding the publication of the text follows in the third section. The fourth section situates *The Way of a Pilgrim* in the context of Eastern Christian spirituality. The fifth describes the recent reception of *The Way of a Pilgrim* in the Western world. In the sixth section, the inter-textuality of *The Way of a Pilgrim* is presented, and in the seventh, a literary analysis. The eighth and final section briefly considers the text’s narrative structure and use of pilgrimage as a root metaphor.

### **1. The Story and Structure of The Way of a Pilgrim**

The tale of *The Way of a Pilgrim* is the first-person account of a poor, lame *strannik* who wanders through Russia, Ukraine, and Siberia in the nineteenth century<sup>6</sup> with only a

<sup>3</sup> *The Way of a Pilgrim*, trans. Gleb Pokrovsky (Woodstock, VT: Sky-light Paths Publishing, 2001), xv.

<sup>4</sup> S.A. Ipatova, “Otkrovennye rasskazy strannika dukhovnomu svoemu ottsu”: paradigma siuzeta, *Khristianstvo i Russkaia literature* (Sankt Peterburg: ‘Nauka’, 2002): 30. Referenced in Anat Vernitski, “The Way of the Pilgrim,” 114.

<sup>5</sup> *The Way of a Pilgrim*, x.

<sup>6</sup> Nineteenth century Russia was a time of spiritual revival in the Russian Orthodox Church, and an age of great Russian literary figures such

knapsack containing dry bread and a Bible. After hearing Saint Paul's injunction to "pray without ceasing" (1 Thess. 5:17) during the Divine Liturgy, the *strannik* seeks out a *starets*<sup>7</sup> (spiritual father) to teach him how to live this out. The *starets* responds by putting the *Dobrotoliubiye*<sup>8</sup> into the *strannik's* hands and explaining to him the practice of the Jesus Prayer – the repetition of the phrase "Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner."<sup>9</sup> He then instructs the *strannik* to say the Jesus Prayer at first 3,000 times a day, then 6,000 times, and finally 12,000 times. Gradually the *strannik* stops counting the number of recitations as the prayer has become united with his every breath and heart-beat.

Throughout the narrative, the *strannik* is focused on the Jesus Prayer, and tells of his search for true prayer, his frustration with conventional teaching, his wanderings, and his failed

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as Pushkin, Dostoevsky, and Tolstoy. The second half of the century saw radical social reforms. Prior to 1860, nearly half of the Russian population lived in serfdom. The events depicted in *The Way of a Pilgrim* are believed to have occurred during the reign of Tsar Alexander II (1855–1881), who liberated the serfs in 1860. The lack of evidence in text of the great social upheaval brought about by this change suggests that the events portrayed were not likely to have happened much after 1860. See Pokrovsky, *The Way of a Pilgrim*, 4.

<sup>7</sup> According to Vernitski ("The Way of a Pilgrim," endnote 4, p. 121), "elders are people of spiritual authority established not by the Church hierarchy but by popular consent. They were usually priests or monks, but their status did not depend on their role within the Church, thus making them purely a popular phenomenon." Cf. Pierre Pascal, *The Religion of the Russian People*, trans. Rowan William (London: Mowbray, 1976).

<sup>8</sup> The *Dobrotoliubiye* is the Slavonic translation of the Greek *Philokalia* – a collection of quotations and references from earlier texts of Patristic and Byzantine spirituality. This translation was written by Paissy Velitchkovsky in 1793. For the English translation, see *The Philokalia: The Complete Text*, compiled by St. Nikodimos of the Holy Mountain and St. Makarios of Corinth, trans. and eds. G.E.H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, Kallistos Ware, 4 vols. (London and Boston: Faber, 1979–95). "*Dobrotoliubiye*" will be used throughout this article when referring to the *Philokalia*, and all quotes referring to this collection will be from this English translation.

<sup>9</sup> The "Jesus Prayer" is a term of convenience in Byzantine spirituality which designates the invocation of the name Jesus, whether alone or inserted into a more or less extended formula. See Lev Gillet ("A Monk of the Eastern Church"), *The Jesus Prayer* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1995), 21.