Religion, State and Society, Vol. 22, No. 2, 1994

Man in Search of Meaning: the St Petersburg School of Religion and Philosophy

NATALIYA A. PECHERSKAYA

And they found Him and said to Him: 'Everyone is searching for You'.
Mark 1:37

The collapse of the Soviet Union has confronted each individual citizen of this former state with the task of becoming aware of his or her own genuine interests and lawful rights. It has become clear that only when personal choices have been made will people living in contemporary Russia be able to define their own place in this country and establish sound and honourable relations with other nations on an equal footing. This will be possible only when, alongside political freedom and private property, real freedom of choice in spiritual matters is achieved. In this context the existence in Russia of a multinational and multidenominational city such as St Petersburg is of considerable importance. This city has the particular task of drawing its inhabitants into general cultural dialogue. Due attention must of course be given to Russian Orthodoxy, but people must also gain a basic acquaintance with, and experience of, Catholicism, Protestantism, Judaism, Islam and the traditions of Southern and Eastern Asia.

So far, however, a significant proportion of the population of the country and of St Petersburg has had no possibility of obtaining reliable knowledge about religions today or of discussing the subject in an up-to-date way. The nearer we come to our own religious problems, the more ineffective appear the proposals offered by official institutions.

There is a natural basis in Russia for interest in spiritual life, but it has been exploited by preachers of esoteric teachings, astrologists, occultists, advocates of ESP and of orgiastic doctrines and so on. It is very hard to obtain authentic critical knowledge about these 'sciences'. Religious preachers of various confessions prefer to pass over these questions in silence, or themselves contribute to the body of myths accumulating in this area. Efforts to provide education have been rendered that much more difficult because for a long time these matters were the object of crude antireligious propaganda. Alongside the need for education there has always existed an indispensable need for clear awareness of this whole sphere of pseudo-knowledge, whose literature has lately been increasingly distributed by unscrupulous commercial enterprises that lack any competence in these matters.

An approach to various forms of spirituality which is respectful and at the same time critical towards differing views on the place of the individual in society and on each cultural community in the world in the past, present and future cannot be elaborated just like that, even given the best intentions. Serious and competent hard work is needed.

The St Petersburg School of Religion and Philosophy, founded in 1990 under the aegis of the city's Association of Scholars, is actively pursuing a programme of education to this end.

The School offers instruction by leading scholars of the Russian Academy of Sciences and of the St Petersburg Theological Academy and Seminary. The staff of the School are not only specialists but also religious believers. The range of languages available to students includes Ancient Greek, Latin, Arabic, Hebrew, Church Slavonic, Sanskrit and Tibetan. Alongside these studies there are courses on a variety of subjects, such as the history of Russia, the Russian Orthodox Church, the writings of the Holy Fathers, liturgy, ancient Russian literature, icons, architecture and Russian religious philosophy.

The St Petersburg School of Religion and Philosophy was the very first secular institution in Russia to start to develop courses in religious-philosophical education at tertiary level. Russia lacked traditional theological departments in universities, and those timid attempts which are now being made by various newly created institutes have not as yet produced a definite framework in which courses of this kind can be worked out. All that they do is copy some details of the educational programmes offered by the theological academies. In this respect the School has already accomplished significant work which should mean that it will develop into an institution of a kind which has not previously existed in either Russia or the West.

Of all cities St Petersburg is probably the most favourably placed for establishing an institute of this kind. The city's scholarly community has remained intact and its members have been available for teaching; the teaching of ancient languages has continued uninterrupted; and the city has libraries that are well stocked with ancient texts. The cultural climate of St Petersburg is different from that of Moscow, for example: it has a less narrow conception of contemporary life than is characteristic of Moscow, but on the other hand the social and political climate of St Petersburg is more strained and tense. It is precisely here, in St Petersburg, on its main streets and squares, that the extremist speeches of the self-appointed 'leaders' of the Russian people can be heard, invoking Orthodox Russia and antisemitism in an incitement to civil war. In this context the School is devoting special attention to building up immunity against nationalistic, racist and demagogic phenomena in society and against xenophobia. In working out its study programmes the school adopts a particular approach, combining traditional religious knowledge with the study of world history and Russian history, philosophy and hermeneutics, for all these types of knowledge are facets of one single subject, that is, culture. What the St Petersburg School of Religion and Philosophy is striving to achieve is as thoroughgoing and rapid a recreation of culture as possible, against the contemporary background of Russia's cultural emptiness and disarray.

The School works with its students in a careful, gradual process. In four years' time, for example, the Department of Christian Archaeology and Liturgy will produce specialists in church art who will not just be trained for work in museums or municipal institutions for the preservation of monuments, but will also be able to preserve the treasures of Russian churches. The School provides teaching for adults, and it might seem that elementary questions about God do not feature in its work. But this is not the case. Anyone who undertakes religious education in Russia today has to be capable of seeing the problem in its entirety, as a real problem for our society.

It is the younger generation which has most obviously lost the habit of reading about the most important world religions and assimilating their ideas. The collapse of communist ideological propaganda has created a vacuum which could rapidly be filled

by a superficial restoration of rituals along denominational lines. Both students and teachers are among those taking up ritualistic religion today. If we are going to have an effect on the upbringing of the younger generation in the foreseeable future and influence their ideas and behaviour it is essential, first and foremost, to reeducate the teachers themselves.

Today two extremes are tearing Russian society apart: democratic ideas of religious pluralism, which recognise the independence of education from the church, on the one hand, and on the other hand, the Orthodox Church, which is trying to reinstate the tradition of teaching Scripture in secondary schools as a compulsory subject. These two extremes have eclipsed the pursuit of scholarly religious study which had been developing intensively in prerevolutionary Russia. During the Soviet atheist period only a few scholars were bold enough to pursue this line. But there *were* such people, and they may be found at the St Petersburg School of Religion and Philosophy, where they carry out their work with school teachers who seek knowledge and understanding.

The task of filling the cultural vacuum requires not only efforts on the educational side, but also the urgent translation into Russian of basic works on theology and philosophy of the twentieth century, those works which were carefully hidden from readers in Russia for ideological reasons. In cooperation with representatives of the municipal authorities, cultural and church figures and all others who are interested, the School is carrying out intensive translation and publishing work, and also work in the media.

It is of course important to avoid hastiness, which easily leads to superficiality. Today all kinds of people are going to have to work together if we are to lead the country and its people out of a dead end. We welcome the cooperation of all those who want to help the religious and national revival of Russia in the name of all believers in Christ the Saviour.

(Translated from the Russian by Jonathan Sutton)