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Orthodox Leadership in a Brave New World (Fr. Johannes L. Jacobse)

Ξένες γλώσσες / In English

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Almost thirty years ago Soviet dissident Alexander Solzhenitsyn delivered an address atHarvardUniversitythat still ranks as one of the most trenchant and inspired critiques of Western culture ever given. Although some of the political references are dated, two observations remain as true today as when they were first spoken. The first is that the philosophical materialism that shaped communism and led to the Gulags now operates in the Western world. The second is that mankind stands at an anthropological threshold.

What is philosophical materialism? To use Solzhenitsyn's definition, it is the belief that man has no touchstone other than himself:

To such consciousness, man is the touchstone in judging and evaluating everything on earth . . . we have lost the concept of a Supreme Complete Entity which used to restrain our passions and our irresponsibility.

Philosophical materialism has concrete cultural ramifications. To social utopians, it means that persons have no enduring value—so society can be forcibly arranged around notions of the common good. To hedonists, it means that the body is primarily a pleasure machine. To nihilists, it means that because the death of the body is also the end of existence, we should exalt death and violence.

These themes shaped much of the course of the last century. Solzhenitsyn had firsthand experience of Marxist social utopianism, but he was not the first to sound the alarm. Almost a century earlier, Dostoevsky heard the rumblings that would makeRussiasusceptible to communist tyranny and warned, “Without God, everything is permitted.”

Prophets of the West

The Democratic West had its own literary prophets, who, while not steeped in Christianity as deeply as Solzhenitsyn or Dostoevsky, nevertheless understood the Christian moral tradition and thus were able to discern the cultural trends that Solzhenitsyn would express so clearly at Harvard years later.

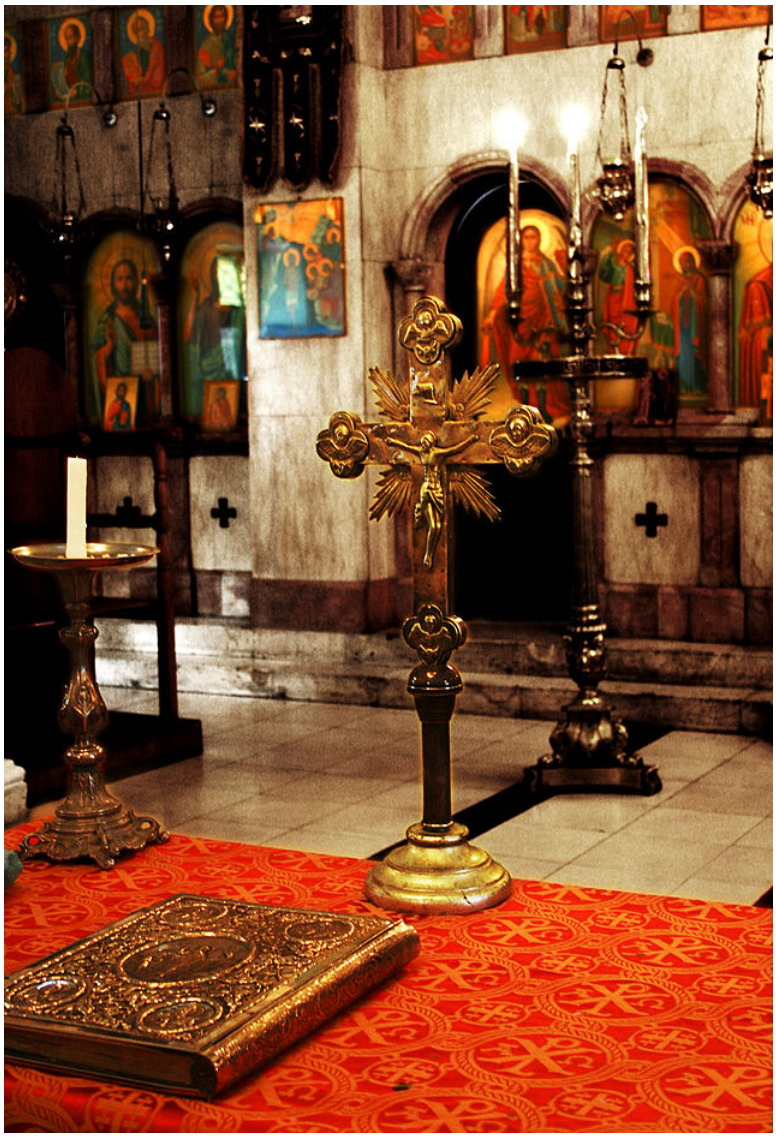
One such visionary was George Orwell, who foresaw the tyranny of the social utopianism that follows when traditional notions of truth and virtue are supplanted, and confronted it in *1984*. Another was Aldous Huxley, who, in his classic *Brave New World*, focused more on the elevation of pleasure and the senseless preoccupation with stimulation that would afflict culture once moral norms shifted. Neil Postman, in his brilliant *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, pointed out the differences between the two authors:

What Orwell feared were those who would ban books. What Huxley feared was that there would be no reason to ban a book, for there would be no one who wanted to read one. Orwell feared those who would deprive us of information. Huxley feared those who would give us so much that we would be reduced to passivity and egoism. Orwell feared that the truth would be concealed from us. Huxley feared the truth would be drowned in a sea of irrelevance. Orwell feared we would become a captive culture. Huxley feared we would become a trivial culture, preoccupied with some equivalent of the feelies, the orgy porgy, and the centrifugal bumblepuppy.

As Huxley remarked in *Brave New World Revisited*, the civil libertarians and

rationalists who are ever on the alert to oppose tyranny «failed to take into account man's almost infinite appetite for distractions.» In *1984*, Huxley added, people are controlled by inflicting pain. In *Brave New World*, they are controlled by inflicting pleasure. In short, Orwell feared that what we hate will ruin us. Huxley feared that what we love will ruin us.

As trenchant as Orwell's and Huxley's prophecies were, however, Solzhenitsyn's emerges as more compelling because of his explicit religious appeal. In locating the cultural calamities in the loss of an awareness of God, he shows the stance Christians—particularly those who understand that current cultural conflicts require more than a political solution—should take today.



The Anthropological Threshold

Mankind, said Solzhenitsyn (and here he means Christendom—the culture that drew from the well of Judeo-Christian morality), stands on an anthropological threshold as significant as the shift from the medieval to the modern period:

If the world has not come to its end, it has approached a major turn in history, equal in importance to the turn from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance. It will exact from us a spiritual upsurge, we shall have to rise to a new height of vision, to a new level of life where our physical nature will not be cursed as in the Middle Ages, but, even more importantly, our spiritual being will not be trampled upon as in the Modern era.

"Anthropology" comes from the Greek word *anthropos*, which means "man." In theological terms, anthropology means what we understand the human person to be. It encompasses who he is, what he was created for, how he should comport himself—all the constituents of man's existence that raise him above the animal, that define his purpose, that make meaning out of his relationships.

Consider Solzhenitsyn's exhortation in the questions facing us today, especially the looming issues concerning the advancements in medical technology. We have unlocked some secrets about human life that were unthinkable just a generation or two ago. Who would have thought we could map the human genome or grow organs from a single cell, as it appears may soon be the case? Who foresaw such advancements as locating and even correcting fetal abnormalities? Who guessed that we could extend life expectancy by decades in some cases?

These advancements are front and center for several reasons. First, they require us to answer foundational questions about the nature and value of the human person. These questions have not been answered, at least in terms that have achieved any kind of cultural consensus. Secondly, how they are answered will drive research and development in the future. Frankly, how we decide these questions will determine what kind of society we bequeath to our children and grandchildren.

These advancements are fraught with ethical difficulty. Is it wrong to test for Down's Syndrome in an unborn child? Is it wrong to extract stem cells from embryos? How far do our obligations to keep people alive really go? These types of questions are highly contentious, as any student of the culture knows. One thing we know for certain is that as our knowledge increases, the ethical questions concerning the nature and value of human life will become more numerous and complex—and the contention is likely to increase.

The contention has been largely defined in political terms. Every reader is familiar

with the hot-button conflicts—teen sexuality, homosexual marriage, abortion, the Terri Schiavo dilemma—that have been fought in the public arena. The political arena will always remain a venue for moral conflicts, but we sell ourselves short if we conclude that the political dimension is the arena where these questions will find their final resolution.

For Solzhenitsyn, spiritual development and self-awareness work hand-in-hand—clearly a Christian value self-evident to any Orthodox Christian. But he also warns that because Western culture has been sidetracked into a philosophical materialism that has dimmed man's spiritual awareness, its future is threatened. The only way out of the present morass is spiritual renewal.

Solzhenitsyn experienced the ravages of the spiritual darkening firsthand, particularly during his eight years in a Soviet prison. There he received the fundamental insight that would propel his groundbreaking work: «The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between political parties—but right through every human heart.»

The timing of his Harvard speech couldn't have been better. His words fell on the ears of a nation that was already experiencing the wrenching dislocations of a cataclysmic shift in moral values and social order—from the sexual revolution to riots in its cities—in ways unprecedented in its history. At the same time, the wondrous—and fearful—unlocking of the deep mysteries of human nature was moving into full swing.Americahad entered a culture war.

The Anthropological Dimension of the Culture War

The culture war is fundamentally a conflict about anthropology—how we value the human being, how we ought to define him, the purpose for his existence, what social arrangements society deems suitable for men and women, and so forth. And politics emerged as the prominent battlefield for the conflict.

Complex conflicts tend to drift toward simplification, and the culture war was no exception. Cultural liberalism and cultural conservatism roughly followed political lines: Democrats were liberal and Republicans were conservative. It wasn't a perfect fit, but even a big suit on a small man still covers his body.

No one has really been comfortable with the arrangement, except perhaps the activists. Adding to the discomfort is our characteristically American way of adjudicating moral conflict. American culture has no institution of moral judgment. We have no national Church, no council of legislative elders, and no final court of arbitration that can definitively resolve the perplexing moral questions that face us.

As a result, the debates and political maneuverings that follow are often raucous and chaotic affairs.

There is wisdom in this system of apparent chaos, however. The Founding Fathers, in refusing to establish a central authority of moral judgment, ensured that these questions must be addressed by the culture itself, thereby affirming the precept, *politics follows culture*, in ways that inhibit any imposition of a final adjudication from the state.

This precept is also drawn from the Christian tradition. It is grounded in the notion that the power of the state draws not only from the consent of the people, but from a people grounded in the Christian moral tradition. Solzhenitsyn, again stressing the anthropological dimension, himself acknowledged this point in the Harvard address:

Yet in the early democracies, as in the American democracy at the time of its birth, all individual human rights were granted on the ground that man is God's creature. That is, freedom was given to the individual conditionally, in the assumption of his constant religious responsibility.

The model built by the Founding Fathers is not a perfect formula, but it does resist the tyranny that Solzhenitsyn experienced in Soviet Russia. One way is by providing a fluidity through which reform movements can arise. Take *Democrats for Life*, for example. Five short years ago an internal challenge to the hard-line pro-abortion position held by Democratic Party leadership was virtually unthinkable. But there it is.

Politics will always play a role in the great moral debates. It's the American way. In taking questions to the culture, then, we need to look past (but not overlook) the political factors and define more clearly the anthropological dimension of the debate. It's a complex topic, so let's restrict our discussion to one important theme: the use and misuse of the Christian moral vocabulary.

Moral Deconstruction

Moral deconstruction can be defined as the systematic takedown and restructuring of the moral assumptions that used to guide our decisions, especially those that touched on the foundational constituents defining our self-understanding and value. These would include decisions about life, death, sexuality, purpose, meaning, sacrifice, and more.

Coming back to our literary prophets, we can see that cultural deconstruction was

what they feared. Orwell warned against the imposition of tyranny, Huxley against a mechanization of the body, and Solzhenitsyn against a moral redefinition of man through which his God-given direction towards freedom (ultimately found in Christ) would be obscured.

Ideas have consequences. How we think determines how we act. This describes not only the individual but also the society he inhabits. A society cannot continue to function without shared notions of right and wrong—a dynamic we call the *moral consensus*. These ideas and values function as universals, as ways that a society organizes itself.

Further, these ideas depend on language, because it's through language that the ideas are passed from one generation to the next. They shape a story, a *cultural narrative*, which references ideas and actions to a larger body of meaning. Solzhenitsyn, in arguing that the moral touchstone has shifted from God to man in Western culture, thereby implies the narrative has shifted as well. Solzhenitsyn says as much by writing the *Gulag* series, which attempted (successfully as it turns out) to destroy the Marxist cultural narrative by telling the truth about it, employing the values and ideas of the traditional narrative Marxist ideas sought to supplant.

In terms of how these concepts enter the culture, however, Orwell is probably the clearest. In *Politics and the English Language*, Orwell warned of how the meanings of words are subverted to stand for ideas and concepts that are not true to their meaning. The promises of the socialist utopia sweepingEurope (and the American intelligentsia) at the time were Orwell's target, but the dynamic remains true today.

In all corners of the culture, words drawn from the moral tradition are employed to justify actions and behaviors that the tradition otherwise discourages and often prohibits. We saw it in the great debates about abortion and euthanasia in the last few decades. The conflict was not only about competing moral values, but also about the language by which those values were communicated. Words like freedom, choice, human value, and others whose meanings were relatively clear when the cultural consensus was shaped by traditional Christian morality now served a different function as that consensus shattered.

This co-opting of the Christian moral lexicon is one reason for the deep moral confusion in the culture. It creates a kind of moral schizophrenia in which people are unsure if right and wrong even exist. Repeat certain words over and over again, and people will tend to believe them. If these words have moral power, which is to say if they derive their authority from the moral tradition, people will tend to believe their new applications *are* the tradition.

That's what Huxley warned against. If man is a biological machine, and if that machine responds to pleasure, why not frame the pleasure-inducing activity in the terminology of a private good? Orwell warned of the same corruption. If man is machine, why not frame the attempts at social reorganization in terms of the common good? All it takes is wrestling common terms from their traditional moral contexts and employing them in ones that justify the dehumanization as progress. Good becomes evil, and evil becomes good. Society has reconstructed itself in a new moral order.

What makes Solzhenitsyn's exhortation so compelling (and ultimately more valuable) is his conviction that the crisis is fundamentally one of anthropology. As such, it might also be one of historical inevitability. Perhaps our progress has forced this dilemma upon us, just as the Nestorian controversy forced the elucidation of the two natures of Christ, and the Arian controversy the elucidation of Christ's divinity. The question we as a society need to answer is: What is Man?

The Re-Christianization of Culture

As awe-inspiring as our technological advancements are, and despite the promise they hold for the alleviation of human suffering, the application of new technologies towards the betterment of the human condition *in terms traditionally understood* is not assured. The moral crisis facing American culture, particularly the deconstruction of cultural forms that managed to safeguard the common and private good (and sometimes correct its failures), can easily subvert the knowledge into something grotesque and ugly while claiming to serve the good.

Solzhenitsyn warned as much when he said the crisis can only be resolved if man reawakens to the spiritual dimension of his existence: "This ascension will be similar to climbing onto the next anthropologic stage. No one on earth has any other way left but—upward."

If Orthodox Christians should understand anything, it is this: Salvation is a concrete, existential encounter with the living God. Moreover, this Lord gives gifts, including wisdom, knowledge, insight, and courage—all the elements needed to

confront the maelstrom of confusion in which our culture finds itself, and all meant to be applied in the work of daily life, whether as mother, researcher, mechanic, priest—whatever our vocation may be.

Salvation is not understanding the correct theological concepts; it is not nostalgia for civilizations past; it is not formal membership in a long-standing parish; it is not social activism; it is not morally appropriate behavior; it is not mastery of the moral vocabulary. Further, it is not enough to recall the certainty of the past. Nostalgic impulses, as comforting as they may be (including the Orthodox variants, such as the longings for Hellenistic Greece or Holy Russia), simply won't meet the challenge.

Orthodox leadership today requires moral clarity and courage. When Solzhenitsyn delivered his address three decades ago, he spoke not as a philosopher, but as a voice crying in the wilderness. He cried out against the dehumanization of men he experienced in the East and saw advancing in the West. Only people with moral clarity and courage could successfully challenge it, he exhorted. What the world needs is not more philosophers, but moralists.

The exhortation drew from a supreme confidence in the power of truth. Solzhenitsyn believed that truth is self-verifying. When the truth is spoken, its veracity is self-evident to the hearer. This is a profoundly Christian notion rooted in the teaching of the apostle Paul: When the Gospel is preached, Christ (who is Truth) is revealed.

Any Orthodox response to the cultural challenge must first presume a recovery of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. The wisdom of the Fathers, the artistry of the poets, the healings of the miracle workers, the courage of the martyrs, the knowledge of the scholars, the patience of the teachers, the foresight of the bishops, the faithfulness of the priests—all the elements that shaped and forged the moral tradition that founded Western civilization and must renew it today—start with the recovery of the Gospel. As Jesus said, "I am the vine, you are the branches. He who abides in Me, and I in him, bears much fruit; for without Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5).

Rev. Johannes L. Jacobse is the president of the American Orthodox Institute where he has posted this article: http://www.aoiusa.org/2009/09/orthodox-leadership-in-a-brave-new-world-2/

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