

## Christianity and the 19th Century Russian Novel

Dairmid Gunn

This Saturday, 20 November, marks the one hundredth anniversary of the death of Leo Tolstoy, author of *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, two of the most celebrated books in literary history. Tolstoy's novels, and those of his contemporaries such as Dostoevsky, occupy an important place in Russia's complex religious and social history, which itself found expression through 19<sup>th</sup> century Russian literature, as Dairmid Gunn describes.

In literary circles the emergence of the Russian novel as a powerful force in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is often described as an inexplicable phenomenon. That a country that had seemingly lagged behind Western Europe in cultural and political terms should produce in little over 40 years such eminent writers as Gogol, Turgenev, Dostoyevsky and Tolstoy certainly demands an explication. That explication lies deep in the history of Russia.



now the Russian language. Church Slavonic continued to be used as a liturgical language.

The 13<sup>th</sup> century saw the invasion and destruction of Kiev by the Mongols, 'the Golden Horde' under Batu, and the centre of gravity of Christian Russia moved to the northern towns of Novgorod, Vladimir and later Moscow. These towns, although under the suzerainty of the Mongols or Tartars, continued to trade and maintained a

The adoption of the Christian faith in 988 by the ancient city of Kiev, the cradle of Russian history and civilisation, owed much to its historical attachment to Constantinople, the capital of an empire and the southern end of a trade route from the Baltic. Before the great schism between the Church of Rome and the Eastern Churches in 1054 two Greek monks, Cyril and Methodius, had gone on a proselytising mission to central Europe using a southern Slavonic language and a Greek based alphabet, thereafter called the Cyrillic alphabet. Subsequently the language was used to spread Christianity in Serbia and Bulgaria before being used in Kiev. In Kiev it was called Church Slavonic and became both the liturgical and literary language of the state. The everyday language, Russian, an eastern Slavonic language, shared the alphabet of the more refined church language. This linguistic duality existed until the 18<sup>th</sup> century when the two languages were fused together to form what is

distinct Russian identity. Their presence provided a platform for resistance from invading forces from Western crusaders in 1242 and the defeat of the Tartars in 1380. The confidence that grew from these victories led to the development of the powerful state of Muscovy and the increased influence of the Church on secular affairs in a period of creative icon painting inspired by such artists as Theophanes the Greek, Andrei Rublev and Dyonisius. After the fall of Constantinople to the Turks, in 1453 Moscow assumed even greater importance and status. The Grand Prince Ivan III married the niece of the last Byzantine Emperor and hailed his country as the Third Rome. With this title, the Russians claimed to have a messianic role as the protector of Eastern Christianity. In 1549 as an outward manifestation of this, Ivan's son, Ivan IV, better known as Ivan the Terrible, was crowned Tsar or Caesar. Forty years later the Patriarchate of Russia was formed, marking a break from the

ecclesiastical authority of Constantinople. The new autocephalous Church of Russia was quick to flex its muscles. The 17<sup>th</sup> century witnessed a power struggle between Church and State with the latter emerging as the stronger force.

This clash between Church and State was not lost on Russia's great Westerniser and reformer, Peter the Great (1682-1725). In his admiration of the West and his desire to create a powerful and centralised state with the newly built St Petersburg as its capital, the Tsar saw the Church as a symbol of Russianness that was important but which had to be kept outside the power nexus. To this end he abolished the Patriarchate and established in lieu a Holy Synod on Lutheran lines, controlled by his representative, the General Procurator. The Church had become a department of state. This was a devastating blow to the Orthodox Church in Russia and one that had serious consequences in the struggle between Christianity and atheism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The powerful Empress, Catherine II (1762-1796), better known as Catherine the Great, cemented many of Peter's ideas and continued what she thought was a policy of enlightenment. She did much to destroy the influence of the monasteries (a challenge to her Western ideas and a source of more revenue for the state), extended her empire to the south and corresponded with the great French writers and philosophers of the time. A serious revolt in Russia, the Pugachev Rebellion, and the French Revolution were to change her 'liberal' views and return her to the familiar structure of autocracy. But events outside Russia could not be controlled. The early years of the 19<sup>th</sup> century were dominated by the rise of Napoleon and the eventual invasion by him of Russia. The invasion unleashed a wave of patriotism in the country and a resurrection of the idea of a Holy Russia, a Russia with a mission; the creation of a new and rich literary language through the fusion of Russian and Church Slavonic provided an instrument for the flowering of Russian poetry, especially that of Russia's greatest poet, Alexander Pushkin; the French Revolution per se interested political circles and the image of a man of power such as Napoleon fascinated. In short, the first quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a period of intense intellectual and cultural activity; Russia had

been rudely opened to Western ways and thoughts, and at the same time made aware of its own history and cultural inheritance.

In December 1825 a group of officers, many of whom had been to France after the defeat of Napoleon, staged a revolt in St Petersburg, a revolt that was ruthlessly suppressed by the newly enthroned Tsar, Nicholas I. Any ideas of democratic change were suppressed and replaced by a severe form of autocracy. The Tsar or Emperor distrusted the nobility and ensured that the more important posts in his administration were filled by men from the other sections of society. It was in this atmosphere of intimidation and fear that the first great Russian novelist, Nicolai Gogol (1809-1852), a member of the lesser nobility, appeared on the literary scene. After making his name with colourful and fantastic descriptions of country life in his native Ukraine, Gogol moved on to more universal themes. His emphasis was placed on the smug self-satisfied attitudes of society at all levels. The Russian word *poshlost* that he used frequently can mean banality, triviality, pretentiousness and petty conceit. He added to this unflattering list of negative qualities the absence of any sense of spirituality. In the novella, *The Greatcoat*, a key book in Russian literature, he portrays a man on the bottom rung of society in a way that can inspire pity and compassion. His pathetic obsession over acquiring a new greatcoat to improve his status among his colleagues is seen by Gogol, however, as merely a facade behind which the protagonist hides his spiritual nakedness. This view was not always understood by political reformers, who applauded Gogol's seemingly sympathetic depiction of the poor and despised. The theme of spiritual bankruptcy permeates Gogol's great play of mistaken identity, *The Inspector General*, and his famous picaresque novel on trade in dead serfs for use as co-lateral, *Dead Souls*. In that book he likens Russia to a troika out of control heading to an unknown destination. After a form of nervous breakdown Gogol considered that what he had written was sinful and destroyed the second volume of *Dead Souls*, a sad move that ended his project of a trilogy on the lines of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Gogol's pessimism, however, was a wake-up call for Russians to look at themselves and be concerned about their fallen state.

The 1840s saw the beginning of a rift between two general movements in educated society – the Westerners and the Slavophiles. The former imbibed the philosophy of Hegel and Marx and saw in this a blueprint for the creation of a perfect state or Utopia. For them The Emancipation of the serfs in 1861 was not enough to satisfy their craving for secular reform. The group in society who agitated for change were called the intelligentsia and among its members were people of modest rank recruited for government service during the reign of Nicholas I. The Slavophiles clung to traditional beliefs based on the Christianity and saw a better state evolving from them. That the Orthodox Church was considered a department of an autocratic state did not help their cause in opposing the ideas of the Westernisers. For any opposing view to be articulated in a meaningful way, help had to be sought from two great Russian authors – Fyodor Dostoyevsky and Leo Tolstoy. Before the appearance of their finest work another giant of Russian literature, Ivan Turgenev, had described most powerfully the intellectual scene immediately prior to the Emancipation of the Serfs. Like Gogol's *The Greatcoat*, Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* is a key book in Russian literature. It depicts a clash of generations and beliefs. The most memorable character, Bazarov, is described as a nihilist, an early use of that term in literature. Although the Westernised aristocrat Turgenev was no supporter of the Church, his book indirectly shows the triumph of old customs and Christianity over the extreme negativism of nihilism.

Before Dostoyevsky entered the lists as a Christian writer he had undergone experiences that would have broken the spirit of most men. Because of a flirtation with a revolutionary set in St Petersburg following the success of an epistolary novel, *Poor Folk* (1844), Dostoyevsky had to endure imprisonment, hard labour and army service for 10 years. His exile had been a sort of brutal 'retreat' but from it he emerged with his faith in Christ strengthened and without any feeling of bitterness. His description of convict life in *The House of the Dead* is remarkably mild and forgiving. His first great novel, *Crime and Punishment* reflects scenes from the New Testament and portrays punishment more in terms of troubled conscience than physical confinement in prison. In *The Idiot* he opposes the idea espoused by Ernest Renan in his *Vie de Jésus* that Christ was a good man, but not Divine, and shows the chaos the pursuance of such a belief can cause. In

*The Devils* he mercilessly attacks terrorists and their aims. But it is in his last book, *The Brothers Karamazov* that he portrays in depth the fundamental clash between the brilliant rationalist, Ivan, and his deeply religious younger brother, Alyosha. No book could be more powerful and Christian.

But what of Tolstoy? By the time of Dostoyevsky's death he had written both *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* – two of the greatest books in world literature. As a creator of character and story teller, Tolstoy has few equals. His lofty ideals simply seep into his stories and add an extra dimension to them. His own search for enlightenment and self realisation is reflected in the characters of Pierre Bezukhov in *War and Peace* and Constantine Levin in *Anna Karenina*. Bezukhov's moment of enlightenment comes as a result of his contact with a simple Russian soldier during the retreat from Moscow, and Levin seeks solace and meaning in the calm acceptance of the rhythm of life and the teachings of the Church among the peasants of his estate. Tolstoy's beliefs, although godly and of a lofty and serious nature, were not Christocentric. Indeed after his so-called conversion in 1878 he turned his back on the conventional religion of the Orthodox Church and was ultimately excommunicated from it.

Both writers were hugely influential in promoting spiritual beliefs in a country that was being beset by materialism in all its forms. If there had not been the excessively harsh reaction to the assassination of Emperor Alexander II in 1881, their influence on the more moderate members of society could perhaps have led to the evolution of a more democratic state and the avoidance of the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, the emergence of the totalitarian and atheistic state of Soviet Russia. No greater tribute to the influence of both these men can be paid than the appearance in the Soviet Union of the 1950s of Boris Pasternak's profoundly Christian novel, *Dr Zhivago*.

*Dairmid Gunn is a vice president of the Scotland-Russia Forum, a charitable organisation dedicated to improving understanding between the two countries through cultural exchanges and contacts of all kinds on a non political basis. In his career in the Royal Navy he served as a naval attaché in the British Embassy in Moscow in the 1960's. He is a fluent Russian speaker.*