

Alexander Solzhenitsyn: Christian Writer

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The recent expulsion of the dissident writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn from the Soviet Union has provoked widespread and diverse reactions from the Western press. Many commentators have observed that such action was more humane than sending him to prison or labour camp. Yet is this not perhaps the most cruel thing that could have happened to this great man, for Russia is his motherland, his lifeline? Solzhenitsyn, like many Russians, is tied to his country by lasting bonds. Not least, he is deeply involved in Russia's spiritual life and is a baptized member of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Solzhenitsyn rarely makes his own religious philosophy explicit in his writings. Nevertheless, he stands directly in the line of the tradition of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky – a tradition which is essentially Christian. While Marxism's expressed aim is to lend dignity to man by changing his exterior economic conditions for the better, Christianity maintains that man can achieve dignity only through penitence which engenders purity in the inner self. In practice, the Christian attitude is a reversal of the communist ethic, which places a higher value on the "collective" than the individual. Solzhenitsyn adheres to the Christian tradition. This may be seen clearly in his novel *The First Circle*. In *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, published in Moscow in 1962 when Khrushchev's anti-religious campaign was at its height, Solzhenitsyn made a minor hero of the young Baptist prisoner Alyosha.

Solzhenitsyn has also written short sketches demonstrating his concern at the closure of churches and the mockery of religious observance by Soviet atheists. In *The Easter Procession*, an outstanding essay published in 1969, he describes a demonstration against this traditional ceremony, one of the most sacred of the Orthodox Church :

The boys spit onto the pavement, dig each other in the ribs, some whistle shrilly, others swear obscenely, and several tune into dance bands on their transistor radios. They hug their girls on the processional path, pull them from each others arms and look them over cockily. At any moment you expect them to draw knives: first against each other and then against the believers . . . The legal boundary to crime has not been crossed, the banditry is bloodless, the insult to the spirit is in the bandit leer of their grinning lips, the brazen talk, the sniggering, the courting, pawing, smoking, spitting – two paces away from the Passion of Christ.

Equally remarkable and vivid is the essay *Along the Oka* in which Solzhenitsyn depicts the beauty of the church buildings to be seen throughout the Russian countryside. He celebrates their spiritual significance and mourns over their desecration in the Soviet period.

They trip up the slopes, ascend the hills, come down to the broad rivers, like princesses in white and red. They lift their bell towers – graceful, shapely, all different, rising high over mundane timber and thatch . . .

But when you get into the village you find that not the living but the dead greeted you from afar. The crosses were knocked off or twisted out of place long ago. The dome has been stripped and there are gaping holes between its rusty ribs . . .

People were always selfish and often unkind. But the evening chimes used to ring out over villages, fields and woods, reminding men that they must abandon the trivial concerns of this world and give time and thought to eternity.

Our forefathers put all that was finest in themselves, all their understanding into these towers.

“Ram it in, Vitka, give it a bash, don’t be afraid!”

“The cinema will be at six, dancing at eight o’clock . . .”

In an open letter to Patriarch Pimen of Moscow at the beginning of Lent 1972, he added the weight of his moral authority to the many voices within the Church calling for reform, for renewal, and for an end to compromise with the atheist authorities. This letter begins :

Most Holy Father, the subject of this letter weighs down like a gravestone upon our heads and crushes the breasts of those Russian people in whom the Orthodox faith has still not been quite extinguished . . . Further silence is impossible.

Solzhenitsyn goes on to accuse the Church leaders of lacking moral fibre. They have failed, he claims, to resist the enforced and illegal closure of churches, they have not pressed the government to repeal the laws banning all forms of religious education for children, they have publicly demonstrated their own subservience by making high-sounding pronouncements about injustices in almost every country in the world – except those ruled by communist regimes.

After Solzhenitsyn’s expulsion, Serafim, Metropolitan of Krutitsy and Kolomna, a senior representative of the Moscow Patriarchate, aired his views on this in the Western press. On 1 March 1974 *The Times* published a letter in which Metropolitan Serafim claimed that Solzhenitsyn had long ago forfeited the right to call himself a Christian in the eyes of the believers of the Russian Orthodox Church. He pointed out the past intimate bonds between Russia and the Orthodox Church and was unable to reconcile Solzhenitsyn’s rebellion against the Soviet State with his

loyalty to the Church. He even accused the dissident writer of supporting German fascists in his hatred for Russia. In the concluding paragraph he writes :

Today believers and non-believers of our country are living and working under a peaceful sky. And Solzhenitsyn, like a prodigal son, enjoyed all the benefits of our peaceful work, yet he has spurned the Christian belief of helping one's fellow men and has stooped to insulting our people and country and joining those who wish to undermine the peaceful life of the peoples.

The World Council of Churches has formally announced its regret at the decision of the Soviet authorities to carry out the expulsion. A communication of 15 February announced :

We deeply regret that the authorities of the USSR have sought to resolve a serious internal problem by expelling the Soviet writer Solzhenitsyn and stripping him of his citizenship. Solzhenitsyn has taken a courageous stand for human freedom through his concern to help his people face the realities of the past.

A number of interesting replies to Metropolitan Serafim's letter have followed in *The Times*. On 6 March a letter from Professor Dimitri Obolensky was published strongly criticising the attack and declaring that Solzhenitsyn deserves to rank among the greatest Christian writers in the Russian language. Professor Obolensky writes of Metropolitan Serafim :

One is driven to conclude from this letter that he regards his own conception of patriotism . . . as the sole valid criterion of Solzhenitsyn's religious beliefs; and that, on grounds no more solid than these, he has arrogated to himself the right to sit in judgement on the sincerity of his Christian faith.

The Bishop of Manchester commented that any man who had actually read Solzhenitsyn's work would find it hard to agree with Metropolitan Serafim's views. Metropolitan Anthony of Sourozh, Exarch of the Patriarch of Moscow and All Russia in Western Europe, stood firmly and courageously in defence of Solzhenitsyn. He opens his letter with the statement :

As Head of the Russian Orthodox Patriarchal Church in Western and Northern Europe I want, in my own name and in that of both my clergy and the believers, to disown the statements about Solzhenitsyn in the letter of Metropolitan Serafim of Krutitsy and Kolomna. Metropolitan Serafim speaks for himself and those in the USSR who misguidedly chose to side with him.

Metropolitan Anthony went on to point out the deep and steadfast love which Solzhenitsyn has for Russia and concludes : "In this love and endeavour he does not stand alone - in Russia or abroad."