Russian Mystics

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Russian Mystics

Sergius Bolshakoff

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The Editors of Cistercian Publications
dedicate this edition
to
Father Panteleimon
and his disciples at the Skete of the Holy Transfiguration
who are implanting in America today in living reality
all that Sergius Bolshakoff
has sought to bring to the West.

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PREFACE

THE AUTHOR OF THIS UNUSUAL BOOK has given it much too modest a title. It is in fact not only an introduction to the lives, the spirituality and the writings of great mystics, many of whom are unknown in the West, but it is also at the same time a clear and practical outline of Russian monastic history. The journey which the reader now begins is not without excitement, for it takes him into new territory, the silence of the great Russian forests which Konstantin Paustovsky has described with such mastery in his autobiography.

Russian mysticism is predominantly monastic (though one may in passing regret that we do not meet in these pages such modern non-monastic mystics as Fr Yelchaninov). It therefore thrives in solitude and renunciation of the world. Yet anyone who has even the most superficial acquaintance with Russian Christendom is aware that the monasteries of Russia, even more than those of the West, exercised a crucially important influence on society, whether as centers of spiritual life and transformation to which pilgrims flocked from everywhere, or as bases for missionary expansion or, finally, as powerful social forces sometimes manipulated—or suppressed—for political advantage. Such struggles as those between St Nilus of Sora and St Joseph of Volokolamsk (barely suggested here) speak eloquently of the age-old conflict, within monasticism itself, between the charismatic drive to solitary contemplation plus charismatic pastoral action, and the insti-

tutional drive to fit the monastic community into a structure of organized socio-religious power, as a center of liturgy and education and as a nursery of bishops.

Other conflicts, such as that between Eastern Orthodox spirituality and Westernizing influences, play an important part in the lives of the monks and mystics of Russia. Many readers will be surprised to learn what a great part Western theological attitudes and devotions played in the formation of St Tikhon. The seminary which Tikhon attended was organized on the Jesuit pattern and yet he was not influenced by post-Tridentine Catholic thought. Dr Bolshakoff identifies him rather with German pietism. In any case, we must not be too quick to assume that St Tikhon's spirituality is purely and ideally "Russian." Yet paradoxically this combination of Western and Eastern holiness is a peculiarly Russian phenomenon. St Tikhon was perhaps the greatest mystic of the age of rationalist enlightenment.

Russian mysticism is to be traced largely to the greatest monastic center of Orthodox mysticism, Mount Athos. Ever since the eleventh century the Russian monastic movement had been nourished by direct contact with the "Holy Mountain"—interrupted only by the Tartar invasions of the Middle Ages. Liturgy, asceticism and mysticism in Russia owed their development in great part not to literary documents but to the living experience of pilgrim monks who spent a certain time at Athos, either in the "Rossikon" (the Russian monastery of St Panteleimon) or in various sketes (groups of small cottages around a monastery) and cells, before returning to found new monasteries or renew the life of old ones in their country. Periods when, for one reason or another, communication with Athos has diminished, have also been periods of monastic decline in Russia.

One of the characteristic fruits of Russian monachism on Athos is the "Prayer of Jesus," the constant repetition of a short formula in conjunction with rhythmic breathing and with deep faith in the supernatural power of the Holy Name. This was a Russian development of the Greek Hesychast way of prayer taught by St Gregory Palamas. The "Prayer of

Jesus" became the normal way of contemplative prayer in Russian monasticism but, more important still, it was adopted on all sides by devout lay-people especially among the masses of the poor peasantry.

Until recently, Western theologians were highly suspicious of Athonite "Hesychasm" and regarded it as perilous, even heretical. Deeper study and a wider acquaintance with non-Western forms of spirituality have made Hesychasm seem a little less outlandish. It is now no longer necessary to repeat the outraged platitudes of those who thought that the Hesychasts were practising self-hypnosis, or who believed that, at best, the monks of Athos were engaged in a kind of Western Yoga.

The "Prayer of Jesus," made known to Western readers by the "Tale of the Pilgrim," surely one of the great classics of the literature of prayer, is now practised not only by characters in Salinger's novels, but even at times by some Western monks. Needless to say that a way of prayer for which, in its land of origin, the direction of a "staretz" was mandatory, is not safely to be followed by us in the West without professional direction.

The mystical Russian "pilgrim" received from his staretz an anthology of Patristic quotations on prayer: the famous *Philokalia.* One of the most interesting chapters of Dr Bolshakoff's book deals with Paisius Velichkovsky (1722-1794) who, after living for some time in a skete on Mount Athos during a period of monastic decline, translated the *Philokalia* into Slavonic and introduced it to Russia. It was then done into Russian by another mystic, Bishop Theophane the Recluse.

Paisius and his disciples also translated other works of the Fathers and in addition to this exercised a direct and living influence on Russian monachism through the numerous pilgrims who constantly visited the monasteries reformed by him in Moldavia and Walachia. Here the faithful from all parts of Russia encountered not only a pure and austere monastic discipline but also the spiritual direction of specialists in asceticism and Hesychast prayer, who came to be known as *Startzy.* The translations of the *Philokalia,* the

monastic reform of Paisius, and especially *Starchestvo*, the direction of the Startzy, set in motion the great development that was to make the nineteenth century the golden age of Russian mysticism. This was also the time when the Rossikon on Mount Athos reached its peak in numbers, fervor and prosperity.

One of the best known (or least unknown) of the Russian mystics is St Seraphim of Sarov who lived the life of a desert Father in the forests at the beginning of the nineteenth century. He affords a striking contrast to other post-medieval saints and ascetics who have tried to imitate the Desert Fathers. In many of these, together with a sincere ascetic and monastic purpose and devotion to authentic ideals, we seem to encounter a spirit of willfulness that is often violent and artificial even to the point of obsession. As a result we find a negative, gloomy and tense spirituality in which one is not sure whether the dominant note is hatred of wickedness or love of good—and hatred of wickedness can so easily include hatred of human beings who are perhaps less wicked than they seem. The study of ascetic tradition and the passion for austerity do not suffice by themselves to make monastic saints, although it must be admitted that a specious "humanism" which turns its back on all austerity and solitude is hardly more effective in this regard!

Whether or not Seraphim had studied ancient monastic tradition, it is certain that he was a living and spontaneous exemplar of the most authentic monastic ideal. His solitary life in the forest was extremely austere and yet his spirituality was marked by pure joy. Though he gave himself unsparingly to each ascetic exploit (*podvig*) he remained simple, child-like, meek, astonishingly open to life and to other men, gentle and profoundly compassionate.

He is without doubt the greatest mystic of the Russian Church, and the Hesychast tradition is evident in his mysticism of light. Yet Hesychasm is, so to speak, absorbed in the Evangelical and Patristic purity of his experience of the great Christian mystery, the presence of the Spirit given by God through the Risen Christ to his Body, the Church. Seraphim's

simplicity reminds us in may ways of St Francis of Assisi though his life was more like that of St Anthony of the Desert. But like every other great contemplative saint, Seraphim had his eyes wide open to the truth of the Gospel, and could not understand how the rest of men could be content with an "enlightenment" that was in reality nothing but ignorance and spiritual blindness. The only contemporary figure in the West who speaks so eloquently and with such ingenuous amazement of the divine light shining in darkness, is the English poet, William Blake. But there is in Seraphim none of Blake's gnosticism: only the pure and traditional theology of the Church.

Seraphim of Sarov is then the most perfect example of that mysticism of light which is characteristic of the Orthodox Church: completely positive and yet compatible with, indeed based on, the apophatic (negative) theology of Pseudo Dionysius and St Maximus the Confessor. It is perhaps this which distinguishes Russian mysticism in its pure state. Not an intellectualist and negative ascent to the Invisible above all that is visible, but more paradoxically an apprehension of the invisible as visible in so far as all creation is suddenly experienced as trasfigured in a light for which there is no accounting in terms of any philosophy, a light which is given directly by God, procedes from God, and in a sense *is* the Divine Light. Yet this experience is not a substantial vision of God because in Oriental theology the light experienced by the mystic is a divine "energy," distinct from God's nature but which can be apprehended in contact with the *Person* of the Holy Spirit, by mystical love and grace.

Thus it is easy to see that though there are on record some instances of a negative mysticism comparable to the Dark Night in St John of the Cross (and the author mentions several here) yet they are not characteristic of Russian mystical theology, which is a theology not of suffering but of transfiguration.

Nevertheless, this theology of resurrection and joy is firmly based on repentance and on tears, and one does not easily find in it the impertinences of a devout sentimentality which

simply assumes that "everything is bound to turn out all right." The reality of redemption and transfiguration depends on the most basic experience of the evil of sin.

Not all the Russian mystics were able to experience this evil as totally consumed in the flames of redemptive Love. Bishop Ignatius Brianchaninov, an aristocrat and an army engineer converted to the monastic life, looked out upon the world with profound pessimism. The world of matter was not, for him, transfigured by the divine light: it was purely and simply the subject of corruption. For him (as for so many others in the nineteenth century) science and religion were in conflict, and to know Christ one had to reject all earthly knowledge as false and totally misleading. And yet, as Dr Bolshakoff points out, science does nevertheless contribute something of positive value to the meditations of Bishop Brianchaninov. However, we observe with regret in Brianchaninov a tendency to impose a kind of unnatural constraint upon the body and the mind, and we are not surprised when he informs us that he considers visions of devils rather a usual thing in the monastic life. His pessimism and suspicion toward women as such blend with the rest of his dark view of things. Yet, even where his negative attitude repels us, we must admit he often displays remarkable psychological insight. All in all Brianchaninov is too rigid, too suspicious of the light, too closed to ordinary human experience to impress us as St Seraphim does. And yet it would seem that the negativism of Brianchaninov had a deeper influence on nineteenth-century Russian monasticism than the marvelous Gospel optimism of St Seraphim. Dr Bolshakoff gives us rather copious quotations from Brianchaninov and they will help us to understand the conservative reaction of Leontiev and of the monks of Optino against Dostoievski's idealized and forward-looking portrait of Staretz Zosima.

This portrait was supposed to have been based on the living figure of Staretz Ambrose of Optino, but the monks in general rejected its optimism, its "humanism," as untrue to the genuine monastic tradition of Russia. Perhaps the generality of monks were more disposed to look at life through the

embittered and blazing eyes of the fanatical ascetic, Ferrapont, in whom Dostoievski himself evidently intended to attack the kind of negativism typified by the old school, the critics and opponents of the Startzy.

It is curious that the Russian revolution was preceded not by a century of monastic decadence and torpor, but by a monastic Golden Age. But if the term "Golden Age" is to mean anything, it must mean a time of vitality. Vitality means variety and this, in turn, may imply conflict. Even in the serene pages of this book which views its subject in its overall unity, we detect the interplay of various conflicting forces in Russian monasticism. There is darkness and light, world-denial and loving affirmation of human values, a general hardening of resistance to forces of atheist humanism and revolution and yet an anguished concern at the sinful oppression of the poor. We cannot with justice dismiss the whole Russian monastic movement as negative, pessimistic, world-hating. Nor can we identify its deep and traditional contemplative aspirations with mere political or cultural conservatism. There was an unquestionably prophetic spirit at work in the movement, and St Seraphim is only one among many examples that prove this. There was also a profound concern for "the world" and for humanity, a wonderful, unequalled compassion that reached out to all mankind and indeed to all living creatures, to embrace them in God's love and in merciful concern. It cannot be doubted that the great Startzy, in their humane and tender simplicity, were sometimes completely identified with the humble and the poor. It would be ludicrous to class them as obscurantists and reactionaries.

On the other hand, there was a less prophetic, but none the less amazing spirit of ascetic fervor, of discipline, of order, which, while it was undeniably one of the things that made the age "Golden," still had rather more human and even political implications. And here monasticism was, indeed, more deeply involved in social structures and national aspirations, even where it most forcefully asserted its hatred of "the world." Here, too, contempt for the world and pessimistic rigorism were in fact inseparable from social and political

conservatism. The ascetic who renounced the city of man in order to lament his sins in the *Poustyna* (desert) may well have been giving his support to a condition of social inertia by implicitly affirming that all concern with improvement was futile and even sinful. We may cite as an example Constantin Leontiev, Dostoievsky's adversary and critic, who entered a monastery, gloried in extreme austerity, and doubtless expressed monastic views that were those of most monks of the time.

Leontiev actually stated that the Orthodoxy on Mount Athos depended on the peaceful and harmonious interaction of Turkish political power, Russian wealth and Greek ecclesiastical authority. Most of his compatriots, monks included, were probably too nationalistic to follow this "realist" view all the way.[1] They were Panslavist and therefore anti-Greek as well as anti-Western. But the point is that their monastic fervor formed part of a complex Russian nationalist mystique and contributed much energy to it. The average good monk, who was not raised by sanctity above this level, tended to identify himself and his religious ideal with this mystique of Russia. It would be interesting to compare this with the ideas of such lay theologians as Soloviev who was very open to Rome and the West, but space does not permit us to do so here.

This is a book that becomes more absorbing as it progresses, and the most interesting pages are those which deal with the Startzy of the last hundred and fifty years. Their doctrine is rich in monastic wisdom, as well as in ordinary religious psychology and plain good sense. It is interesting to see that they were concerned with many traditional monastic problems which are being rather warmly discussed in Western monasteries today. The answers of the Startzy can be of special value to Western monks who are interested in discovering the deepest meaning of their monastic vocation, and ways to live that vocation more perfectly.

1. See Igor Smolitsch, "Le Mont Athos et la Russie" in *Le Millénaire du Mont Athos,* Chevetogne (Belgium), 1963, p. 299. Smolitsch calls this opinion of Leontiev a "somewhat unusual estimate."

The reason for this is perhaps simpler than one might expect. It is not so much that the Startzy were exceptionally austere men, or that they had acquired great learning, but that they had surrendered themselves completely to the demands of the Gospel and to evangelical charity, totally forgetting themselves in obedience to the Spirit of God so that they lived as perfect Christians, notable above all for their humility, their meekness, their openness to all men, their apparently inexhaustible capacity for patient and compassionate love. The purpose of Starchestve is then not so much to make use of daily spiritual direction in order to inculcate a special method of prayer, but rather to keep the heart of the disciple open to love, to prevent it from hardening in self-centered concern (whether moral, spiritual or ascetical). All the worst sins are denials and rejections of love, refusals to love. The chief aim of the Staretz is first to teach his disciple not to sin against love, then to enourage and assist his growth in love until he becomes a saint. This total surrender to the power of love was the sole basis of their spiritual authority, and on this basis the Startzy demanded complete and unquestioning obedience. They could do so because they themselves never resisted the claims and demands of charity.

One cannot refrain from observing, in this connection, how much Pope John XXIII displayed this same charismatic and evangelical openness. His life as pope is filled with incidents in which this great warm-hearted man unquestioningly obeyed the Spirit of Goodness that was in him, and met with consternation when he expected others to obey the same Spirit with equal readiness! So many Christians exalt the demands and rigors of law because, in reality, law is less demanding than pure charity. The law after all has reasonable and safe limits!

The mention of Pope John naturally suggests a conclusion to this introduction. Pope John's love for the Church of the Orient, of the Balkans, Greece and Russia, is well known. His idea of calling the Second Vatican Council was prompted in large part by this love of our separated Orthodox brothers. Knowledge of the spirit and teaching of the Russian mystics

can be of great help to us in carrying on the work of mutual understanding which Pope John has bequeathed to us. This is therefore a very timely book for an age of ecumenism and of renewal. Full of interesting historical material and of spiritual wisdom, written for the ordinary reader, it provides a much needed popular introduction to a subject of great interest and importance to all Christians.

Thomas Merton*

INTRODUCTION

THE RUSSIAN MYSTICS are still very little known in the West. Yet they are numerous, profound and interesting. Professor Vladimir Lossky stressed the importance of the mystics in his remarkable book: *Essai sur la Théologie mystique de l'Eglise d'Orient.*

In that book Professor Lossky shows that, as far as the Orthodox Church is concerned, no split has developed as in the West to separate theology and mysticism, and indeed in the East there is no theology without mysticism. He states: "Eastern tradition never differentiated clearly between mysticism and theology, between personal experience of divine mysteries and the dogma approved by the Church. Words pronounced a century ago by a great Orthodox theologian, Metropolitan Philarete of Moscow, express this perfectly. He said: 'No mystery of Divine Wisdom, even the most secret, must appear to us strange or altogether transcendent, but in true humility we must adapt our mind to the contemplation of Divine Things.' "[1]

This means that a dogma defining revealed truth which appears as a mystery to our way of understanding, must be lived by us. But we must not try to adapt the mystery to our level of understanding. On the contrary, we should ourselves undergo a profound change, being transformed from within, in order to be capable of mystical experience.

1. *Sermons and Speeches of Metropolitan Philaret* (in Russian), vol. 2, p. 87.

Far from opposing each other, theology and mysticism assist and complete each other. The first is impossible without the second and vice versa. There is no Christian mysticism without theology. Still less is there true theology without mysticism. For that very reason the tradition of the Eastern Church has reserved the title of "Theologian" to three sacred authors: St John, the most mystical of the four Evangelists, St Gregory Nazianzen, author of contemplative poems, and St Symeon, called the New Theologian, minstrel of union with God. Mysticism therefore, must be, considered as a perfection, the crown of all theology, a theology par excellence.

If mysticism is the crown of theology, true theology, then obviously monks, and particularly contemplative monks, should be the greatest theologians. So it was in history. Most of the Fathers and Doctors of the Church in the East were monks. Something similar may be noticed also in the West. The greatest periods of theological activity in the East nearly always coincided with the flowering of monasticism. This was so during the Christological, iconoclastic and Hesychastic controversies. Once theology and mysticism start to drift apart the former tends invariably to become a "theology of concepts," an abstract science, a mere religious philosophy. Those who teach theology cease to live up to it as the mystics did. In order to return to the great age of theology, dogma must be brought back to life and mystically experienced.

What is true generally is equally true for the Russian Church. There, too, the periods of the greatest glory have coincided with the ages of the prosperity of monasteries and of numerous mystics. Russian contemplatives have as their patriarch St Anthony of Kiev (983-1073). According to tradition he was professed in Esphigmenou Monastery on Mount Athos. With St Theodosius (1035-1074), St Anthony founded in 1062 the first large Russian monastery, which is still in existence, the celebrated Pechersky Monastery in Kiev. The first Russian bishops, missionaries and sacred writers came from that monastery.

The foundation of the Russian Church in the tenth century coincided with the golden age of the Byzantine Empire, when it reached its zenith under Basil II. Bolgarokrotonos, broth-

er-in-law of St Vladimir, Grand Prince of Russia, and of Othon II, Holy Roman Emperor. The son of the latter, Othon III, was a friend of St Nilus, founder of Grottaferrata Abbey near Rome. Grottaferrata was founded in the same century as Pechersky Monastery.

St Anthony brought Athonite spirituality and customs to Russia. Since early times the Russians have possessed a large collection of Slavonic translations of patristic writings. Even before the Mongol invasion of 1236 the Russians read St Athanasius the Great, St Gregory Nazianzen, St Gregory of Nyssa, St Gregory the Great, St Basil the Great, St Ephrem the Syrian, St John Climacus, St John Chrysostom, St John Damascene, St Maximus, St Hippolytus of Rome, as well as several Palestinian and Egyptian mystics. Although the Russians were in continuous contact with Constantinople and Mount Athos in the age when St Symeon the New Theologian and St Athanasius of Mount Athos flourished, they were still too new in Christianity to produce mystics. Nevertheless, they produced many good and saintly monks and ecclesiastical writers.

The thirteenth century was marked by the Mongol invasion of Russia and the foundation of the Latin Empire in Constantinople. Many Russian monasteries were destroyed by the Mongols and communication with the Byzantine Empire became restricted. This could not but have repercussions on the prosperity and development of the Russian monasteries. However, this painful period did not last long. In the fourteenth century, with the appearance of St Sergius of Radonesh (1314-92), Russian monasticism revived. The great Monastery of the Holy Trinity, founded by St Sergius in 1354, quickly became the largest, wealthiest and most influential Russian monastery. It still exists and has over a hundred monks. The abbot is the Patriarch of Moscow. The monastery also houses the Moscow Theological Academy and Seminary. Enormous crowds from all over the Soviet Union and many pilgrims from abroad come even today to this monastery, which is a splendid city in itself. They pray there and consult the monks on spiritual problems.

St Sergius personally founded nine monasteries, while his

disciples founded twelve more. Besides these, a number of monasteries was founded by friends of St Sergius. At that time the number of monasteries in Russia was already considerable. Although many of these were quite small, not a few numbered from one to three hundred monks. The fourteenth century was the age of the Hesychast movement in the Byzantine Empire. This movement was started by St Gregory the Sinaite, who was successively a monk of Mount Sinai and Mount Athos. He died in 1346 and left a long treatise of one hundred and fifty chapters on contemplative prayer. Gregory Palamas, another Athonite monk, afterwards abbot of Esphigmenou and Archbishop of Thessalonica, who died in 1360, composed several treatises which define Orthodox mystical theology. His writings and teaching were made known in Russia by several Russian primates: Theognost, St Alexius, Cyprian and Photius.

Besides the primates, other Greeks, such as the Athonite monk Dionisios, later Archbishop of Rostov and Lasar of Murmansk and Sergius of Murom, two monks, brought the same ideas to Russia. Epiphanius the Wise, a disciple of St Sergius of Radonesh, and St Arsenius, abbot of Konevetz, both visited Mount Athos at the peak of the Hesychast movement. St Nilus of Sora (1433-1508), who visited Mount Athos in the fifteenth century, was the first, and perhaps the greatest Russian mystic. As a nobleman he studied Byzantine mystics in Slavonic translation at St Cyril's Monastery on the White Lake. In 1465 he went to the East returning home in 1478. On his return St Nilus founded his own Skete[2] on the Athonite model, and wrote his celebrated *Tradition of Sketic Life*. This remarkable short treatise is a masterly summary of Orthodox mystical and ascetical teaching. It precedes the *Philokalia*, a larger summary, by nearly 350 years.

According to St Nilus the outward forms of monastic life, although important, are secondary. The chief work of the monk is spiritual: the cultivation of the Prayer of Jesus, read-

2. Groups of monks living in cottages around a central church and dependent upon a parent monastery.

ing the Holy Scriptures and the Fathers and keeping death in mind. Without this one cannot attain union with God. The teaching of St Nilus is based on St Anthony the Great, St Basil the Great, St Ephrem, St Isaac the Syrian, St Macarius the Great, St John Climacus and St Symeon the New Theologian. St Nilus did not approve of monastic wealth and the interference of monks in the affairs of the state. He also disapproved of ritualism and formalism in religion, as well as blind attachment to conventions and outworn traditions.

The supporters of the opposite view, led by St Joseph of Volokolamsk (1440-1515), entered quickly into conflict with the disciples of St Nilus. The Josephians stood for monastic estates, which they considered essential for the wellbeing of the Church, and for the strictest ritual observance. The struggle between the two parties ended in victory for the Josephians, and led to the further growth of monastic land-owing, rigid ritualism, intolerance toward all foreigners, including Orthodox, and an unreasonable worship of the past. Among many people who suffered in this struggle was a brilliant Greek scholar and humanist, Michael Trivolis, known in Russia as St Maximus the Greek (1480-1556). Maximus had studied in Italy and had been a novice in the convent of Savonarola in Florence. He afterwards became a monk of Vatopedi on Mount Athos. He was sent to Moscow as a scholar to reorganize the Grand Ducal library. The victory of the Josephians was an unhappy event for Russia and produced in the seventeenth century the Great Russian Schism. The Josephians were opposed to the liturgical reforms of Patriarch Nikon (1652-1667). Unable to undo these reforms the conservatives preferred to leave the Russian Church rather than submit. Professor Fedotov, in his book *Saints of Ancient Russia,*[3] stressed the fact that while in the sixteenth century thirty saints were canonized, only fifteen were canonized in the following century. No one was canonized in the last quarter of that century. Still 220 new monasteries were founded in the seventeenth century.

3. G. Fedotov, *Saints of Ancient Russia* (in Russian) (Paris, 1931), pp. 201-202.

Church wealth unavoidably excited the jealousy of the state. Already in the seventeenth century the first attempts were made to limit monastic wealth. Peter the Great, who reformed the Russian state in the first quarter of the eighteenth century, met stiff resistance among the conservatives, particularly the clergy and the monks. In order to overcome this resistance he abolished the office of the Patriarch and replaced him by a board of ecclesiastics nominated by himself and called the Holy Synod. Death prevented him from carrying out drastic plans for the suppression and confiscation of monasteries.

In 1763 Catherine II confiscated the landed estates of the Church which by this time included one-fourth of the entire Russian territory. Certain monasteries were fabulously wealthy. The Laura[4] of the Holy Trinity, near Moscow, founded by St Sergius of Radonesh in 1354, possessed 100,000 serfs. Catherine II closed down 568 monasteries out of 953 and greatly reduced the membership of those that remained. The decree forbade the profession of new monks and nuns without special permission from the capital in every case. It seemed that Russian monasteries were condemned to disappear. Yet this did not happen. In spite of their critical situation, the Russian monks produced in the first half of the eighteenth century two outstanding Russian mystics, both bishops, St Demetrius of Rostov (1651-1709) and St Tikhon Zadonsky (1724-1783). The first wrote a voluminous collection of the *Lives of Saints* as well as many ascetical and mystical treatises, while the second published a fine book entitled *True Christianity* and some shorter works. Although strictly Orthodox, neither bishop belonged to the traditional Hesychast school. St Demetrius was deeply influenced by the Latins in his outlook, while St Tikhon was well read in Protestant spiritual writers, including Anglicans and German pietists. After St Tikhon, Zadonsk Monastery

4. A community of monks living in separate cells around a central church.

produced another mystic, George the Recluse (1789-1836).

The new revival of monasticism and the golden age of Russian mysticism is connected with Mount Athos. Paisius Velichkovsky (1722-1794), a native of Poltava in the Ukraine, lived in the difficult period of Russian monastic history. Realizing early that there was not much chance of becoming a monk in Russia, Paisius left Russia in 1744 for Rumania where he made his profession. In 1747 he retired to Mount Athos where he founded the Russian Skete of St Elias which is still in existence. The ever recurring wars between Russia and Turkey prevented Paisius from remaining on Mount Athos. In 1754 he returned to Rumania (Principality of Moldavia), where in 1774 he became abbot of five hundred monks at Neamtu, a monastery still flourishing today.

While living in Neamtu, Paisius translated into Slavonic several patristic treatises, including the *Philokalia* which had just been published by Metropolitan Macarius of Corinth and St Nicodemus the Hagiorite. The *Philokalia* is a collection of patristic and Hesychast writings concerning interior prayer and the monastic life. It was printed in Venice in 1782. It is divided into two parts. The first includes the writings of Anthony the Great, Isaiah, Evagrius, Cassian, Mark, Hesychius, John Damascene, Philemon, Theognost, Philotheus of Sinai, Elias and Theophane. The second part contains treatises of Peter of Damascus, Simeon Metaphrastes, Symeon the New Theologian, Nicetas Stethatos, Theoleptus, Nicephorus, Gregory of Sinai, Gregory Palamas, Callixtus and Ignatius Xanthopulos, Callixtus the Patriarch, Callixtus Angelikudes, Callixtus Cataphygiotes, Symeon of Thessalonica, Mark of Ephesus and Maximus Kapsokalyvitis. Paisius translated only twenty-five treatises out of thirty-six. He named his translation *Dobrotolyubie* or *Love of Beauty*.

Gabriel Petrov (1730-1801), Metropolitan of St Petersburg, printed the *Dobrotolyubie* in 1793. This edition was quickly sold and rapidly spread through Russia. Among Paisius' monks in Rumania and Mount Athos there were many Rus-

sians. Some of them returned home and settled in various monasteries. They brought the Hesychast spirituality to Russia. The nineteenth century witnessed the Golden Age of Russian mysticism which, in modern times, can only be compared to the Golden Age of the Spanish mystics in the sixteenth century. This Golden Age coincided with the renewed monastic expansion in Russia. Over 300 new monasteries were founded in the nineteenth century, nearly 200 of them during the reign of Alexander III which lasted barely thirteen years. By 1900 there were in Russia 800 monasteries, of which 300 were for women. There were 17,000 professed monks and nuns and 30,000 novices. In 1914 there were in Russia 11,845 professed monks and 9,485 novices, while the number of nuns reached 17,283 with 56,016 novices. Several monasteries numbered over 1,000 members. A good many monasteries were running schools, hospitals, homes for the aged and printing presses. They attracted vast crowds of pilgrims.

Many mystics lived in Russia in the nineteenth century. They can be divided into several groups. The first includes two bishops, Ignatius Brianchaninov (1807-1867) and Theophane Govorov (1815-1894). Bishop Brianchaninov was a nobleman and an army officer before he became a monk. He left six volumes of ascetical and mystical writings which were widely read by Russians in search of perfection. Trained by the monks of Optino, Ignatius became abbot of St Sergius' Monastery near St Petersburg in 1834. In 1857 he was consecrated Bishop of Caucasus but within four years he resigned and retired to Nikolo-Babaev Monastery in order to live a strictly contemplative life.

Bishop Theophane, after a brilliant scholastic career as professor and rector of various seminaries, went to the Holy Land, Syria, Egypt and Constantinople in 1847 for scholarly research. He also visited Rome and had an audience with Pius IX. Returning to Russia in 1855 as rector of St Petersburg Academy, Theophane was consecrated bishop of Tambov in 1859. Transferred to Vladimir in 1863, he resigned three years later and retired to the Monastery of Vysh. During his twenty-eight years as a recluse, Theophane published several

books on the spiritual life. In his principal mystical work, *The Way of Salvation,* Theophane summed up his teaching. The goal of human life is union with God. The way to this goal is faith and life according to Christ's commandments. We are saved by the grace of the Holy Spirit which is ours without cost because of our redemption by Christ. The Church is our guide. We attain to interior purification by ascetical exercises and become Christlike. There are three stages in the interior life: beginning, growth and perfection. The description of this process by Theophane is a masterpiece, hardly equalled in mystical literature.

In 1877 Theophane published the first Russian edition, in five volumes, of *Dobrotolyubie,* which he had translated from Greek. The Russian edition is longer than the Slavonic. It was printed at the Russian Monastery of St Panteleimon on Mount Athos and has been reprinted three times. Theophane published also *The Ancient Monastic Rules of Pachomius the Great, Basil the Great, John Cassian and Benedict.* He also published *The Spiritual Combat* by Lorenzo Scupoli (1529-1610), an Italian mystical writer of the Counterreformation period. But he made a great many changes in his translation of Scupoli. The writings of Theophane made a deep impression on the Russian monks, clergy and laity who were attracted to the contemplative life.

The second and most remarkable group of Russian mystics of this period was centered around the renowned Monastery of Optino. Founded in the sixteenth century, Optino became prominent only in the nineteenth when it produced its three great Startzy, or spiritual directors, Fathers Leonid Nagolkin (1769-1841), Macarius Ivanov (1783-1860) and Ambrose Grenkov (1812-1891). Several other great contemplatives were connected with Optino, including the two brothers Putilov; Moses was abbot of Optino (1962) and Anthony, abbot of Maloyaroslavetz. The Staretz Basil Kishkin and the anonymous author of the celebrated Russian mystical classic *Tales of the Russian Pilgrim* belong to the same circle. Macarius Ivanov, Ambrose Grenkov and Anthony Putilov left very illuminating letters of direction.

Father Macarius published several of the Slavonic translations made by Paisius Velichkovsky. In this work he was assisted by the Russian philosopher Ivan Kyreevsky (1806-1856) and some of the monks. Altogether sixteen titles were published. They include Barsanuphius the Great, John, Symeon the New Theologian, Theodore Studite, Maximus the Confessor, Isaac the Syrian, Thalassius, Dorotheus, Mark, Orisius and Isaiah. Most of these books were published in Slavonic, but some in Russian. They greatly influenced the revival of mystical life in Russia. The Startzy of Optino directed several eminent Russians, authors, ministers and statesmen, like N. Gogol, S. Shevirev, M. Pogodin, L. Kavelin, A. Norov, A. Muraviev, T. Filipov, C. Leontiev and C. Zedergolm. Four great Russian writers and thinkers, T. Dostoevsky, L. Tolstoy, V. Soloviev and B. Rozanov visited the Staretz Ambrose. Dostoevsky tried to picture him as the Staretz Zosima in *Brothers Karamazov* and Vladimir Sloviev did the same for his Staretz John in *Three Conversations*. The Monastery of Optino was closed by the Soviet government in 1923 and its last Staretz, Father Nectarius, died in 1928.

The third group of the Russian mystics centers around the great Sarov Monastery, founded about 1700. Its greatest representative was Seraphim Moshnin (1759-1833), canonized by the Russian Church in 1904. He is the most popular saint of modern Russia as well as its most profound mystic. St Seraphim himself left *Instructions,* while his sayings are recorded by his friends and disciples. His *Talks with Motovilov* on the purpose of Christian life is a classic of Russian mysticism. During this conversation the phenomenon of the transfiguration of St Seraphim occured. It is fully described by Motovilov. According to St Seraphim the goal of Christian life is the acquisition of the grace of the Holy Spirit. This grace was given to Adam but was lost by him through his sin. Christ redeemed us and gave us back this grace. We all receive it when we are baptized and confirmed but lose it afterwards by our sins. We can regain the lost grace by penance, Holy Communion, true faith and Christlike living. When this is done, we become temples of the Holy Spirit. Those who

attain the highest degree of this sanctification are transfigured as Christ was on the Mount Thabor.

To the same group belong Father Mark the Hermit, Nazarius, abbot of Valaam (1735-1809), Staretz Theodore Ushakov, abbot of Sanaksar, and others. Some writings by Nazarius and Theodore remain. Abbot Nazarius introduced into Valaam many patristic and mystical writings. This monastery later produced several first class mystics, particularly Abbot Damaskin (1795-1881), Abbot Khariton and Father Michael the Recluse. Abbot Damaskin and Khariton left some writings. I have described my conversations with Father Michael in many articles and in a book *Father Michael, Recluse of Uusi Valamo.*[5]

The fourth group of the Russian mystics is made up of the solitaries of the Roslavl Forests. About thirty contemplatives developed in these forests. In addition to the brothers Putilov, mentioned above, the group includes Father Adrian, abbot of Konevetz, Father Zosima Verkhovsky (1767-1833) and Staretz Vasilisk. The latter two contemplatives spent many years as solitaries in Siberia and left remarkable writings. Staretz Daniel of Achinsk (1784-1843) was another remarkable Siberian mystic, although he is not connected with Father Zosima and Staretz Vasilisk.

A fifth group of Russian mystics gravitated around Kiev. Its central figure was the Metropolitan of Kiev, Philarete Amfiteatrov, who did much to revive the Monastery of Optino as Bishop of Kaluga. To this group belongs Father Parthenius of Kiev, and Archimandrite Lawrence, Superior of Iversky Monastery in Novgorod.

The sixth group of Russian mystics is connected with Mount Athos. It has several remarkable men, Father John of Modavia, Abbot Parthenius of Guslitsi, Father Arsenius, Father Jerome Solomentsev (1803-1885), Father Hilarion of the Caucasus, Staretz Siluan and the still living Father Ilian. All these mystics belong to the pure Hesychast tradition and some of them have left treatises of a great depth.

5. Oxford, 1956.

While in the Latin Church, particularly in the modern period, there were a great many women mystics such as St Theresa of Avila, St Thérèse of Lisieux and St Margaret Mary of Paray-le-Monial, there were few in the Russian Church. Still there were some, like Abbess Mary of Makhrishky, Princess Serafima Odoevsky, who lived in the fifteenth century and Taisia Solopov, abbess of Leushin at the end of the Imperial period, and others. Abbess Taisia left memoirs of great value.

In the present book only the Russian mystics who belonged to the Orthodox Church and were either religious or closely connected with the monasteries are studied. There were in Russia also a number of mystics among the diocesan clergy, like the celebrated Father John of Kronstadt of whom we will say something, and among the laity. This book would become too long and unwieldly if all were included. For the same reason nothing is said about the Russian mystics who belonged to various non-conformist sects.

CHAPTER I

RUSSIAN MONASTICISM TO THE END OF THE FIFTEENTH CENTURY

THE RUSSIAN NATION came into being in the ninth century. At that period several scattered Slavonic tribes occupied what is now Western Russia, living along the Volkhov and the Dnieper and their tributaries. These tribes, partly hunters, partly agriculturists, were nature-worshippers in their religion. They lived in small isolated communities under a patriarchal regime. The great plain was politically unorganized although the civilized and powerful states of Byzantine, the Volga Bulgarians and the Khazars lay on its borders.

Scandinavian adventurers, traders and robbers, known to the Slavs as Varyags, travelling along the Volkhov and the Dnieper to Constantinople, explored this Slavonic country and gradually subjected it to their overlordship, founding an enormous but loosely organized state. Tradition dates it from 862, when a Scandinavian chieftain, named Rurik settled in Aldeigjuborg on the lake of Ladoga. Rurik, who died in 879, is recognized as the first Russian sovereign. He and his son Igor were pagans like the majority of their Norse soldiers. Nevertheless, Christianity had already found converts among these turbulent and cruel warriors and in Kiev, the capital of the Russian state, a Christian church and community existed long before St Vladimir (972-1015), who is regarded as the Apostle of Russia.

Christianity came to the Varyags both from the Latin West and from the Byzantine East. The Latin prelates appeared in

Scandinavia in 823, when Archbishop Ebbo of Rheims, visited Denmark hoping to evangelize this country. In 826 King Harald of Jutland was baptized with his family. St Anscar, a Benedictine monk from Corbie Abbey in Picardy, dedicated his life to the conversion of Scandinavia. In 826 he visited Denmark, and in 829 and 831 Sweden. By that time he had been consecrated bishop. In 834 the Pope made him Archbishop of Hamburg and Papal Legate in the North. In 853 Anscar again visited Sweden, in 859 he gave Sweden its first bishop, a Danish monk named Rimbert. St Anscar died in 865.

Although the Varyags were overwhelmingly pagan, they knew something of the Latins. Baron Michael von Taube in his book on early Russian Christianity thinks that Askold, Varyag Prince of Kiev, was baptized in 862 and probably by a Latin priest because he assumed the name of Nicholas after his contemporary, Pope Nicholas I.[1]

On the other side some Varyags settled in colonies in Crimea. There they mixed with those Goths who remained there after their cousins moved to the West. There, too, they entered into contact with the Byzantines. The Crimean Goths had been Christians for some time. They possessed the Scriptures and the liturgical books in their own language. The Varyags probably received the Christian faith from them.

In any case the celebrated Patriarch Photius of Constantinople announced in 867 in his Encyclical to the Eastern Patriarchs that the Russians had decided to become Christians and had requested him to send them a bishop.[2] Scholars still cannot agree where this bishop was sent and who he was. According to Russian tradition the name of this bishop was Michael. While some scholars believe that he was sent to the Azov-Crimean Russians to revive the ancient See of Tamatarkha, others suppose he went to Kiev at the request of Askold.

Meanwhile a pagan reaction led to the assassination of Askold in 882 and to the occupation of Kiev by Oleg, who succeeded Rurik in the North. The pagan reaction did not

1. Michael von Taube, *Rome et la Russie avant l'invasion des Tatares* (Paris, 1947), pp. 128-129.
2. E. Golubinsky, *Istoriya Russkoi Tserkvi*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1900-1901), 1:51.

succeed in wiping out Christianity in Kiev. It survived so well that in the reign of Igor (913-945) the Christian Varyags already possessed in Kiev a collegiate church of St Elias, undoubtedly a daughter church of the similar Varyag church in Constantinople, where many Scandinavians served in the Imperial guard. The Christians were so numerous among the Russians of Kiev that in the treaty of Igor with the Eastern Empire in 944, they took the oath to observe the treaty together with their heathen cousins. They even promised to watch after its observance by the heathen.

Olga, who succeeded her husband, Igor, as Regent for her small son, Svyatoslav, became Christian herself in 954, taking the name of Helen. In 957 she visited Constantinople, where she was well received by the Emperor Constantin Porphyrogeneiis, who described her visit in the well known work Εκθεοις της βασιλεῖου τάξεως[3] In 959 Olga sent an embassy to the Holy Roman Emperor, Otto the Great. According to Western chroniclers, she requested Otto to send a bishop with priests to Kiev. A Benedictine monk, St Adalbert, of St Maximin's Abbey in Trier, was sent to Kiev in 961 but the very next year he came back, prevented from settling in Kiev by pagan opposition.[4] He became afterwards the first Archbishop of Magdeburg.

Svyatoslav (942-972), son of Igor and Olga, was the last typical Viking who ruled in Kiev, although he already adopted a Slavonic name. Many of his entourage also began to adopt Slavonic names and to worship Slavonic gods. The Scandinavians and the Slavs began to fuse, forming one Russian nation. Although many attempts have been made to explain who the original Russians were, the most satisfying is the following. They were almost certainly Swedes, predominantly natives of Rosgalen, in the present province of Uppland.[5] Danes and Norwegians joined in from time to time. All Scandinavians who raided the Eastern European plains were called Russians by the Slavs and the Finns alike.

3. PG 112:1108.
4. Pertz, *Monumenta Germaniae Historica,* 1, 624.
5. K. Tiander, *Frankfurter Zeitung,* May 24, 1927.

Svyatoslav, a true Viking adventurer, had no sympathy with Christianity. He believed it effeminate and unworthy of a soldier. He spent his short life in wars with the Khazars, the Bulgarians and the Byzantines. He occupied Bulgaria and liked that country so much that he wanted to transfer his capital there. The Byzantine Emperor, John Zimisces, however, forced Svyatoslav out of Bulgaria. However, Svyatoslav's stay in Bulgaria greatly influenced the fortunes of Christianity among the Eastern Slavs. Under Svyatoslav many Christian Bulgarians came to Kiev as prisoners of war or allies. They helped to spread Slavonic Christianity in the capital.

The conversion of Bulgaria was the work of Clementi, Naum and Angelyar, disciples of St Cyril and St Methodius, Apostles of the Slavs. It took place in the ninth century. Boris, ruler of Bulgaria, could not make up his mind for a long time what form of Christianity to adopt, Latin or Byzantine. Both Pope Nicholas I and Photius, Patriarch of Constantinople, were eager to win Bulgaria over. Their rivalry produced the first dangerous rift between Eastern and Western Christendom. Finally, Bulgaria went over to the Byzantines. Very likely the fact that the Byzantines agreed to allow the Bulgarians to use their native language in the liturgy decided the choice. The rise of Bulgaria under the Tsar Symeon resulted in the independence of the Bulgarian Church in 927. The Byzantines conceded to the Bulgarians the right to elect their own Patriarch and to manage their own affairs. A few decades later the Bulgarian Church numbered thirty dioceses and was very flourishing.[6] At the same time not only the Holy Scriptures and liturgical services but many patristic writings and other texts were translated into Macedonian Slavonic which was then easily understood by all the Slavs.

The sudden death of Svyatoslav led to an internal struggle among his sons for the succession. His third son, St Vladimir, finally came out on top. This able statesman quickly realized that his enormous but loosely connected state, formed by an uneasy alliance of Scandinavian adventurers, Slavonic traders

6. Makarij Moskovskij, *Istoria Russkoi Cerkvi* (Moscow, 1889), p. 129.