

**Russian W4006: Modern Russian Religious Thought**

**Liza Knapp**

**Spring 2009**

Monday, Wednesday, 9:10-10:25.

The course explores Russian religious thought of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, with special attention to its close ties to the Russian literary tradition. Works by religious thinkers will be read in conjunction with relevant literary texts and works of literary criticism written from a religious perspective. Knowledge of Russian is not required. Texts may be read in English translation or in Russian (or French) original. Open to undergraduate and graduate students.

Week 1 (Wednesday only): **Introduction and Background**

Week 2: **Petr Chaadaev's Questions about Russia's Otherness and Religious Identity.** Chaadaev jolted Russian religious thought into action by asking disturbing questions about the Russian condition of isolation from the rest of Europe. We will read from his letters and "apology" as well as a few responses, from Pushkin in his own time to Mandelstam.

**Readings:** Petr Chaadaev, Excerpts from "Philosophical Letters" and "Apology of a Madman"; Alexander Pushkin, responses to Chaadaev in letter and verse; Fedor Tiutchev, letter; Osip Mandel'shtam, essay "Petr Chaadaev" and poem "Posokh moi, moia svoboda..."  
Recommended: Mikhail Gershenzon, Alexandre Koyré on Chaadaev.

Week 3: **Slavophile Answers (Aleksei Khomiakov and Ivan Kireevsky) with Gogol's Diagnosis.** Slavophile intellectuals attempted to find answers in Russian Orthodoxy and in their vision of the Russian people. Also read will be short stories by Gogol where the hero's identity crisis has spiritual and national ramifications.

**Readings:** Aleksei Khomiakov: "The Church Is One" and "Some Remarks by an Orthodox Christian on the Western Confessions of Faith"; "Tebia prizval na bran' sviatuiu..." (poem); excerpts from Pavel Florensky's "Around Khomiakov" and Nikolai Berdiaev's *Aleksei Stepanovich Khomiakov*. Ivan Kireevsky: "On the Necessity and Possibility of New Principles in Philosophy." Fedor Tiutchev, "Eti bednye selen'ia." Nikolai Gogol, "Diary of a Madman" and "The Nose"  
Recommended criticism on Gogol: Konstantin Mochulsky's *Dukhovnyi put' Gogolia*; Robert Maguire, *Exploring Gogol*

Week 4: **Russian Piety in Practice: Pilgrims, Elders, Monks, Holy Fools, and Others.** We will explore varieties of Russian religious experience, including: the journal of an anonymous pilgrim-wanderer, who was associated with renewed interest in hesychasm and the "Jesus Prayer"; the conversations of Serafim of Sarov (1759-1833), a beloved elder, with one of his spiritual children; literature about holy fools.

**Readings:** [anonymous], *The Way of the Pilgrim*. "Conversation of St. Seraphim of Sarov with Nicholas Motovilov concerning the Aim of a Christian Life." Literature on Optina Pustyn' Monastery. Excerpts from studies on holy fools and from literary works (Tolstoy's *Childhood*; Dostoevsky's *Demons*).

Week 5: **Landmarks in Russian Religious Thought: Vladimir Soloviev's "Godmanhood" and Nikolai Fyodorov's "Resurrecting the Fathers".** (a) Soloviev's 1876 "Lectures on Godmanhood," attended by Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and scores of others, had an enormous impact on the course of Russian religious thought thereafter. Our reading of excerpts from the Lectures will be followed by Dostoevsky's story "The Meek One." (What Soloviev theorizes, Dostoevsky presents in fiction.)

(b) Nikolai Fyodorov, considered one of the most original Russian thinkers ever, envisioned a "project" for creating universal brotherhood and resurrecting the dead. We will read from his teachings, along with responses by Dostoevsky and Tolstoy.

**Readings:** (a) Vladimir Soloviev: selections from "Lectures on Godmanhood." Fyodor Dostoevsky: "The Meek One" and diary entry of 1864.

(b) "The Question of Brotherhood or Relatedness, and of the Reasons for the Unbrotherly, Dis-Related, or Unpeaceful State of the World, and of the Means for the Restoration of Relatedness" and other selections

from *Philosophy of the Common Task*. Selected responses, both direct and indirect, to Fyodorov (Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Zabolotsky, possibly others).

Recommended for next few weeks: responses to Dostoevsky by Russian religious thinkers: Ivanov, Berdyaev, Rozanov, Bulgakov.

**Week 6: Dostoevsky and “The Jewish Question”; Soloviev and “The Jews and the Christian Question.”** We will address the question of Dostoevsky’s anti-semitism as well his vision of a Russian Orthodox theocracy. Soloviev diverged from Dostoevsky on these issues.

**Readings:** Dostoevsky: selections from “Diary of a Writer” including “Pushkin Speech” and “The Jewish Question.” Soloviev: Dostoevsky speeches; “The Jews and the Christian Question.” Dmitrii Merezhkovsky, “The Jewish Question as a Russian Question.”

Maxim Shrayer, “The Jewish Question and *The Brothers Karamazov*” and Joseph Frank, “The Jewish Question” (chapter 16 of *The Mantle of the Prophet*); Paul Vallière on Soloviev’s essay in *Modern Russian Theology*.

Recommended: Leonid Tsypkin, *Summer in Baden-Baden*; Gary Saul Morson, “Dostoevsky’s Anti-Semitism and the Critics: A Review Article.”

**Weeks 7: Sacraments and Liturgical Life in Dogma and Fiction.**

Russian Orthodox theologians often argue for the centrality of liturgy to Orthodox spirituality. We will read works on liturgy by theologians (Bulgakov; Schmemmann), a layman (Gogol), then look at fictional representations of sacred moments from a variety of perspectives.

**Readings:** Sergii Bulgakov, “The Eucharistic Dogma.” Nikolai Gogol, “On the Divine Liturgy.” Fyodor Dostoevsky, [convicts take communion] in *Notes from the House of the Dead*; “Cana of Galilee” in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Lev Tolstoy, [Natasha prepares for communion and goes to church] in *War and Peace*; [Levin confesses; Levin gets married] in *Anna Karenina*; [eucharist] in *Resurrection*; Anton Chekhov, tbd

**Week 8: What Tolstoy Believed?: A Life of Religious Thought**

In the late 1870s, religious thinking moved to the forefront of Tolstoy’s writing, with fiction all but banished. He sought God in his own way and ended up being excommunicated from the Russian Orthodox Church in 1901. We will read excerpts from his early fiction, where the seeds of his later views may be found, and then focus on religious works.

**Readings:** Lev Tolstoy, selected passages from *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*; “Confession”; selections from “What, Then, Should Be Done?,” “What I Believe,” and “The Kingdom of God Is Within You”; “I Cannot Be Silent”; selected short works written and adapted “for the people.” Sergii Bulgakov: “Simplicity and Simplification” & Nikolai Berdiaev, “Old and New Testaments in the Religious Consciousness of L. Tolstoy.”

Richard Gustafson, *Resident and Stranger*. Hugh McLean, “Tolstoy and Jesus”

**Week 9: The Images of Mary in Religious Culture: Icon, Prayer, Verse, Prose.**

We will study the central role of Mary, the Mother of God, in Russian spirituality and religious thought. Various forms of religious expression, from high and low culture, will be addressed, from folk poetry, to icons, to the literary canon. Some attention will also be given to other Marys in Orthodox culture: Mary Magdalen, Mary of Egypt.

**Readings:** Sergii Bulgakov, selections from *The Burning Bush*; Alexander Shmemann, *On the Virgin Mary*; [Pavel Florensky, ch. 10, *Pillar and Ground of Truth*]. Ouspensky, Rowan Williams, and others on icons of Mary. Anton Chekhov, “Peasants” and other stories. Nikolai Gogol, “Taras Bulba” Selected poems from the literary canon and from folk culture (*dukhovnye stikhi*).

Julie de Sherbinin, introduction and selections from *Chekhov and Russian Religious Culture: The Poetics of the Marian Paradigm*; Vera Shevzov, “Scripting the Gaze: Liturgy, Homilies, and the Kazan Icon of the Mother of God in Late Imperial Russia” and “The Message of Mary”

**Week 10: Love and Sophia in the Silver Age**

We will look at modernist manifestations of religious thought, with particular attention to the impact of Soloviev’s teachings on love and Sophia.

**Readings:** Vladimir Soloviev, “The Meaning of Love” and selections from *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings* (ed. by Judith Kornblatt); poems by Silver Age poets; essays on Soloviev and Sophia by Richard Gustafson, Judith Kornblatt; Paul Valliere; (suggested) monograph by Mochulsky. Viacheslav Ivanov, “The Crisis of Individualism”; Vasilii Rozanov, “Sweetest Jesus and the Bitter Fruits of the World”

**Week 11: Truth, Image, and the Word in the Writings of Pavel Florensky.**

By reading from his work on aesthetics and language, as well as from his major work, we will see how Florensky brought Orthodox theology into dialogue with modernist concerns.

**Readings:** selections, including Letters 5 (“The Comforter”), 10 (“Sophia”) & 11 (“Friendship”) from *The Pillar and Ground of the Truth: An Essay in Orthodox Theodicy in Twelve Letters*; “Inverse Perspective” & “Iconostasis”; “Stroenie slova” & “Antinomiia slova”

Recommended: Steven Cassedy on Florenskii and language; Stephen Hutchings on Florensky and aesthetics; Katerina Clark, Michael Holquist, and others on Florensky and Bakhtin. Selections from Stephen Hutchings: *Russian Modernism: The Transfiguration of the Everyday*.

**Week 12: Russian Religious Ideas Abroad: Nikolai Berdiaev; Lev Shestov.** Berdiaev championed “freedom” and “creativity.” He is known for making Russian religious thought known in the West, although some of his contemporaries did not feel he spoke for them. Lev Shestov, often compared to Kierkegaard, rejected rationalism and embraced a radical faith in an irrational God. He was also the author of brilliant critical works on the Russian classics (Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov).

**Readings:** *to be determined; they will include, in both cases, samples of philosophical work and of responses to the work of others; the readings will be weighed more heavily to Shestov.*

**Week 13: Russian Religious Ideas Abroad: Sergei Bulgakov and Elizaveta Skobtsova (Mother Maria).** The religious thought of each bears the imprint of the times they lived through, from avant-garde beginnings to church life in the Paris emigration. Each had a new vision of how Russian Orthodoxy should respond to the human condition. Central to Bulgakov’s legacy was his sophiology. Mother Maria called for a life of active love and presented imitation of the Mother of God as the model.

**Readings:** Sergii Bulgakov, Excerpts from *The Burning Bush* and from *Sophia, the Wisdom of God: An Outline of Sophiology*; “Meditations on the Joy of the Resurrection” (sermons)

Elizaveta Skobtsova (Mother Mariia): “On the Imitation of the Mother of God”

Recommended: Paul Valliere, section on Bulgakov in *Modern Russian Theology*; Sergei Hackel, *The Pearl of Great Price: The Life of Mother Maria Skobtsova, 1891-1945*.

**Week 14 (Monday only): Conclusion.** We will read literary works through the lens of Russian religious thought. [Texts, to be determined; among the possibilities are: poetry on religious themes, such as Akmatova’s “Requiem,” Tsvetaeva’s “Magdalena,” Pasternak’s “Zhivago” poems (or the whole novel), Brodsky’s Christmas poems, or other suggestions from the class].

**Texts:** where copyright allows, required readings will be posted on electronic course reserve or as “course files” on Courseworks. (I’m assuming that students will prefer this to buying a course reader.) Suggested readings will be at the Reserve Desk of Butler Library. Some of the books, such as *The Way of the Pilgrim*, Judith Kornblatt’s forthcoming *Divine Sophia: The Wisdom Writings of Vladimir Soloviev*, and Soloviev’s *The Meaning of Love*, will be on order at Book Culture.

**Requirements for undergraduates:** regular attendance, careful reading of the required texts, participation in class and short presentation; weekly short written responses to the reading (less than 250 words per week); final exam (3 hours, at the scheduled time).

**Requirements for graduate students taking the course for a letter grade:** same as for undergraduates plus a 5-6 page paper *due at the last class*.

**Requirements for graduate students taking the course for R credit:** regular attendance and careful reading of the required texts, participation in class. Students who miss a class will be required to submit the written response for that week within a week or take the final exam.