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Anton Chekhov: Atheist, Agnostic, or Struggling Orthodox Christian?

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I

The question of Chekhov's Christianity and his relationship with the Orthodox Church continues to be debated. Even Father Alexander Schmemann, who lauded Chekhov's deep insights into the complexities of the human person brought about by his religious and medical backgrounds, could not confidently state that he was a man of the Church.[1]

Anton Chekhov, c. 1902.

This article does not pretend to provide the definitive answer regarding Chekhov's faith and piety. However, it does attempt to draw attention to his passionate struggle for the meaning of human existence and how, through his characters, one encounters a doctor and writer who tenaciously wrestles with Christ, the Church, and the gospel.

This quest for meaning often leads Chekhov to those existential crossroads where, rather than choosing one particular path, he skillfully describes to his audience slices of life which offer glimpses into the pains, trials, doubts, and joys of human existence. Like a jazz or blues musician, Chekhov offers spontaneous, dissonant, crisp, and open-ended compositions, which often develop from a character or a set of characters seeking to scale the walls of personal loneliness and alienation. Delving into the personal traits and relationships of these characters, one can detect the unequal intensities of darkness and light that Chekhov experienced in his own life and observed in the lives of others.

II

One of six children, Anton Chekhov was born into a merchant's family in the latter part of the nineteenth century. He was immersed in a culture that was, on the one hand, ostensibly Orthodox in its Christianity, yet on the other hand—due to the polit-

[1] See Alexandre Schmemann, *Journal (1973-1983)*, trans. Anne Davidenkoff, Anne Kichilov, and René Marichal (Paris: Editions Des Syrtes, 2009).

ical, social, and religious reforms of Tsar Peter the Great—receptive to the philosophical, spiritual, and artistic trends of Western Europe. The West's intellectual contribution to science, mathematics, philosophy, literature, and theology in Russia still remains to be fully appreciated. However, the culling and absorption of disparate worldviews and spiritualities into the salons of Russia's cultural elite helped to generate a mood of religious confusion and restlessness that led, in some cases, to the abandonment of Christianity. Father Georges Florovsky characterizes the Russian intellectual's often impatient and uncritical quest for religious experience as being "unorthodox, vague, dreamy, erratic, syncretistic. . . often a psychological mood or aesthetic rapture, or else a kind of moralistic psychoanalysis" that did not evoke a "sober and firm belief."[2] It is in this religious milieu that Chekhov lived and wrote.

Though Chekhov was no stranger to the new and popular ideas of the day, his literary output does not tend to support or negate any particular movement or trend. By no means a passive bystander, Chekhov presented people and events as they were, thus leaving the reader or audience with the task of interpretation. For the official critics of his time, Chekhov's work was void of social value. His stories and plays did not offer a moral lesson and thus a social compass. For the conservatives, Chekhov was not willing to support the status quo. For the liberals, Chekhov was too much of a rogue and therefore unable to be conscripted into any camp of the avant-garde. Writing to his literary "godfather," the poet Alexei Pleshcheev, Chekhov affirmed his independence: "I am afraid of those who look for a tendency between the lines and who insist on seeing me as necessarily either a liberal or conservative. I am not a liberal, not a conservative, not an evolutionist, nor a monk, nor indifferent to the world. I should like to be a free artist and nothing more, and I regret that God has not given me the power to be one. . . . Pharisaism, stupidity, and tyranny reign not in shopkeepers' houses and in lock-ups alone; I see them in science, in literature, in the younger generation. . . . I regard trademarks and labels as a kind of prejudice. My holy of holies is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love, and absolute freedom—freedom from violence and falsehood no matter how the last two manifest themselves. This is the program I would follow if I were a great artist."[3]

III

Was Chekhov an atheist or agnostic? In studying his personal correspondence, one might easily label him as one or the other. In a letter dated March 9, 1892, and addressed to his friend Ivan Leontiev-Shcheglov, Chekhov recalls how during his youth he was enveloped by a prevailing melancholia generated by an oppressive religious upbringing. To a great extent, this oppression was linked to his father, Pavel Egorovich, who, in addition to being a local merchant, was a choir director at one of the churches in Taganrog. Pavel coerced his children into singing the many and lengthy services of the Orthodox Church. "When I recall my childhood, the latter appears rather somber. Now I do not have religion. You know, when we came to sing in church . . . we felt as if we were convicts."[4] Chekhov would often say to his brothers, "What an unhappy lot we are! Other boys may run, play, visit their friends. We can only go to church."[5] In addition to singing daily in the parish choir, Chekhov knew firsthand of the brutal and

[2] Georges Florovsky, "The Quest for Religion in 19th Century Russian Literature: Three Masters: Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy," in *Theology and Literature*, vol. 11 in *Collected Works of Georges Florovsky* (Belmont, MA: Nordland, 1989), 13.

[3] Anton Chekhov to Alexei Pleshcheev, October 4, 1888, quoted in *The Portable Chekhov*, ed. Avrahm Yarmolinsky (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 605. See also *The Selected Letters of Anton Chekhov*, ed. Lillian Hellman, trans. Sidonie K. Lederer (New York: Barnes & Noble, 2007), 55–6.

[4] Anton Chekhov quoted in Jacqueline de Proyart, "Le Christianisme d'A. Tchekhov," *Le Messager orthodoxe* 143 (2005): 26.

dark atmosphere that prevailed in the earlier grades in official ecclesiastical learning institutions. These schools often attracted faculty members who were better at disciplining students than being mentors and guides. Poorly chosen teachers, who did not hide their indifference and insincerity when it came to the educational and spiritual formation of their students, made a lasting impression on Chekhov. Writing to his friend and editor A. S. Suvorin, Chekhov commented on the parish school in his native Taganrog: "It is not astonishing that so many atheists are from the seminaries."[6]

Drawn to the literary genius of Leo Tolstoy, Chekhov expressed his admiration in the latter's unorthodox brand of belief. In his letter to Mikhail Menshikov, Chekhov emphasized that he embraced a comprehensive belief: "I am an unbeliever, but of all the faiths, I esteem the faith of L. Tolstoy the nearest to my heart and most suited to me."[7] Nearly one year before his death, Chekhov, in his response to Serge Diaghilev's invitation to become a member of the editing committee of the magazine *Мир искусства* (*The World of Art*), confessed that he had lost his faith. He wrote on July 12, 1903: "I do not see how I would be able to live under the same roof as [co-editor and Symbolist writer] D. S. Merezhkovsky. He believes in a very resolute way as a professor, while *I have squandered my faith* a long time ago and only look upon a believing intellectual with perplexity."[8]

Certainly, one can use Chekhov's own words to support the rejection of any kind of institutionalized and formalized Christianity. Using the above quotations and the writer's other references to personal doubt and unbelief, the Soviets held up Chekhov as one who exposed Christianity (and religion in general) as the opium of the people. Soviet literati and ideologues found in Chekhov a comrade whose work could be appropriated to further the cause of the Marxist-Leninist agenda. Yet while Chekhov was definitely dissatisfied with the established Orthodox Church of his time, it would be too hasty to consign him to either the agnostic or atheist camps. Even when he wrote to Diaghilev that he had "*squandered his faith*," these words need to be put into a broader context. First of all, Chekhov, in addition to being critical of the established Church, was more averse to the mysticism and theology espoused by the intellectuals of the day. Though he praised Tolstoy's religion, rooted in reason and the brotherhood of man, Chekhov never made it his own. Regardless of what Chekhov wrote to Menchikov in praise of Tolstoy, his writings never promote a rejection of Christ's divinity nor do they suggest an acceptance of Tolstoy's rewriting of the gospel in accordance with religious syncretism and philosophical rationalism.

While open to new ideas and theories, Chekhov was not drawn to the spiritualities that captured the minds of his contemporaries. That Merezhkovsky was a member of the Religious and Philosophical Society (*Религиозно-философского общества*) was enough for Chekhov to turn down the offer to co-edit *The World of Art*. For Chekhov, neo-mysticism and theosophy rang "false and hollow" since, for him, they were not rooted in experience and did not focus on acts of charity.[9]

The reader encounters through Chekhov's characters a writer who is critical of institutional Christianity but neither rejects the Scriptures nor turns from the teachings of the Orthodox Church. Much of his writing shows a more than casual or superficial in-

[5] Anton Chekhov quoted in Princess Nina Andronikova Toumanova, *Anton Chekhov, The Voice of Twilight Russia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1960), 13.

[6] Anton Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, March 17, 1892, quoted in De Proyart, "Christianisme," 27.

[7] Anton Chekhov to Mikhail Menshikov, January 28, 1900, in *Selected Letters*, 262.

[8] Anton Chekhov to Serge Diaghilev, July 12, 1903, quoted in De Proyart, "Christianisme," 28–9.

[9] De Proyart, "Christianisme," 28.

terest in the liturgical calendar. In so many of Chekhov's stories, the feasts of the incarnation and the resurrection form the context through which his characters reveal their personal uniqueness. Each character is opened to eternity and therefore cannot be defined by any predetermined anthropology. While seeking communion with the other, each character is continually developing, inasmuch as there is an encounter with truth, evil, light, and darkness.

Paradoxically, Chekhov's "*squandered faith*" did not drive him away from Christ. In spite of his dissatisfaction with established Orthodoxy and his profound personal struggles with faith, he persevered in the Orthodox Church. Chekhov's oppressive religious upbringing, nurtured by a stifling ritual formalism, could not prevent him from *seeing* and *experiencing* the transforming beauty of liturgical celebration and its role in revealing the indissoluble bond of love between God and humanity. All of this warrants a closer look at how Chekhov, through his characters, sought to uncover a living Christianity, in which God's mercy and love open the way to transfigured life.

IV

Ironically, or perhaps providentially, Soviet scholars in the 1970s made the complete and uncensored works of Chekhov available to a wider readership. Though the critical apparatus of this invaluable contribution held firmly to a Marxist-Leninist hermeneutic, it nevertheless was a major step towards producing new impressions and studies of Chekhov. For Russian scholars, a re-examination of Chekhov's Christianity would have to wait until the fall of communism. Beginning in the 1990s, scholars outside of Russia gradually came to appreciate what they recognized as more than a superficial deference to Christianity. The Second International Chekhov Conference, held in 1994 in Badenweiler, Germany (the place of Chekhov's death), focused on the philosophy and religion of Chekhov as reflected in his life and work. In France, the *Revue de littérature comparée* (*Review of Comparative Literature*) dedicated an entire issue in October 1995 to the "New Faces of Chekhov." In 2004—marking the centennial of Chekhov's death—a conference in Melikhovo, located about 40 miles south of Moscow and home to Chekhov from 1892 to 1899, was devoted to the theme "Anton Chekhov, Yesterday and Today." The conference included a visit to the newly and fully restored monastery of Saint David (Davidova Pustyn), where Chekhov spent time getting to know many of the resident monks. Of these monastics, the hieromonk Ananias became the model for Father Sisoes in Chekhov's story "The Bishop."[10] In 2005, the journal *Le Messager orthodoxe* published a comprehensive article on Chekhov's Christianity by Jacqueline de Proyart.[11]

As an artist and as a doctor of medicine, Chekhov was both open to and critical of new ideas. He was very interested in Charles Darwin and, like the Victorian biologist and philosopher Herbert Spencer, he recognized that art, science, and religion were completely integrated. Consequently, for Chekhov all paths to knowledge led to the truth, but all knowledge did not exhaust the truth.

Yet Chekhov was also keenly aware that truth could not be separated from God and neighbor. In "A Boring Story," as the dying Professor Nikolai Stepanovich examines his life, he discovers that all of his erudition leaves

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[10] In Melikhovo, Chekhov also established ties with the privileged and underprivileged. As a landowner, he dedicated himself to improving the lives of the peasants living on his estate. During an outbreak of famine and cholera in 1892, he provided relief and comfort to the peasants. He also built three schools, a clinic, and a fire station. As a doctor, he spent hours visiting the infirm, both poor and wealthy.

[11] De Proyart, "Christianisme," 19–50.

him yearning for something more. "In my predilection for science, in my wish to live, in this sitting on a strange bed and trying to know myself, in all the thoughts, feelings, and conceptions I form about everything, something general is lacking that would unite it all in a single whole. Each feeling and thought lives separately in me, and in all my opinions about science, the theater, literature, students, and in all the pictures drawn by my imagination, even the most skillful analyst would be unable to find what is known as a general idea or the god of the living man."[12]

Professor Stepanovich's broad range of knowledge leads him to loneliness. Ultimately he becomes estranged from what he ostensibly loves. The question that emerges from Stepanovich's introspection is, "Who or what is the god of the living man?" For Chekhov, the answer rests in a personal God. The God of the "living man" is Christ who, as incarnate love, seeks to draw all to himself in a bond of interpersonal communion based on the new commandment to love one another (John 13:34–35). Stepanovich is alone because he ceases to love.

In one of his earliest published works, "The Sinner from Toledo" (1881), Chekhov asks through the character of Maria: "Is it truly possible for those who do not love man to love Christ?"[13] Here is more than an echo of 1 John 4:20. For Chekhov, the inability or refusal to draw near and to embrace the other annihilates both love and faith. Writing to Suvorin, Chekhov laments over a person's inability to love. What is unfortunate, he writes, "is not that we hate our enemies, who are few, but that we do not love enough our neighbor, who is infinitely numerous."[14]

Chekhov knew both the Old and New Testaments. The Decalogue's censure against killing, the love for the peacemaker in the Beatitudes, and the acceptance of the incomprehensibility of existence expressed in the book of Ecclesiastes contributed to the tone and vision of his writing. Clearly, for Chekhov, reality was in no way black and white. His personal suffering and his ever-increasing insights into the the human person led him beyond the myopia of an ethical Christianity. He strongly embraced the words of Ecclesiastes—*vanitas vanitatum, omnia est vanitas*—to ensure for himself that the mystery of life, and therefore the mystery of the human person, would not be compromised nor exhausted.[15]

The human person's ever-pressing desire to enter and experience the mystery of life permeates the works of Chekhov. Through the beggar Grigory Liharev, one of the main characters of "On The Road" (1886), the reader *unexpectedly* encounters the profound sentiment of an all-embracing love of life. For the unreliable Liharev, "the meaning of life lies in just that unrepining martyrdom, in the tears which would soften a stone, in the boundless, all-forgiving love which brings light and warmth into the chaos of life."[16] Love and forgiveness are Christlike qualities that narrow the gap of human separation and overcome the horror of existential loneliness.

Liharev's words are directed to Mademoiselle Ilovaisky, a self-centered, one-dimensional woman who by chance encounters the articulate beggar in a train station during a snowstorm on Christmas Eve. Listening to Liharev's words about unconditional love and forgiveness—themes central to the Nativity Event—Ilovaisky expe-

[12] Anton Chekhov, *Selected Stories of Anton Chekhov*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Modern Library, 2000), 104–5.

[13] De Proyart, "Christianisme," 22

[14] Anton Chekhov to A. S. Suvorin, October 18, 1888, quoted in De Proyart, "Christianisme," 34, note 34.

[15] De Proyart, "Christianisme," 30ff.

[16] Anton Chekhov, "On The Road," *The Literature Network*, http://www.online-literature.com/anton_chekhov/1197/.

riences a brief moment of ecstasy. This moment forges a sense of communion that allows her to catch a glimpse of the depth and mystery of life:

> She gazed wonderingly into the darkness, and saw only a spot of red on the ikon and the flicker of the light of the stove on Liharev's face. The darkness, the chime of the [church] bells, the roar of the [snow]storm, the lame boy, Sasha with her fretfulness, unhappy Liharev and his sayings—all this was mingled together, and seemed to grow into one huge impression, and God's world seemed to her fantastic, full of marvels and magical forces. All that she had heard was ringing in her ears, and human life presented itself to her as a beautiful poetic fairy-tale without an end.[17]

Considering that God's beautiful and wonderful world is brought to Ilovaisky by a wandering man who has no place to rest his head, it would not be an exaggeration to say that loving one's neighbor is a major part of the cornerstone of Chekhov's faith. But this love for the other is not an end in itself. Loving the poor, the hated, the oppressed and the wounded are interwoven with a desire to transcend one's self and the present moment. In "The Lady With The Pet Dog" (1899), Chekhov creates a scene in which the unhappily married Dmitry Gurov appears to wrestle with his adulterous affair with the newly married and well-to-do Anna:

> Sitting beside a young woman who in the dawn seemed so lovely, Gurov, soothed and spellbound by these magical surroundings—the sea, the mountains, the clouds, the wide sky—thought how everything is really beautiful in this world when one reflects: everything except what we think or do ourselves when we forget the higher aims of life and our own human dignity.[18]

For Chekhov, human dignity is not achievable without Christ. In the encounter with Christ, the human person, susceptible to sin and bound to death, is led into a new life founded on divine love and forgiveness. In Chekhov's play *The Cherry Orchard*, published in 1904—the year of his death—there is an important but oblique reference to the transforming love Christ offers to each person. Towards the middle of Act Three, there begins—again *unexpectedly*—during the course of a ball, a recitation of Alexei Tolstoy's 1857 poem "The Sinful Woman." The stage directions allow for one of the guests, the Stationmaster, to recite a few lines of the poem until he is drowned out by a Viennese waltz. In the context of the play, the poem is an intrusion into the lives of people who will soon have to face the uncertainties and fears of a new life no longer moored to the familiar and formal rhythms of the past. By inserting this poem in a subtle if not cryptic manner, Chekhov reaches out to the audience, reminding them that Christ himself is a kind of subtle and cryptic intruder who, when finally discovered and welcomed, changes one's life forever. Chekhov uses Tolstoy's poem to capture how Christ unsettles the life of Mary Magdalene and ultimately draws her into the unending mystery of new and transcendent life.

The poem, in the context of the play, attests to the dying Chekhov's conviction that only Christ can save; only Christ can restore beauty, dignity, meaning, and life to himself and to others.

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Anton Chekhov, "The Lady with the Pet Dog," in *The Portable Chekhov*, ed. Avrahm Yarmolinsky (New York: Penguin Books, 1977), 420.

Vasily Polenov, *Christ and the Woman Taken in Adultery*, 1888. State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow.

The Other approaches her home.
He places his saddened gaze.
And for the first time, evil became a horror to her.
In this gaze, full of goodness, she reads
His condemnation during her days of debauchery
And His pardon and mercy.
She falls down in tears with her face on the ground
Before the holiness of Christ.[19]

The works of Chekhov present a series of moments that point to the yearning and need for interpersonal communion. In these moments, Chekhov himself points to how the relationship of persons rooted in the truth and love of Christ cannot be bound to any fixed or unchanging belief. In the words of Jacquline de Proyart, Chekhov's faith and Christianity "cannot be constrained in an ensemble of certitude inculcated by a channel of authority, [or] closed in a system of devotions and of obligatory rites of a bureaucratic Church."[20] In reading the works of Chekhov, one is able to see that certitude is found only in the ever-changing dynamics of personal relationships and not in static systems, ideologies, or philosophies that are imposed by any ecclesiastical institution unable to commune with the person.

In spite of his doubts, or perhaps because of his doubts and wrestling with God, Anton Chekhov sought to be with Christ as he struggled with the Orthodox Church of his time. For Chekhov, the Church was in need of internal reformation if it was to recover the centrality of the human person's openness to eternity and the ceaseless ascent from "glory to glory." His Christianity is that of the sojourner who never ceases to grow in the divine life offered by the immanent and transcendent God. ❃

[19] Alexei Konstantinovich Tolstoy, "Грешница" (1857), *Wikisource*, https://ru.wikisource.org/wiki/Грешница_(А._К._Толстой).

[20] De Proyart, "Christianisme," 29.

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