

## Nymphios and Sophia: Gender as a Spiritual Dialectic in the Thought of the East-Slavs

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### Резюме

Автор, священник білоруського походження Української Православної Церкви (Вселенський Патріархат) і професор гуманістичних наук університету в Пенсильванії, зосереджується над деякими сучасними питаннями і проблемами, зокрема над юридичними і патріархальними перспективами на подружжя і сексуальність, та висловлює думку, що перспектива східно-слов'янських Церков і богословів є скарбницею богословської мудрости, на підставі якої можна розвинути взаємне співвідношення статей.

Релігійне значення сексуальности аналізується у своєму метафоричному представленні, особливо в традиції східно-слов'янського народного танцю. Автор пропонує таїнственну перспективу на Ерос як превентивний засіб проти легалізму і статево-центризму, які або звужують поняття подружжя до контрактного обов'язку, або відкидають нормативний характер його притаманного, гетеросексуального змісту. У божественній взаємності, яка існує між Нимфіосом (Ісусом Христом) і Софією (Святим Духом), онтологічне поєднання мужеського і жіночого принципів становить християнську основу для здійснення загальнолюдської рівності мужчин і жінок, та їхнього майбутнього співвідношення.



### *An Introductory Note on Nomenclature and Categories*

The West still preserves those Marxist-forged hammers and chisels which so long sculpted its attitudes toward Slavic thought. Its reluctance to abandon obsolete categories is still evident in its inability to give up obsolete nomenclature. "Former Soviet Union" is a convenient tag; yet it is so convenient precisely because that simple verbal triad can bury complexities, ignore nationalities and suppress spiritual identities, all at the same time. The Communist monolith collapsed once its monolithic nature was revealed to be an illusion. Yet the materialist, empirical imperative which suffocated the Communist academy survives, weighty and enduring, in the institutions of the Western intellect. It pervades Western analyses of those three distinct peoples now known as Russians, Ukrainians, and the people of Belarus.

This is especially ironic given the recovery of the Christian mind among those three Eastern Slavic peoples. The scholars, artists and philosophers who shaped that mind, and who in many cases survived one of the greatest attempts at intellectual extinction known to human history are virtually unknown in the larger Western academy. When these figures flicker for a moment into Western awareness, their light soon dies: its philosophers are regarded as "idealists" or "hopelessly mystic"; its theologians condescendingly tolerated as quaint traditionalists; its cultural figures (who sometimes fare better than their counterparts in other areas) critiqued as retrogressive apostles of nostalgia.

The first problem to solve is the one of nomenclature. No label is more misapplied to Slavic Orthodox thinkers than "former Soviets." Yet the frequent substitute, "Russian," is frequently inaccurate and always redolent of imperialism. The recently celebrated millennium of Christianity in East Slavic lands revived the ancient term "Rus" to apply to the common intellectual and theological tradition of the three Eastern Slavic peoples. In that spirit I will use the term in this essay and hereafter to refer to common elements of the Russian, Ukrainian and Belarussian religious traditions. These traditions are as rich in art and thought as in the mystic ritual for which they are so often credited among Westerners (who have too little appreciation for either mysticism or ritual.)

Why was the West so unheeding for the religious thought of Rus'? This religious mind appreciated, far more fully than the West did, the deep cultural roots of the Marxist phenomenon. As early as 1937 Nicolas Berdyaev published in the West *The Origins of Russian Communism*. He treated, quite plainly, the traditional Slavic antecedents of Soviet Marxism. The August coup but revealed in political terms a long present and profound yearning for "recovery," a yearning which hosts of Western Sovietologists (and intelligence experts) had failed to recognize. It was clear that people in virtually every republic searched for spiritual foundations and re-examined traditional thinkers. Amidst the glitter of consumer goods and the reorganization of trade, often led by a criminal class, that yearning remains. Slavic "traditionalism," in fact, now disquiets those who once ignored it. The answer to this stubborn refusal to recognize facts is, I believe, a simple one. The West was in a curious way dependent upon the old Soviet system in order to define itself.

The Soviet Union constituted the "high church" of Marxist thought in the West. For the leftist intelligentsia, the USSR sheltered the rigid dogmatics of philosophical materialism: even as they condemned its "abuses," leftist scholars could still rely upon it as some imperfect expression of an utopian messianism. And for those thinkers on the right, the old Soviet Union was a ready-made antithesis: it was an "anti-Messiah," indeed a distant Antichrist which could always be relied upon to embody evil far, far away. Thus, though many North American intellectuals knew that the old USSR was plagued with desperate problems, they somehow took comfort in its endurance. I suspect that in their inmost hearts they miss all that the post-Soviet order now rushes to toss away.

The advice which Berdyaev gave in 1937 now applies to Western analysts more than ever:

The Westernizers were wrong, because they denied any original distinctive character to the Russian people and Russian history. They clung to naively simple views of the progress of enlightenment and civilization, and saw no

mission of any sort for Russia, except the necessity of catching up with the West.<sup>1</sup>

In Russia, Ukraine and Belarus today, the option of "Westernization" suggests itself more than ever. In economics, in religion, in intellectual and social life, there is a temptation to sacrifice tradition, even that suppressed, religious-philosophical tradition which now experiences revival. The West calls the East-Slavs to "conversion" on their own soil, to an evangelical and economic rebirth. The traditionalism of Rus' is suspect especially because of its uncompromising resistance to postmodern "progress." That resistance, however, is an instinct of self-preservation. "Westernization," especially in philosophical terms, will not bring prosperity but bankruptcy.

Those who give advice (and the academics and religious activists in the West have been aburst with "advice" in Slavic lands) display in their own personhood the fruits of their own advice. Western "personhood" is itself fragmented. Cracks are spreading through the radical, relativist substructure of North American academic life. Its institutions, after all, share some materialist assumptions with the fallen academy of the so-called "former Soviet Union." Phenomena like "meaning" and "truth" have lost their coherence. Indeed, a generation of scholars is being raised up to rely upon the belief that this chimera which past generations called "truth" can never be recovered, that in "deconstruction" and in the absolute empowerment of the individual interpreter to dis-mantle lies the prime intellectual task.

### *Gender and Personhood*

The traditional religious philosophy of Rus' not only offers itself as an opportunity to see East Europe on its own terms. What I wish to emphasize most emphatically is that the Orthodox tradition also offers *us in the West* a necessary, much longed-for correc-

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<sup>1</sup> Nicolai Berdyaev, *The Origins of Russian Communism* (1937; repr. University of Michigan: Ann Arbor, 1964), 13.

tive to our own dilemma. We, too, have lost our confidence in the phenomenon of meaning: we search for a new hermeneutic. Those of us in the West who long for a foundation to such terms as "truth" and "meaning" can now look to those who survived the most brutal of intellectual assaults for hope and coherence.

The philosophical tradition of the Eastern Slavs has been preserved among us, both in translation and in new emigre thought in the West. But it has been for us a small current of critique in a larger, powerful river of individualism and autonomy. There are among us "converts," both academic and religious, to the traditional Orthodox notion of "personhood" as opposed to "individualism." Christos Yannaras, the contemporary Greek philosopher, has carried that Orthodox notion into Western modernity, but its modern roots are anchored here, in the Slavic philosophical tradition. As Yannaras points out, the West has anchored its notion of humanity in the idea of the "individual." The view of what it means to be human, however, is a far different thing in terms deriving from the Orthodox East. In the traditional religious thought of Rus', our humanity expresses itself in *personhood* rather than *individuality*. And as Yannaras explains for the West, the "individual" and the "person" are quite opposite in meaning:

The individual is the denial or neglect of the distinctiveness of the person, the attempt to define human existence using the objective properties of man's common nature, and quantitative comparisons and analogies.<sup>2</sup>

In the Slavic mistrust of Western rationalism, which was articulated clearly by Pamphil Yurkevich, Ivan Kireevsky and Alexei Khomyakov, we find a rejection of the very principle of "segmentation." Both they and their successors defined human nature primarily in terms of *relationship*. The "person" is defined not in *distinction from*, but in *relationship to* all other persons with whom he or she is defined. The implications of this idea are

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<sup>2</sup> Christos Yannaras, *The Freedom of Morality*, trans. Elizabeth Briere (Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1984), 18.