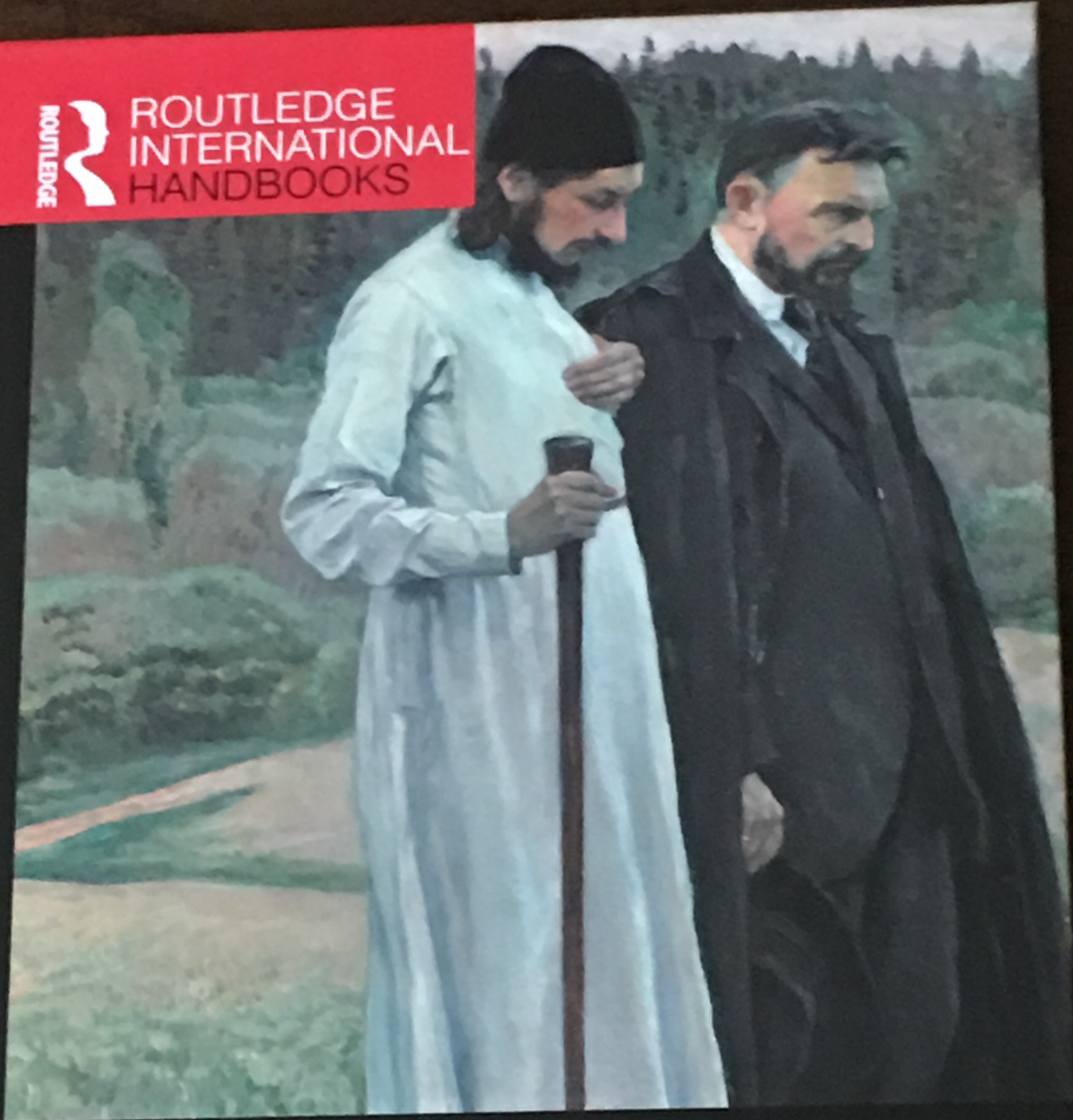


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Edited by Justin Beaumont

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Postatheism and the phenomenon of minimal religion in Russia¹

Mikhail Epstein

The end of atheism and the varieties of post-atheistic experience

The seven decades of Soviet atheism (1917–1987), whether one calls it ‘mass atheism’, ‘scientific atheism’, or ‘state atheism’, was unquestionably a new phenomenon in world history. Mass heterodox movements and heresies were known before, but these developments did not change the core of a religious perception of the world; they did not suspend the belief in God, the Holy Scriptures, or the possibility of the soul’s salvation. The German Anabaptists are a case in point (Bowman 1995; Durnbaugh 2003; Meier 2008). In the past there have been periods of libertine thought, but these touched only the intellectual tip of the social iceberg without altering the religious mood of the masses. The French Enlightenment is a relevant example here (Chartier 1991; Gomez 2003; Bronner 2004).

Only in the Soviet Union did militant atheism penetrate into the masses and create three generations of non-believers. Even if they themselves did not destroy churches and burn icons, neither did they pray or invoke the name of God; indeed, they forgot about His very existence. Even if the majority were not antagonistic to religion, they became profoundly indifferent to it.

Could religion, which had been subjected to such a long period of persecutions and negations, be simply reborn in its earlier traditional forms? Or, on the contrary, could it be inferred that, since atheism was a historically new phenomenon, postatheist spirituality, which superseded it, would have to be interpreted as even more of a novelty?

What is taking place in postatheist Russian society can be divided into three major tendencies. One of these tendencies constitutes a ‘religious revival’ proper. It is a return of Russian society to its *preatheist traditional beliefs*. The traditional religions—Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Islam, Buddhism, Judaism—are regaining their status and influence in the spiritual, cultural, and even political life of Russia. Not surprisingly, these newly converted believers bring an emotional ardour and dogmatic ignorance to the life of their new church. These believers are also bearers of a protective, romantic nationalism and messianism. The Orthodox hierarchy accumulates huge property, including land and buildings, and in exchange obediently cooperates with the State bureaucracy, wilfully fulfilling its ideological assignments, and supports patriotism as an allegedly authentic expression of the Christian

faith. In the end, however, scant little goes beyond the confines of tradition: it merely fine-tunes the tradition to meet current needs.

Another tendency seeks to restore not the prerevolutionary but the archaic, pre-Christian layers of religious traditions and can be characterized as *neopaganism* (Pilkington and Popov 2009). According to its adherents, Russia's salvation is not to be sought in a religion of the spirit, but in the ancient cult of nature. What is required is an immediate restoration of the pre-Christian Russian and Arian pantheon. More often than not, neopaganism is mixed with elegiac ecological sentiments, in which the pagan cult of nature is presented as the defender of the environment against the encroachments of civilization. It is even more common to see Orthodox Christianity interpreted in the pagan spirit, as a special branch of Christianity, intimately connected to Russia's state and army and its God-bearing people. The advantage of Orthodoxy vis-à-vis other Christian confessions lies in its doubling as both a religion of the Heavenly Father and an ancient cult of Mother Earth. Orthodoxy in this context appears as a militant form of patriotism, destined, from time immemorial, to defend Holy Russia from the 'heresies' of Judaism, Catholicism, Freemasonry, and other 'foreign contaminations'. The new paganism also features the cultivation of magic, extra-sensory perception, para-psychology, spiritism, and other similar beliefs, which hark back to the earliest animistic and fetishistic practices.

Minimal religion

Together with the return to traditional religion and the parallel immersion in pagan and Orthodox archaism, a third tendency—*minimal religion*—can be observed in contemporary Russian religious life (Epstein 1999a, 1999b; cf. Taylor 2007). To date, it has attracted the least attention because it tends to escape all forms of objectification. Its 'minimality' almost precludes the formation of dogma or ritual and can be identified only as an internal impulse, a state of spirit, or a disposition of mind. This is what I call 'poor' or 'minimal' religion. For a Western observer, a more 'recognizable' name for it would be religious modernism, universalism, or ecumenicism, even if these terms do not exactly correspond to the Russian phenomenon. The spiritual vacuum, created by Soviet atheism, gave rise in the 1970s and 1980s to a new type of religiosity.

Imagine a young man from a typical Soviet family which, for a few generations, was resolutely cut off from all religious traditions. Suddenly hearing a spiritual call in his soul, he cannot decide where to go in search of truth and salvation. He tries the Orthodox Church, the Catholic Church, the Jewish Synagogue, Baptist, and also Lutheran services. He finds historically shaped traditions of faith everywhere. Yet he is eager to experience spirit as whole and indivisible. Looking for faith he finds only different religions. It is in this disparity between faith and denominations that 'minimal' religion emerges. It is a religion without an order of service, holy books, or specific rituals. It is notable that many more people in post-Soviet Russia were abandoning atheism than joining specific denominations. These people can be characterized as 'poor believers' who do not subscribe to any specific set of conventional religious practices. They belong to 'religion' as such, without further definitions or qualifications. Their relationship to God is holistic, mirroring the wholeness and indivisibility of God Himself.

In an essay written even before perestroika, I called this postatheist spirituality 'poor', or 'minimal' religion (Epstein 1982; 1999a, 1999b). It took the form of 'faith pure and simple', without clarifications or addenda, without any clear denominational characteristics. It manifested itself as an indivisible sense of God, outside historical, national, and confessional

traditions. The atheistic negation of all religions gave rise to a ‘minimal’ religiosity negating all positive distinctions among historical religions. Paradoxically, this ‘faith as such’, ‘faith in general’, was prepared by the atheist denial of all faiths.

A typical expression of such ‘minimal religiosity’ can be found in the simple ‘creed’ of a well-known contemporary Russian artist, Garif Basyrov (1944–2004). Asked if he could be considered a faithful Muslim, Basyrov replied:

That’s ridiculous. As any normal person I feel I am approaching something... To use high-flown words, you can say I am on my way. But I am neither an expert in Islam, Buddhism, nor Christianity. All these rituals are not for me. One thing I do know for sure: God exists.

(Basyrov 1991: 31)

For a minimal believer, God exists above and beyond all religions, thus nullifying their historical divisions. What is at issue here is the possibility of establishing a unitary religious consciousness through the experience of the negative void of the atheist world. This postatheist spirituality is as historically unprecedented as the phenomenon of mass atheism that preceded and conditioned it.

Thus, the religious revival in postcommunist Russia is not only a renaissance of traditional beliefs, which were widespread before the atheistic revolution, but is also the *naissance* of a qualitatively new, postatheist kind of spirituality. In the soul of a ‘poor believer’ there are no dogmatic or ritual preferences created by either a continuous historical tradition or long-standing family religious commitments. Just as the divisions among farmers’ holdings were destroyed during collectivization, turning fertile land into wasteland, so the confessional divisions were also erased. This prepared the post-Soviet wasteland not only for a revival of old traditions, but also for a renewal of the religious consciousness as such, capable of transcending historically established boundaries.

In the prophet Isaiah we read:

³ The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

⁴ Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain:

⁵ And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the Lord hath spoken it.

(Isaiah, 40: 3–5, King James version)

A few questions arise: was not this prophecy implemented, with uncanny precision, by the ideology of Soviet atheism? Did not atheism actually prepare a road for ‘the glory of the Lord’ by persecuting all beliefs, levelling all mountains and valleys, smoothing out different beliefs so that a trans-confessional spirituality could arise? (see Berdyaev 2009).

In the 1980s, there was no way to substantiate those observations with sociological data. Later, with the development of democratic procedures in Russia, there appeared instruments to test statistically the validity of these theoretical assumptions. A poll conducted in December 1995, by the Center for Sociological Research of Moscow State University, under the direction of S. V. Tumanov, shows (from a sampling of 3,710 respondents) that 37.7% of the Russian population characterized itself as believers who do not observe religious rituals; only 12.8% of the respondents characterized themselves as observant believers.

With regard to confessional self-determination, 12.8% of the religious population identified themselves as Christians in general (non-denominational), as compared to 71.0% Orthodox, 0.2% Catholics, and 0.7% Protestants. In addition, 2.7% of the believers did not perceive any essential difference among denominations, and 2.5% had their own perception of God. Based on these statistics we can conclude that approximately 18% of the Russian religious population is non-denominational (Dobrynina et al. 2000).

Lyudmila Vorontsova and Sergei Filatov (1994: 401–2 quoted in Epstein et al. 1999a: 469) reveal even more striking statistical data concerning what they call ‘just Christians’ in contemporary Russia.

The growth of religiosity and the increase in those who believe in God has not been accompanied by a growth in the popularity of Orthodoxy. Indeed, the years 1990–1992 saw a sharp fall in its popularity. /.../ Orthodoxy’s main competitor is not other religions, but the swiftly growing category of people with no denominational adherence: ‘just Christians.’ They grew two and a half times over the three years 1989–1992 and made up 52 percent of the population, while the number of Orthodox (of all jurisdictions) decreased. /.../ ‘Just Christians’ are the neophytes who believe in God and have come to faith but are not prepared to enter the church unconditionally and to accept church disciplines... The fact that the number of ‘just Christians’ is growing at the expense of Orthodoxy testifies to the rebirth of Christianity not in the form of Orthodoxy as it was 70 years ago, but on a more modern, universal level.

The phenomenon of ‘minimal religiosity’ is illuminated by numerous works of Russian literature of the 1970s and 1980s. The literary protagonists of Andrei Bitov, Yuz Aleshkovsky, Yuri Trifonov, Vasily Aksyonov, Bella Akhmadulina, and Venedikt Erofeev all crave for a higher spirituality. To satisfy this craving, the heroes of this late Soviet literature cannot turn to traditional forms of religiosity, because, for several decades, such forms had no common currency in Russian life. The new religiosity, which these fictional characters come to embody, is alienated from all objectified historical traditions.

The autobiographical protagonist of Venedikt Erofeev’s (1969, 1995) novella *Moscow to the End of the Line* (‘Moskva-Petushki’) is a typical ‘poor believer’. He occasionally turns to God with the plea: ‘Oh, Lord, you see what I possess. But do I need all *this*? Is *this* what my soul pines for?’ (*Op cit.*: 25). Venia’s ‘Lord’ exists outside all traditions and confessions. He has no temple in this world other than the littered train from which the hero’s soul addresses itself to Him. The hero also has no church, no preconceived notion of religion, and no other method of proof of God’s existence than the ‘hiccups’ that overpower and release him with equal suddenness.

The Law is higher than all of us. Hiccups are higher than the Law... We are trembling creatures while hiccupping is almighty. It is God’s Right Hand, which is raised over us all... *He* cannot be conceived by the mind, therefore *He* exists. So be perfect as your Heavenly Father is perfect.

(*op cit.* p. 55)

The ‘sixth’ proof of God’s existence—proof by hiccups—may appear blasphemous or at the very least parodic in relation to canonical theological discourse. Remember that in *Summa Theologiae*, Thomas Aquinas elaborated five logical proofs of God’s existence (Aquinas 1989). The main function of Venia’s hero, however, is not comedy or parody. It acts, instead, as a

revelation of the apophatic spirit of ‘poor’ religiosity, which is on a par with the sacrilegious and eccentric behaviour of the Russian fools-in-Christ, or ‘holy fools’. The same logic of the negative knowledge of God applies here. Man knows God through things that man cannot control by his will or reason. Hiccups are an elementary example of such a thing: they are a sequence of unwilling bodily movements at unregulated temporal intervals. Using this negative logic, Erofeev can make the assertion, which appears to have come straight out of a treatise on apophatic theology: ‘*He* [God] cannot be conceived by the mind, therefore *He* exists’. (Erofeev 1969; 1995: 55).

The transitional stage between (Marxist) atheism and (Christian) faith is admirably illustrated in Yuz Aleshkovsky’s (1993) narrative *The Ring in the Case* (‘Persten v futliare’) with the characteristic subtitle ‘A Christmas Novel’. This didactic and grotesque narrative portrays the transformation into a ‘poor believer’ of one Helio Revolverovich Serious, a die-hard atheist and ‘third-generation fighter against bourgeois prejudices’, whose efforts to stamp out the belief in God have earned him a position in the upper ranks of the party hierarchy. Shaken by the disintegration of his relationship with his beloved woman, and reduced to breaking point by the misery of his physical and spiritual existence, Helio suddenly experiences the need for prayer, not knowing to whom to address himself or about what to pray:

Perhaps I should have another try at praying to... but what can one pray about? That’s the question... About love? ... It’s too late... About salvation?

(Op cit.: 44)

The numerous marks of omission are significant. They are a graphic embodiment of his impoverished religious feeling or, to be more specific, the apophatic nature of this religiosity, which cannot use images or words to describe the One, Who...

The hero then resorts to poetry and addresses Him with a line from Pasternak: ‘O Lord, how perfect are Thy works!’² However, he never specifies—neither for himself nor for the reader—whom he actually means when he says ‘Oh, Lord!’. The phrase is pronounced almost like an interjection, a sigh—‘Oh, Lord!’. But in this case the universal character of the interjection does not signify indifference or automatism. On the contrary, it bears the stamp of a meaning attained through suffering and deeply felt experience. What would seem more natural for this seasoned atheist, erudite in the dialectic of relativism (‘The Moslems picture him as Allah, while for the Christians he is simultaneously Father, Son and Holy Ghost, which shows that the assumptions of the different religions contradict one another, revealing their complete implausibility...’), than to ask himself: whom am I addressing, *which* God?

And that is precisely the point: twentieth-century atheism used the diversity and historicity of the world’s religions and spiritual traditions as its most powerful argument against faith; that is, since there are so many religions, each with its own god, then there is no god. It was atheism that asked all those official, ‘passport-like’ questions, trying to specify to which tradition or confession ‘god’ might appertain: ‘date of birth’, ‘nationality’, ‘place of residence’, and so on. It was a natural reaction on the part of postatheist religiosity to erase this entire panoply of historical and national ‘essences’ and to make a fresh start by setting up a pure, universal, ‘poor’, and singular name, analogous to the interjection ‘Oh, God!’ or ‘Oh, Lord!’, devoid of specificity and without any determinants whatsoever. Atheism had used the diversity of religions to argue for the relativity of religion. Consequently, the demise of atheism signalled the return to the simplest, virtually empty, and infinite form of monotheism and monodeism.³ If God is one, then faith must be one.

In most places around the world, people are raised within a specific religious tradition and are brought to a church, a mosque, or a synagogue from childhood. In postatheist Russia, however, many people first experience the spirit in their hearts and then come to houses of worship. There are two different ways of conversion. One is a conversion to God through the church. This is the normal way of ‘conversion’ in the world with established religious traditions. The other is a conversion to the church through God. This was the way of conversion in the times of Moses, Christ, and Luther. It is also the way of conversion in late atheist and postatheist Russia.

One might speculate that this thrust towards religious reformation will dominate the spirit of twenty-first-century Russia. The restoration of preatheist traditions is the focus of the current religious revival, but the atheistic past, the experience of the wilderness, cannot pass without a trace, and this trace of ‘the void’ will manifest itself in a striving for a fullness of spirit, transcending the boundaries of historical denominations. Those people who have found God in the wilderness feel that the walls of the existing temples are too narrow for them and should be expanded. Thus, we have seen that the three tendencies can be discerned in the misty dawn of Earth’s first postatheist society. One is traditionalism, which is housed in existing churches and subscribes to the existing religious subdivisions. A second is neopaganism, which is focused on archaic objects of worship such as the soil, blood, and national identity. The third is ‘poor’ or ‘minimal’ religion, which is free from historical divisions and seeks the unification of all religions in the gap between existing churches and the fullness of a future epiphany.

It is significant that Russian religious thought of the early twentieth century, which now serves as a general reference point on all questions of Russian spirituality, furnishes models for all three tendencies. Traditionalism is connected with the figure of the priest Pavel Florensky. Its firm basis is in the philosophically interpreted church canon and the heritage of the church fathers. The second, archaist tendency is connected with the name of Vasily Rozanov. It is close to paganism and the primal cults of the Sun and the Earth, consecrating the universe of sex drives and fecundity. The third, modernist tendency, inspired by Nikolai Berdiaev, issues from the apophatic conception of pure freedom, which posits itself as anterior to God and the act of creation. It presupposes an ultimate unification of all religions in anticipation of the eschatological end of history.

Theses on ‘poor faith’⁴

In the following text I resort to the form of theses for the very reason that they provide the most succinct means of setting out ideas which belong to a worldview still in the process of formation. I will divide 32 theses into several thematic sections to prompt further discussion.

Statistics

- 1 According to the results of the largest sociological survey of opinions involving 56,900 respondents and carried out by the *Sreda* research centre in Russia in December 2012, one in four people fall into the category of ‘poor religion’—that is to say, a simple belief in God without any affiliation to a belief system or denomination. This proportion (25%) comes second only to Orthodox Christian believers (41%) and exceeds Muslims (6.5%).⁵
- 2 The growth of supra-confessional awareness is a worldwide tendency. According to data from the Pew Research Center, the ‘extra-confessional’ (religiously non-aligned)

population of the world makes up 1.1 billion people (or 16% of the total world population). In China that is 52% of its population, or 700 million, and in the USA 20%, or 46 million. These figures include atheists and agnostics. However, the proportion of believers among these 'religious nones' is considerable: 7% in China, 30% in France, and 68% in the USA affirm that they do believe in God. And 10% of those religiously unaffiliated even pray every day.⁶

Foundations of poor faith

- 3 In the religious context the word 'poor' has a strong positive connotation, as in 'Blessed are the poor in spirit'. The adherents of poor faith do not possess any symbolic capital in the form of generally recognized and specific denominational traditions, church buildings, and socially recognized prestige or image. Poverty is a Christian virtue, which one could use as a measure for judging Christianity itself and its dogmatic wealth.
- 4 When applied to the realm of faith, the word 'poor' has connotations for synonyms like *free, direct, living, open, creative*.
- 5 Poor faith corresponds to apophatic theology which denies the possibility of knowing God or conceiving of Him in positive forms, symbols, or definitions. This faith lives beyond the boundary of all faith systems.
- 6 In Russia, poor faith was the consequence of seven decades of atheism. By rejecting all religious confessions at a single stroke, militant atheism created a favourable setting for the emergence of 'religion in general'. It was precisely the faithlessness of the Soviet years which formed the kind of person who could only be defined as a 'believer'.
- 7 An important feature of faith is the dialectical relationship between induction into the life of the church and disengagement from the church, between entry into the historical and denominational body of religion and distancing from it.
- 8 The 'trans-religious' is not only a 'going out' beyond the boundaries of historically formed religions, but also beyond *religion as such*. The trans-religious is Christ prior to Christianity, that is, the stage of faith before religion, or Christ after Christianity, Christ in apocalyptic times, the stage of faith after religion. Thus, faith constantly brings forth a crisis in religion and then supersedes it, in the form of an instant impoverishment, an 'emptying out' of the dogmatic and ritualistic wealth accrued in the long course of history.
- 9 If we consider just Russian instances of the phenomenon, then Lev Tolstoy, Daniil Andreyev, and Grigory Pomerants all represent various versions and stages of this movement towards the trans-religious. Tolstoy represents the discovery of trans-religious space in its pure form, as critique of the church. Andreyev sees the trans-religious as a means of gathering together all the historical forms of religion in a supra-historical unity, 'the Rose of the World'. For Pomerants, the trans-religious amounts to the individual's existential experience of contact with various religions.
- 10 There is another, fourth, path, which is that of poor faith. It is a minimalist, not maximalist, extension of religious openness. Poor faith is not only a postatheistic but also trans-religious consciousness.
- 11 Poor faith does not criticize specific beliefs and belief systems, but rather, from the position of a complete toleration of faiths, it signifies openness towards their revelations, their spiritual beauty, their historical meaning and searching, not indifference towards these aspects.
- 12 In the contemporary world, two tendencies can be observed: (a) strengthening of militant forms of confessionalism, of clerical and fundamentalist movements; and (b) growth

in poor faith and other forms of trans-religious and supra-confessional awareness, forms that are able to unite people above the level of all ethnic and religious barriers. A distinguishing feature of this postsecular age is the polarization of these two tendencies. Religion is acquiring a new significance, both as an instrument for political struggle and also as the path of a new spiritual unification of the world.

- 13 The struggle between faith and religion constitutes the spiritual tension and the inner conflict of our time experienced by many believers. Disillusionment with the symbiosis of church and corrupt power structures ('religarchy') in Russia may push society yet further and closer towards poor faith.
- 14 A putative postsecular epoch is not confronted with the question 'To believe or not to believe?' Rather, the question is framed this way: 'Is your faith church-based or not-church-based?', or 'Is your faith based on rites or not based on rites?' There is a time for gathering stones and a time for taking stones apart, including the stones of the temple within your own soul. The history of humankind, as well as the history of each soul, is not only a struggle of faith with faithlessness, but also a struggle of faith with religion.

The dynamics of poor faith

- 15 Henri Bergson distinguishes between static religions and dynamic religions, identifying those which reproduce stable stereotypes for behaviour and support stability in society and those which are based on man's experience of direct communication with God (Bergson 1932; 1977).
- 16 Poor faith is not a constant and self-identical spiritual condition. It has many levels and many stages. It moves from a state of naivety to a state of reflection, from a preconfessional to a supra-confessional stage. Preconfessional faith lacks any knowledge and experience of specific religious confessions or denominations, whereas supra-confessional faith attempts to reach beyond their boundaries.
- 17 Five stages of poor faith can be identified. The initial stage is a non-reflective 'I believe in Something'/'I believe in Someone', which constitutes the first step in distinguishing oneself from non-believers.
- 18 The second stage comes in the form of an attraction to mystical yearnings, esotericism as popularly understood: spiritualism, theosophy, yoga, and folk superstitions.
- 19 The third stage consists of a parallel or subsequent affiliation to one or several confessions, an experience of interaction between them, participation in their mysteries, and a full or partial induction into church life.
- 20 The fourth stage is that of disillusionment in organized and ritual forms of religion and their dogmatic nature, commercialization, politicization, and their confluence with state power. This is the stage of *dis*-engagement from church, and of the individual person's aspiration to find support in a direct standing before God.
- 21 The fifth stage is that of a conscious faith outside the confines of religious confession, a faith enriched by varied spiritual experience and encounters with various belief systems, Holy Scriptures, teachings, and traditions.
- 22 Poor faith is a path of spiritual becoming which can pass by and through other stages and in a different order from that outlined earlier. Poor faith can arise within specific religious confessions as an aspiration to feel the living spirit beyond the outward forms. The fire of faith is common to all religions; national and historical forms vary in the ways that this fire of the spirit dissipates.

- 23 Poor faith does not adhere to old dogmas nor creates new ones. Rather, it takes the traditions of various religions as raw material for constructing its own personal experience. Just as an artist creates her or his own canvas, using a plethora of lines and colours, so the poor believer creates her/his own faith, employing those forms and meanings which are accessible through the whole legacy received from previous testimonies and revelations of faith.
- 24 Poor faith can go through crises and through 'dark nights of the soul', and lack all forms of support other than its own efforts to further set down its path towards God.
- 25 Just as various paths lead to poor faith, so also various paths lead away from it. These include a weakening of, or a break in, communication with God, together with a drying up or withering of the inner life; a move into atheism, a loss of faith; joining one of the non-traditional religious cults which claim to possess a 'non-confessional' nature; mono-confessionalism, that is, returning to a former confession or attaching to a new one; multi-confessionalism, the experience of belonging to two or several confessions; and a synthesis of various confessions and the construction of a universal religion.
- 26 Poor faith can be a primary, naive impulse of faith, but it can also absorb a multifaceted spiritual experience. It is able to assimilate the values of various mysteries and sacraments, but it remains the person's inner work, a communication of the unique individual with the One, which takes place completely outside the framework of any religious cult. However well-endowed poor faith might be, it remains poor to the extent that it is not identical at all to any confession, and it does not permit confessions to take a hold and to form within itself.
- 27 Poor faith remains poor precisely because it is not organized. As soon as anyone begins to form something like a 'community of adherents to poor faith' with its own customs and core teaching, it is no longer poor faith, but yet another church, albeit a radically protestant and non-conformist one.

Poor messianism

- 28 The beginnings of all religious traditions are various, but the end can only be a commonly shared end. Monotheism turns into *theomonism*, a coming together of all forms of monotheism in the unity of faith itself. The historical significance of the postsecular age may lie precisely in this transition.
- 29 The messianism which is an inherent feature of all faith systems in the Abrahamic tradition is the expectation of a Messiah and a constant state of readiness for His coming. 'Watch therefore, for ye know neither the day nor the hour wherein the Son of man cometh' (Matt, 25: 13, King James). Poor messianism, or 'messianicity' (a term coined by Jacques Derrida 1996; 2002) is a broader *not-knowing*: of the very possibility of the coming of the Messiah.
- 30 Such messianicity, as a projection of poor faith into the absolute future, does not guarantee the appearance of a real Messiah. Rather, it consciously attributes to any 'claimant' the possibility of personifying false messiahship and remains a vanishing horizon for our looking and striving.
- 31 At the same time, the open structure of expectation is preserved, akin to the structure of hospitality, of 'inviting-in'. Absolute hospitality does not know in advance who the guest is who will appear on one's threshold. The same holds true for poor messianism: it is elevated into the absolute and at the same time reduced to a minimum. It is an expectation that is open to any unexpected happenings or events, including the *non*-appearance of the Messiah. It is faith in its initial source, a precondition for any other faith, a prefaith for all faiths.

- 32 That same Godot whom the other characters in Beckett's play of the absurd are waiting for, does not arrive either. It is he who is the true God (God O!), as he is defined in the relationship between the maximum and minimum of faith. This is the general condition for all other forms of expectation: the expectation of good, of justice, of perfection. This 'supra-expectation' is transforming the world by the power of its openness, although it does not promise fulfilment but only allows for such a possibility.

Minimal religion and Western postsecularism

In the previous sections I emphasized the specificity of minimal religion as a uniquely postatheist phenomenon. There are, however, many lines of convergence between Russian postatheism and postsecularist tendencies in the West. The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor highlights this confluence in his acclaimed book *The Secular Age* (2007). Close to the end of the book, Taylor attempts to envisage 'a time in which the hegemony of the mainstream master narrative of secularization will be more and more challenged....[I]ts overcoming would open new possibilities' (p. 534).

What are these possibilities of postsecularism that Taylor is anticipating? The first, and in fact, the most articulated phenomenon that he mentions in this context is the *minimal religion* to which he devotes several pages of his book (pp. 533–5; 849). Paradoxically, this 'irreligious' spirituality has originated from the country that was the first in the twentieth century to affirm and then to survive atheism, the tragic experience of 'super-secularization' that turned out to be the devastation of all religions—to allow the new form of spiritual poverty to be born from this void.

Taylor writes in reference to my work:

Epstein introduces the concept of "minimal religion". He also speaks of an overlapping category, the people who declare themselves "just Christians" in surveys of religious allegiance, as against those who adhere to one or other Christian confession, like Orthodox, or Catholic. This kind of religious (p. 533) position Epstein sees as "post-atheist"; and this in two senses. The people concerned were brought up under a militantly atheist regime, which denied and repressed all religious forms, so that they are equidistant from, and equally ignorant of, all the confessional options. But the position is also post-atheist in the stronger sense that those concerned have reacted against their training: they have acquired in some fashion a sense of God, which however ill-defined places them outside the space of their upbringing.

"Minimal religion" is spirituality lived in one's immediate circle, with family and friends, rather than in churches, one especially aware of the particular, both in individual human beings, and in the places and things that surround us. In response to the universalist concern for the 'distant one' stressed in Marxist communism, it seeks to honor the 'image and likeness of God' in the particular people who share our lives.

But because this religion was born outside of any confessional structures, it has its own kind of universalism, a sort of spontaneous and unreflective ecumenism, in which the coexistence of plural forms of spirituality and worship is taken for granted. Even when people who start with this kind of spirituality end up joining a church, as many of them do, they retain something of their original outlook. <...>

Perhaps something analogous can be said about the situation in "post-secular" Europe. I use this term not as designating an age in which the declines in belief and practice of the last century would have been reversed, because this doesn't seem likely,

at least for the moment; I rather mean a time in which the hegemony of the mainstream master narrative of secularization will be more and more challenged.

(p. 534) <...>

Being “spiritual but not religious” is one of the western phenomena which has some affinity with Epstein’s “minimal religion” in Russia; it usually designates a spiritual life which retains some distance from the disciplines and authority of religious confessions. ...In both cases, a certain diffuse ecumenical sense is widespread, and even those who subsequently take on some confessional life, and thus become “religious”, retain something of this original freedom from sectarianism.

(p. 535)

Charles Taylor indicates that the phenomenon known in Russia as poor faith or minimal religion in the West, is often called ‘spirituality’ in opposition to organized religion. I would argue, however, that spirituality is not quite a relevant term to characterize postsecular trends. Spirituality as such includes belief in high ideals, adherence to supreme moral values, or the aesthetic experience of the sublime and the beautiful—all this can belong to a purely secular worldview. Spirituality as such can be both secular and postsecular, and by itself it draws an insufficiently clear line of demarcation between the two. What makes the distinction between the secular and the postsecular more articulate is that the latter still retains the direct relationship with *faith* and *religion*. But postsecularism is *poor* faith; *minimal* religion. The degree of minimality may differ in each individual case, for each personal experience of faith. But without at least minimal faith, the boundary between the secular and postsecular disappears. In this sense minimality is also liminality.

Minimal religion is transcendental in two senses. As a *religion*, in distinction from a purely secular position, it transcends the ‘earthly’ world of immanence. As a *minimal* religion, in distinction from all organized religions, it transcends the world of all existing religious traditions, dogmas, rituals, and affiliations. It is only in the liminal ‘between’ that this uniquely postsecular phenomenon can be defined. Religion, yet minimal; poor, yet faith.

Notes

- 1 This article draws upon and integrates several pieces published earlier in Russian (see Epstein 1996; 2014), with new material added in English.
- 2 From Boris Pasternak’s poem ‘V bol’nitse’. See <https://books.google.com/books?id=puymuobJIoC&pg=PA111&lpg=PA111&dq> accessed online 28-05-2018.
- 3 I refer here to monodeism as the default standard concept of deism, distinct from polydeism, pan-deism, and spiritual deism.
- 4 See Epstein (2014) translated from Russian by Dr. Jonathan Sutton, Leeds, UK.
- 5 See ARENA: *Atlas of Religions and Nationalities of Russia*, <http://sreda.org/arena>, accessed online 28-05-2018. Full survey results can be downloaded from the ARENA website.
- 6 See www.pewforum.org/2012/12/18/global-religious-landscape-unaffiliated/ accessed online 28-05-2018; see also www.pewforum.org/2012/10/09/nones-on-the-rise/ accessed online 28-05-2018.

Further reading

Daniel, W. L. (2016) *Russia’s Uncommon Prophet: Father Aleksandr Men and his times*, DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press.

This biography is of Aleksandr Men (1930–1990), a most influential Russian Orthodox priest, prolific writer, and theologian who attempted to open Orthodoxy to other religious traditions and to universal human values. Growing up during the darkest, most oppressive years in the history of

the former Soviet Union, he attracted large, diverse groups of people in Russian society and made an enormous impact of the postatheistic consciousness of late Soviet intelligentsia.

Epstein, M. (1994) *Vera i obraz. Religioznoe bessoznatel'noe v russkoi kul'ture XX veka* ["Faith and Image: the religious unconscious in twentieth century Russian culture"], Tenafly, NJ: Hermitage Publishers.

The book treats the phenomenon of unconscious religiosity as it is revealed in the philosophy, literature, and art of the Soviet epoch, and compares the Russian-Soviet tradition of apophatism-atheism with Eastern non-theistic religions, such as Buddhism and with the Western processes of secularization.

Epstein, M. (2013) *Religia posle ateizma: Novye vozmozhnosti teologii* ["Religion after Atheism: New Possibilities for Theology"]. Moscow: AST-Press.

According to sociological surveys, 25% of the Russian population believe in God but do not associate themselves with any particular confession. This book analyzes the new phenomenon of a 'minimal religion' (non-denominational faith) and many other trends of religious thought following the demise of Soviet atheism and the crisis of Western secularism. The book explores the following questions. What new opportunities for theology become open in the advent of a post-secular age? How dangerous is a historically precipitous transition from militant atheism to a dominant role of the church? How does a religious worldview incorporate recent scientific discoveries?

Erdozain, D. (ed.) (2017) *The Dangerous God: Christianity and the Soviet experiment*, DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press.

The book explores the contribution of Christian thought and belief to the Soviet culture of dissent and survival, showing how religious and secular streams of resistance joined in the self-awareness of Soviet intelligentsia. Against the Marxist notion of the 'ideological' function of religion, the authors set the example of people for whom faith was more than an opiate, and propose the centrality of religious faith in the intellectual, political, and cultural life of the late modern era.

Fagan, G. (2014) *Believing in Russia: Religious Policy after Communism*, London: Routledge.

This book presents an overview of religious policy in Russia since the end of the communist regime, exposing many of the ambiguities and uncertainties about the position of religion in Russian life. It reveals how religious freedom in Russia has, contrary to the widely held view, a long tradition, and discusses the pursuit of privilege for the Russian Orthodox Church and other 'traditional' beliefs.

Furman, D. E. and K. Kaariainen (2000) *Starye tserkvi, novye veruiushchie. Religia v massovom soznanii postsovet'skoi Rossii*. ["Old Churches, New Believers: Religion in the Mass Consciousness of Post-Soviet Russia"]. St. Petersburg/Moscow: Summer Garden.

The book is based on unique polls, on a strictly sociological approach to analysis. What do modern believers and unbelievers think? Is their faith deep or is their faith pure formality, a tribute to a new tradition? How do different elites of Russian society treat religion? The book sums up the research project "Religion and values after the fall of communism" (1991–1999).

Johnson, J. Stepanians, M. and B. Forest (eds.) (2005) *Religion and Identity in Modern Russia: the revival of Orthodoxy and Islam*, London: Routledge.

This book discusses and compares the role of Russia's two major religions, Orthodoxy and Islam, in forging identity in the modern era and brings a blend of sociological, historical, linguistic, and geographic scholarship to the problem of post-Soviet Russian identity.

Jones, M. V. (2005) *Dostoevsky and the Dynamics of Religious Experience*, London: Anthem Press.

This book, relying in particular on Mikhail Epstein's concept of poor faith, shows how Fyodor Dostoevsky, despite his passionately proclaimed devotion to Orthodox Christianity, presents a much deeper and broader dedication to the theology of minimal religion, as presented in the characters and spiritual revelations of Elder Zosima and Alyosha Karamazov.

Louth, A. (2015) *Modern Orthodox Thinkers: from the philokalia to the present*, Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic.

The book offers historical and biographical sketches of Orthodox religious thinkers and includes a chapter on theology in Russia under communism (Alexei Losev, Sergei Averintsev, Aleksandr Men).

Sutton, J. (2006) "'Minimal religion' and Mikhail Epstein's interpretation of religion in late-Soviet and post-Soviet Russia", *Studies in East European Thought*, 58(2): 107–35.

The entire special issue 'Two readings of the dynamic between religion and culture: Sergej Averintsev and Mikhail Epstein', edited by Jonathan Sutton and especially his article on minimal religion, deals with two different interpretations of relations between religion and culture in the context of decades of mass atheism.

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