A MATTER OF PERSONAL CONSCIENCE: SOVIET WOMEN, RELIGION, AND THE SACRED SELF

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On December 5, 1947, Harvard University received a $100,000 grant from the Carnegie foundation for the development of a Russian Studies Center.[73] By 1950, the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System (HPSSS), in conjunction with the Air Force's Human Research Institute had begun its study of life under the Soviet regime.[74] Research directors Alex Inkeles and Raymond A. Bauer aimed to provide Americans with a "portrait of Soviet Russia by Russians" in an attempt to unveil life behind the iron curtain.[75] Although their study did not directly explore the question of feminine religiosity within the Soviet context, their interviewees revealed complex interpretations of spirituality and religion.

The American public, amidst Cold War stereotypes, clamored to learn more about social conditions within the Soviet Union. *The New York Times* regularly ran articles regarding secularization and religious persecution. A 1951 article explained "What We Do and What We Do Not Know about Russia," and Harry Schwartz commented, "[a]lthough the Kremlin has not entirely succeeded in wiping out religious belief, it has had sufficient success so that organized religion is only a minor

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73 "Harvard to Study Russia," *The New York Times,* December 6, 1947, 13.

74 David Brandenberger, "A Background Guide to Working with HPSSS Online," *The Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System Online,* http://hcl.harvard.edu/collections/hpsss/working_with_hpsss.pdf (accessed April 10, 2009).

75 Alex Inkeles and Raymond A. Bauer, "Portrait of Soviet Russia by Russians: Refugees provide a Team of Social Scientists with valuable Information on Life in the U.S.S.R," *The New York Times,* November 25, 1951, 207.

factor."[76] That same year, Ukrainian "refugee" Priests interviewed by the *New York Times* confirmed that under Stalin, "many churches had been transformed into movie theatres, stables, and warehouses."[77] Articles such as these only served to pique the interest and curiosity of Americans yearning to learn the truth about Soviet communism. Alex Inkeles, along with other prominent scholars even conducted a radio series promising to offer the "uncensored, unvarnished, unbiased truth about Russia" based on "almost 500 personal interviews with former Soviet citizens."[78]

Urban female émigrés that participated in the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System alluded to or outwardly referred to religion as a "matter of personal conscience," a phrase that deserves further exploration in the context of Russian culture and thought. The phrase, which may have first been used in 1905 legislation regarding the rights and regulation of non-Orthodox religious groups, seems to have taken on a more complex and philosophical meaning by the 1950's.[79] Furthermore, the intellectual interpretations of morality, irreligiosity, and piousness, evolved over the course of four generations.

As the meaning, language, and significance of various religious aspects shifted, the chasm between the religious and irreligious developed into an undefined gray area. It is this gray area that has largely been ignored by scholars. Although several academics have explored women's religiosity prior to the Russian revolution as well as peasant resistance to anti-religious policy, few historians have immersed themselves in the individual and collective analysis of what Marc D. Steinberg refers to as the '*lichnost'* or the "inward person."[80] Most urban women born between 1895 and 1910 opposed the Soviet anti-religious policies, but more importantly, this age group felt as if the development of social morality was stifled by state policies. Younger women, born between 1910 and 1930, were not only adamant about religiosity in the introspective sense, but also discussed the concept of faith amidst a blank canvas lacking ceremony and ritual.

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[76] Harry Schwartz, "What We Do and Do Not Know About Russia," *The New York Times*, April 1, 1951, 175.

[77] "Russians Now Pray to Moscow Divinity," *The New York Times*, November 26, 1951, 5.

[78] "Display Advertisement #173," *The New York Times*, December 1, 1952, X20.

[79] Paul W. Werth, "Arbiters of the Free Conscience: State, Religion, and the Problem of Confessional Transfer After 1905," in *Sacred Stories: Religion and Spirituality in Modern Russia*, ed. Heather Coleman and Marc D. Steinberg (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 180.

[80] Marc D. Steinberg, "A Path of Thorns: The Spiritual Wounds and Wandering of Worker Poets" in *Sacred Stories: Religion and Spirituality in Modern Russia*, ed. Heather Coleman and Marc D. Steinberg (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2007), 306.

Although sociologist Alex Inkeles and social psychologist Raymond Bauer, who led the Harvard research team, argue that the "emphasis on religion…suffered a sharp decline in importance during the main post-revolutionary period," evidence points towards a much more intricate interplay between the individual, social expectation and faith tradition.[81] I argue that urban émigrés perceived their inner self as sacred, and for that reason, they encountered strong opposition against a state "invasion" of their soul, or conscience. As exemplified by various participants in the Harvard study, faith, which was once publicly expressed in a communal sense, slowly became a private, personal, and introspective topic. Moreover, generational variances in language and ideological subtleties point to the shifting fluidity of the term "religious."

While scholars have focused their research on women's religiosity prior to the Russian revolution, research on women's thoughts regarding spirituality and the development of the inner self during the Soviet period is almost non-existent.[82] Historically, the topic of religion during the Soviet period has been explored through the eyes of peasants, who, according to Glenys Young did not simply "act as passive recipients of state actions."[83] Similarly, William Husband offers various examples of non-militant resistance against anti-religious policies between 1917 and 1932.[84] Although class is a definite factor when discussing religion in both the pre-revolutionary and Soviet society, it is important to discuss the ways in which philosophies and moralities transcended the socio-political transition. Thus far, scholars have failed to analyze women's definitions of faith during the Soviet Period, as well as the importance of the secularized terminology used to express their opinions regarding church & state.

Paul W. Werth's "Arbiters of the Free Conscience: State, Religion, and the Problem of Confessional Transfer after 1905," introduces the reader to legislation that reveals the complex interplay between church, state, and the population prior to the revolution. Werth argues that the ingenuously crafted policy of "freedom of conscience" as opposed to "religious toleration" strengthened the role of the Orthodox Church in

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81 Inkeles and Bauer, 222.

82 Christine Worobec, *Women, Witches, and Demons In Imperial Russia* (Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2003). Brenda Meehan, *Holy Women of Russia* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997).

83 Glenys Young, *Power and The Sacred in Revolutionary Russia: Religious Activists in The Village* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1997), 4.

84 William Husband, *Godless Communists: Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932* (Dekalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000), xiii.

people's lives. This policy dictated the rights of non-Orthodox groups and regulated "confessional transfer," or as Werth explains the conversion from one faith to another. The state played a crucial role in monitoring religious affairs and, by enacting this legislation, interfered with the citizenry's personal spiritual choices.[85]

While Werth's work includes the usage of the term "freedom of conscience," he makes no attempt to analyze the meaning of the phrase. He also does not offer the original Russian phrase, which would have been helpful, in order to analyze its proper translation and meaning. The word "conscience" itself may or may not refer to the inner self; however, it is significant that this wording was chosen over "religious tolerance."

While primary sources such as the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System offer revealing insight, scholars have failed to recognize the opinions, thoughts, and observations of women and spirituality during the Soviet period. Inkeles and Bauer, who discuss the limitations and possible "response bias" in their book, allude to the possibility of "religious teaching and morality expressed in secularized terminology."[86] They establish connections between cultural values, traditions, and religious upbringing and claim that younger generations are "irreligious" and therefore devoid of any "sacred" allusions. Inkeles and Bauer point to a fifty-nine year old female biologist who told interviewers in 1950 that she and her husband were "religious in their souls" despite publicly professing atheism.[87] She also admitted not having a problem with the communist education her children received. Her answer, at first glance, may seem like a contradiction, and in fact Inkeles and Bauer use this as an example of the irreligiosity of Soviet youth. This woman further explained that as adults, she believed her "children would make up their own minds" regarding religion.[88] Her answer is a testament to the notion of personal growth and the development of the "sacred" inner self. A concept so introspective, it transcends the mere discussion of religiosity or atheism, but instead is truly a matter of "personal conscience."

To fully comprehend the thoughts of female émigrés profiled in this study, it is important to remember that the purpose of this analysis is not to question the faith of women, but rather examine how the concept and meaning of religiosity changed amidst a new social context. Defining the

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85 Werth, 179-184.

86 Alex Inkeles and Raymond A. Bauer, *The Soviet Citizen: Life in A Totalitarian Society* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1959), 222.

87 Ibid., 216.

88 Ibid., 217.

term "religious" is admittedly a challenge because the meaning as a whole largely depends on personal interpretation. Furthermore, Alexander Agadjanian argues, although "emotionalism always operates with the collective memories of the past," it does not necessarily mean that a person "is trying to revive the past."[89] Female émigrés born between 1895 and 1910 not only refer to religion as a matter of conscience, but also equate the concept of morality to Christian teaching.

In February 1951, a fifty-seven year old former teacher agreed to divulge her most personal thoughts to a complete stranger in a Munich Hotel Lounge. Citing the necessity for each individual to develop his or her own moral compass, she insisted that, "every man must have the right to religious belief. This is a matter of conscience."[90] When asked to further clarify her statement, she pensively replied, "Suppose you do not want to be Christian . . . you must know what it is to be moral even if you do not want to attend church."[91] According to this interviewee, suppressing or restricting religious instruction could have an adverse affect on the ethical development of an individual. In this context, the respondent implies that an individual should be exposed to religion not for the purpose of tradition and belief, but rather for the sake of ethics.

In a set of interviews conducted at the Hotel Midway in New York City, a forty-five year old typist reluctantly agreed to participate in the Harvard study. Interviewers surreptitiously noted her need for coaxing since she had immigrated to the United States only twenty-one months earlier.[92] The self-proclaimed lifelong typist, who grew up in an extremely devout family, noted that, "religion is the only source of moral strength for a human being. Religion and faith lead a person to purity, to a moral soul."[93] The respondent proudly spoke of her sister, who successfully raised "good children." They prayed every night and integrated themselves into mainstream Soviet society.[94] Likewise, a forty-six year old bookkeeper and statistician confidently stated, "[c]hildren cannot be brought up without religion," because "religion teaches honor."[95] Both

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89 Alexander Agadjanian, "Revising Pandora's Gifts: Religious Identity in the Post Soviet Societal Fabric," *Europe-Asia Studies* 53 (May 2001): 474-475.

90 Ibid., 82.

91 Ibid.

92 Harvard Project On the Soviet Social System, Schedule A, Vol. 33, Case No.134 (interviewer T.H.), 1: http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:962323 (accessed April 10, 2009).

93 Ibid., 71.

94 Ibid., 35.

95 Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System, Schedule A, Vol. 10, Case No.134 (interviewer J.R.), 39-43: http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:952555 (accessed April 10,

argued that neither the state nor church has the right to interfere with a person's moral center, the soul.

The aforementioned cases stressed personal development, morality, and to a certain extent, citizenship. Interestingly, statements expressed by men of the same age group coincided with women's sentiments. A fifty-three year old economist eloquently affirmed that "[t]he Russian does not distinguish God from man; God is inside man. Inner morality is God."[96] This bold assertion was followed by his claim that if a person has a "good soul," then the individual "can accomplish anything."[97] This internalization of religious ideals emphasizes the concept of contemplative spirituality and individualism and as a result re-directs the focus away from communal worship. This makes sense considering the closing of churches in the early days of the Soviet regime.[98] When the most sacred representation of religion (the church) was taken away, urban individuals who considered themselves "religious" found themselves in a deep identity crisis.

This becomes an even more complicated issue when one considers that secularization itself was a source of controversy within atheist circles. In an effort to promote atheism, the "League of the Godless" was established. Yet according to historian Daniel Peris, disagreements within the "League of the Godless" led to members accusing one another of distancing themselves from Leninist ideology in regards to religion. Peris points out that despite the crusade against the Orthodox Church, the overall public reception and perception of the anti-religious policies is difficult to measure. While interventionists stressed the connection between class and religion (thereby making the eradication of religion a necessity), culturalists believed that a new communist "morality" would be a natural progression in the social evolution and socio-political transformation of Soviet Russia.[99] By the time Stalin came to power, the interventionist strategy was favored due in part to the need for rapid results. It is interesting to note the difficulties surrounding the intent to disengage "morality" from religion, but not necessarily from the

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96 Harvard Project On the Soviet Social System, Schedule A, Vol. 16, Case No. 307 (interviewer S.H.), 31: http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:954869 (accessed April 10, 2009).

97 Ibid., 31.

98 Harvard Project On the Soviet Social System, Schedule A, Vol. 7, Case No. 95 (interviewer M.L.), 14: http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:942108 (accessed April 10, 2009).

99 Daniel Peris, "The 1929 Congress of the Godless," *Soviet Studies* 43 (1991): 711-732.

individual. Ironically, both members of the League of the Godless and the émigrés profiled questioned the purpose and necessity of both individual and collective principles. Culturalists insisted that a new "communist morality" would emerge, confident that regardless of the context, ethics is still an aspect of the social normative process, even when stripped of its religious connotation.

In response to the closing of churches, many interviewees who participated in the Harvard study simply placed more significance in the act of prayer, while maintaining icons on their ceremonial corner.[100] Yet the subtleties of spirituality in metamorphosis may have been lost to both members of the Harvard research team and American spectators. As symbols and traditions were re-invented, the only constant that remains true was the self. Individualism and the development of the inner self became issues of primary concern for those born after 1910.

The urban interpretation of religiosity seeped into the consciousness of women, particularly those born between 1910 and 1930. While many émigrés told interviewers that their parents had been "very religious," this generation of young women re-defined the term in order to fit the confines of their busy lives. The result was the interchangeable definition between "religious" and "spiritual." Although younger women saw themselves as "religious." most in this age group saw no need for ritual, ceremony, or traditional Orthodox doctrine.

For four consecutive days in January 1951, a young woman identified only as case number 386 dazzled a Harvard interviewer. The young woman revealed that she had been brought up in "the religious spirit," but also mentioned that in school, she had been taught that religion was "something cloudy and imaginative…something that handicaps people's ability to work."[101] When questioned regarding her personal beliefs, she admitted to praying every day and claimed that her views on religion had not changed despite the overall social climate. However, she also casually stated, "[t]here should be only one religion and one prayer to God."[102] The concept of a universal and spiritual approach to faith was echoed amongst other women of this age group.

A thirty-nine year old medical assistant, described as reserved, cooperative and punctual, spoke openly the anti-religious propaganda,

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[100] Harvard Project On the Soviet Social System, Schedule A, Vol. 7, Case No. 95 (interviewer M.L.), 13-14: http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:942108 (accessed April 10, 2009).

[101] Ibid., 32, 52.

[102] Ibid., 52.

including peer pressure, to join atheist groups while she was in school.[103] She considered her parents "moderately religious" and herself "a believer." She de-emphasized the significance of sacred structures by stating, "I respect all religions. But whether I go to church or a synagogue, I can still pray to God."[104] Once again, prayer as well as the introspective personal relationship with god gains prominence. The subject also mentioned her desire to teach her children religion so that they may become "decent" individuals.[105] Although in both cases the young women display confidence in their spirituality, and belief, it is safe to assume that their great grandmothers would have been horrified at what appears to be a loss of tradition. Upon closer inspection, the statements made by these young women are merely a representation of a more modern depiction of faith. These urbanites were not rejecting religion like the *nigilitski* of past; instead, their ideology could be understood as the evolution of religious rhetoric; an inclusive discourse that aims to unify people under one belief system.[106]

As Marc D. Steinberg has noted, elements of Russian culture, such as the obsession with "self improvement" and "the search for universal truth" play an integral role in the development of individuals.[107] Both the medical assistant and a thirty-year-old aspiring teacher explained that their faith was anchored by their belief in God, and not the ceremony or rites of religion.[108] Echoing an older generation, the aspiring teacher insisted that religion is "a man's personal affair…an inner thing for each man to decide for himself."[109] Adhering to this motto, a thirty-one-year old student further clarified that she would teach her children "in a religious spirit only slightly," because she would want her children to grow up and be able to make educated decisions for themselves.[110]

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[103] Harvard Project On the Soviet Social System, Schedule A, Volume 36, Case No. 487 (interviewer A.V.), 1: http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:981995 (accessed April 10, 2009).

[104] Ibid., 28.

[105] Ibid., 29.

[106] Barbara Alpern Engel, *Mothers and Daughters: Women of the Intelligentsia in 19th Century Russia* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2000).

[107] Steinberg, 306.

[108] Harvard Project On the Soviet Social System, Schedule A, Volume 36, Case No. 487 (interviewer A.V.), 9 http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:981995 (accessed April 10, 2009).

[109] Harvard Project On the Soviet Social System, Schedule A. Vol. 1, Case No. 9 (interviewer R.F.), 99: http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:928123 (accessed April 10, 2009).

[110] Harvard Project On the Soviet Social System, Schedule A, Vol. 25, Case No. 507 (interviewer A.P.), 28-29: http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:958351 (accessed April 10,

Another young woman in her twenties recalled attending a church liturgy with her parents when she was seven years old.[111] Although her parents never spoke openly about or against religion, they participated in holidays, and kept icons in a drawer "laid away as precious items."[112] The nurse, who did not consider herself "religious," did consider herself a "believer." The philosophical trajectory points to a consequential differentiation between the meaning of the terms "religious" and "believer." Over time, it became more apparent that the church, state, or family could not aid a person in his or her quest for existential truth.

Men in this age group shared similar ideas regarding religion, individualism, and child rearing. A twenty-seven year old elementary school teacher explained that although he grew up in a religious family, he had expressed indifference towards the topic.[113] That is until his science classes failed to explain "the existence of the simplest things in life."[114] His anecdote serves as evidence of religion as "personal conscience." This religious consciousness came about as a result of his search for universal truths. When asked which values he would like to instill in his own children, he stated, "…they should be religious, have strength of character…and I would teach them to love work."[115] Likewise, a doctor in his early thirties confessed, "I had an internal conflict. I was always thinking about religion trying to decide who was right, the school or my parents. I finally decided my parents were right."[116] His thoughts regarding child rearing mirrored those of the elementary school teacher, and can be summed up in a simple list: "religion, labor, honesty, and good citizenship."[117] Men's responses are tinted with the concept of *zakal*, or "strength of will."[118] The notion, synonymous with masculinity during the

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111 Harvard Project On the Soviet Social System, Schedule A, Vol. 4, Case No. 41 (interviewer K.G.), 30-32 : http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:939760 (accessed April 10, 2009).

112 Ibid., 32.

113 Harvard Project On the Soviet Social System, Schedule A, Vol. 11,Case No. 142 (interviewer M.L.), 23: http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:948913 (accessed April 10, 2009).

114 Ibid., 23.

115 Ibid., 23.

116 Harvard Project On the Soviet Social System, Schedule A, Vol. 16, Case No. 323 (interviewer R.F.), 18-19: http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:954876 (accessed April 10, 2009).

117 Ibid., 19.

118 Catriona Kelly, "The Education of the Will: Advice, Literature, Zakal, and Manliness in Early 20th Century Russia," in *Russian Masculinities in History and Culture,* ed. Barbara Evans Clements, (Houndmills, UK: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2002).

1920s and 1930s, stressed the importance of a disciplined mind and body. Often regarded as a cultured man's "moral fiber," masculinity revolved around the ability to exhibit self-discipline and reject idleness.[119] Both the teacher and the doctor illustrate their mental virtues by offering an obvious example of their reasoning skills. They also emphasize their desire for cultivating a strong work ethic in their future children. Most importantly, by remaining firm in their convictions, these young men exemplify moral and mental strength. Interestingly, none of the women profiled in this age group mentioned the importance of work when discussing their hopes for their children. This makes sense, since the *zakal* was associated with masculinity and not femininity.

At the end of their study, Inkeles and Bauer commented on the "irreligiousness" of the younger Soviet generations. Although an obvious change in ideology can be traced over time, this is an oversimplification of complex socio-cultural issues. The urban population's religious interpretations varied immensely when compared to those of the peasantry. One merely has to consider the passionate words of a sixty-two year old peasant housewife who told researchers, "I may give up my life, but never my religion."[120] Urban females in general did not show signs of distress, nor did they choose emotionally driven vocabulary. The urban interpretation of "religiousness," therefore, not only was unique to begin with, but also stressed individualism and private spiritual expression. The rural housewife, unlike her urban counterparts, expressed sorrow for the closing of churches, and her inability to cross herself in public.[121] Her passionate and sorrowful verbal expressions, as well as her acceptance of destiny, are reminiscent of Maxim Gorky's didactic novel *Mother*. The Harvard interviewer sympathized with her suffering soul and extreme piousness, and noted, "[t]he one thing which impressed me was the respondent's reconciliation with her fate, brought about by a sincere religious devotion."[122] The urban women profiled regardless of age referred to religion as a "personal affair," a topic so private, it required introspective contemplation. Reminiscent of the ascetic devotion expressed by pre-revolutionary laywomen, these urbanites felt completely comfortable with their solitude, silence, and contemplation.[123] Yet unlike their ancestral sisters, they did not seek solace or comfort in a communal

[119] Kelly, 132-133.

[120] Harvard Project On the Soviet Social System, Schedule A, Vol. 8, Case No. 109 (interviewer M.L.), 1-2: http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:FHCL:946653 (accessed April 10, 2009).

[121] Ibid., 38-39.

[122] Ibid., 2.

setting. In its place, they found strength and independence in the impenetrable realm of the introverted self. Regardless of social expectation or familial opinion, these women understood the power of silent reflection.

[123] Brenda Meehan Waters, *Holy Women of Russia* (New York: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1997), 1-12.