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The Renaissance as Failure and New Beginning: Vladimir Bibikhin's Interpretation of European History in *The New Renaissance*

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Abstract

In *The New Renaissance*, V. Bibikhin defines “a renaissance” in general terms as an attempt to overcome a historical crisis and to provide a new impulse for the development of both people and society. In this sense, there have been many renaissances, but the main one—the Italian Renaissance—was a unique event during which humankind attempted to unleash its creative essence in all its fullness. At the same time, the Renaissance was an attempt to reestablish the true teachings of Jesus Christ and to overcome the false doctrine of the Christian church, which separated people from God through the idea of sin. The 15th–16th century Renaissance was suppressed by the church and this occasioned the continuing crisis and decline of European civilization; which could only be saved by a new renaissance.

Keywords

Bibikhin, crisis of civilization, the Christian church, Renaissance, true Christianity

The title of Vladimir Bibikhin's *The New Renaissance* (1998) invites the question: what is the primary focus of this work? The book was compiled from a series of papers written over many years, and was dedicated not only to the historical Renaissance (one of Bibikhin's main areas of expertise as a scholar and translator), but also to the history and contemporary state of European civilization. Nevertheless, an analysis of the Italian Renaissance is a central part of the book, and for this reason, the designation "new" applied to "renaissance" gives the title a significant meaning. The first two sections of the book focus on clarifying this meaning; and one of them has a title no less paradoxical than that of the work itself: "Our renaissance."

Carefully reading the initial sections of this work, one realizes that these terms can and should be understood in two different ways. The renaissance is "ours" and "new" to the extent that the book presents an absolutely new approach to the understanding of that which we call the Renaissance of the 15th and 16th centuries. Yet in the sense of the "renaissance of our time," it is also "ours" and "new." The "renaissance of our time" has not yet taken place but must, if there is hope that humanity has a future and can leave behind its current, extremely regrettable state. In light of this, it must be noted, that the word "renaissance" in the original title is written in lower-case letters, and that the text of the book contains both the *Renaissance* (15th–16th centuries) and the many *renaissances*, that Bibikhin finds in the history of European civilization.

In this context, it is not surprising that the book begins with evaluations of the contemporary era, rather than an analysis of the Renaissance. To a certain extent, Bibikhin considers the contemporary era to be a turning point, but not because it is characterized by any substantial achievements. On the contrary, it is a turning point, because the degradation of culture and of humanity itself has reached such a degree that there are only a few possibilities for further development. They are ultimate destruction (or, more likely, a slow death so protracted that it overshadows the meaning of the catastrophe taking place), a rebirth and transformation, or a return to the fruitful existence that was squandered by Western civilization over the course of the last three centuries.

As a faithful heir to the traditions of Russian philosophical thought, Bibikhin is a profoundly religious thinker. He believes that the rebirth of humanity is always possible and should arise precisely out of a profound crisis, which is hidden in the unknowable essence of a person. A crisis determined by invisible mystical causes, rather than by rational and material factors. The modern world has reached such a degree of spiritual and cultural degradation that the only remaining possibility for salvation lies in the *mystical transformation* of humanity and a *new beginning* of historical development.

In order to clarify the nature of this new beginning of history, Bibikhin turns to the 15th–16th century Renaissance as the most striking example

of a *renaissance as such*. A renaissance constitutes the essence of history and takes place whenever man takes actions that give rise to a new historical impulse. A renaissance in this broad sense is always a reaction to the degradation and decline of culture, and as such, it has taken place and will continue to take place as long as history continues its march and people still have the strength to be responsible historical subjects and makers of culture. As Bibikhin writes, “renaissance is not a past period of our history, but rather its essence. Every discovery of meaning is a step toward a renaissance, which in its purpose is the same today and in past centuries” (Bibikhin 1998a: 23).

In this way, we can talk about a whole series of “renaissances,” designating turning points in history, at which humanity sought to overcome the stagnant existing order and achieve a new level of existence and creative activity. “The Medieval Renaissance must thus be just as legitimate a concept as the Carolingian Renaissance of the early 9th century, or the Ottonian Renaissance around 1000, when the Gothic cathedrals began to be built; the 12th-century Renaissance around the Chartres school and its popularizer, John of Salisbury; the 13th-century Renaissance around the University of Paris” (Bibikhin 1998a: 46). This should also include the Islamic renaissance, which was significant for Europe in light of the active interactions between European and Islamic culture in the 10th–13th centuries. Finally, Bibikhin believes that the term “renaissance” can be applied in a direct and non-metaphorical sense to significantly later cultural phenomena. For example, it is perfectly legitimate to speak of a Russian religious and philosophical renaissance in the late 19th–early 20th centuries. Ultimately, “everything that determines, gives measure, and is registered in history, turns out to be a renaissance” (Bibikhin 1998a: 48–49).

But why is it a *renaissance*, a *rebirth* and not just a *new beginning*? Is Antiquity of particular significance here? After all, the Renaissance era has traditionally been considered the rebirth of the classical era. Bibikhin answers the latter question negatively: the emphasis on Antiquity as the primary focus of the 14th-16th-century Italian humanists tends more to obscure our understanding, more than it reveals the main ambitions of the Italian Renaissance. Bibikhin emphasizes the fact that Ancient Greece and Rome were themselves no less “renaissance-like” than any other era, and thus the essence of renaissance as such is not connected with any one historical period. “For Virgil, poet and prophet of the early *principate*, the entire Roman state enterprise was a restoration, a rising from the ashes of ancient Troy, such as Troy had only presumed itself to be, but had never been. This might-have-been Troy was now taking its revenge, subjugating Greece to its peace (*pax Romana*) as the Greeks had once subdued Troy through war and deception” (Bibikhin 1998a: 49).

All of this makes it easier to understand why *all of history* is renaissance-like. A new historical beginning and a new gust of cultural creativity and fullness of life always presuppose examples based on existing his-

torical forms, and always rely on them as a foundation. According to Bibikhin, the sense of historicity of human existence lies precisely in this fact. Meanwhile, the image of a great and brilliant past inspiring people to new achievements, as a rule, does not coincide with reality; it exists in the imagination as a lofty and unattainable ideal. However, this is precisely why the imitation of this ideal does not lead to the epigone and the merely derivative. It is never the past that is reborn, which happened in reality, but rather an ideal present, understood as the past. This is the reason why “rebirth” results in the revelation of new horizons of historical creativity. On the contrary, if a given period considers itself to be entirely new and unique, and does not recognize the past as the basis for the present and the future—in reality it then sinks lower than everything that came before it. In the second half of the 20th century, humanity entered such an era. The illusions and deceptions, actively spread by contemporary (postmodernist) ideologues, have built this era; the central deception is that of unlimited progress and unlimited achievements in all areas—in democracy, in production, in technology’s authority over nature. “The renaissance is an entirely different mood from the one that is largely dominant today and that forces us to consider contemporary humanity as having arrived at an unprecedented ascent or decline. Today’s people, people now, the newest and most contemporary, modern people are supposedly such or have become such as have never been before and never were” (Bibikhin 1998a: 33).

This illusory “unprecedented” quality that modern people pride themselves in without understanding that it is a mark of their advanced degradation, makes the concept of the renaissance particularly relevant, indeed, of life-and-death importance: for it is the only path of salvation. A proper understanding of renaissance and the Renaissance should compel contemporary people to recognize as false and deceptive all that they currently considers most valuable and important in their everyday existence. They must recognize that past eras, which they treat condescendingly as “undeveloped,” were in fact full of creative energy and life, the very qualities they have long since squandered.

Bibikhin’s criticism of “contemporaneity” is uncompromising and politically incorrect to such a degree that today, it seems reminiscent of the valiant Don Quixote. Fifteen years ago, when he published his book, Bibikhin’s refusal to accept “contemporary” philosophy and culture and his assertion that modern liberalism is barely distinguished from totalitarianism was met with cold incomprehension. Today these assertions might have come under attack from the “liberal community,” was it not for the fact that it has definitively lost its ability to listen to and hear alternative points of view.

“The end of history is sad,” writes Bibikhin. “There is no art, no philosophy; all we see is a museum of culture, preserved with exhausting effort. Amidst its precautionary, copious prosperity, humanity sits in the

center of today's civilization of the shop-window and the screen and waxes nostalgic for the past, when, as it recalls, the pitch was set by the willingness to risk one's life for a pure goal, bravery, imagination, idealism" (Bibikhin 1998a: 14). *Joy*, experienced quietly and deep within, and connected with the experience of fullness of existence and creativity, has for the modern person been replaced by *cheerfulness*, an externalized playfulness that allows one to forget about oneself and one's purpose, to be *the same*, to be *like everybody else*. "Totalitarianism and liberalism both prescribe cheerfulness, which the majority is always capable of and the minority, somehow, never" (Bibikhin 1998a: 15).

The main paradox of the current situation is the absolute, increasingly absurd opposition between the proclaimed value of the human personality and its actual *devaluation* because of the completely lost connection with the whole—with society, the state, existence, God. "In the 20th century, the higher the value of the person, the more acutely is felt the need for a safety-net in case of collapse. In the face of the threat of inflation, we must drastically over-praise people, raise the bar ridiculously high to the point at which we find ourselves writing into the new constitution—in direct contradiction of the obvious—that the individual is prior in significance to the state. The more insane the promises made, the comforts promised, the guarantees of everything from culture to financial well-being, the less ground beneath all this eminence actually remains beneath our feet" (Bibikhin 1998a:31).

The contrast between contemporary liberal concepts of the individual and Bibikhin's philosophic-metaphysical understanding of man is one of the major topics of his work. This contrast is laid out in particular detail in the cycle of lectures *Know Thyself*, a print version of which came out the same year as *The New Renaissance* (1998). Bibikhin's thoughts build upon the ideas of great thinkers of Russian and Western philosophy (Schopenhauer, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Heidegger et al.). He claims that the individual in their essence possesses an indissoluble unity with other people and with the existence of the whole world. In this sense, the experience of unity and oneness with other people and the surrounding world comes first in relationship with the experience of isolation and independent existence. Bibikhin illustrates this initial quality using examples from child psychology. Young children understand their oneness with the world far more profoundly than adults which is why the child is so simply and unreservedly ready to identify itself with any external object and to become any person—the protagonist of a fairy tale or film, etc. Bibikhin considers this "childlike" acceptance of all of the world's objects, this dissolving of oneself in every object and in the world as a whole, as the basis of artistic creativity—and above all, of poetry.

It would seem that dissolving oneself in the world would lead to the loss of individuality, but Bibikhin claims the opposite. Only through unification with the world as a whole is a person able to *truly attain individu-*

ality: “...individuality, in order to exist as individuality in that definitive and necessary essence of which it consists, —in simplicity, indivisibility, wholeness <...>—can only rest on the whole, ultimately, on the universal” (Bibikhin 1998b: 148). And vice versa, those who assume as a primary value the isolation and independence of the personality, preserving its right against invasion from the outside, completely lose their essence and individuality, turning instead into a set of standard social roles, “guises” or “masks.” According to Bibikhin, this is precisely what is happening in contemporary Western culture, which is degrading itself and leading people to degradation through its noble demands for defending the rights of the individual personality.

With this relationship to the idea of the value of the discrete personality, it makes sense that Bibikhin does not agree with the widespread opinion that the central achievement of the Renaissance was its “discovery” of the personality and its significance in the world.

People think that the provocative contemporary solicitude toward the individual rests on Renaissance humanism, its exaltation of humanity or, as one critic puts it, ‘the value of the personality.’ But the dignity of humanity is only one of many renaissance themes. We find the flip-side in the harsh deconstruction of humanity conducted by Petrarch, Leonardo, Machiavelli, which in its penetrating acuity has not been surpassed to the present day, even in the twentieth century, the era of total unmasking (Bibikhin 1998a: 54).

He voices the same position still more stringently:

...it is wrong to think that Renaissance humanism closed off the individual alone with their creative potential, having transformed him into a self-sufficient subject. Renaissance ethics from Dante to Leonardo da Vinci did not recognize the individual as having inherent value and, with a severity reminiscent of Antiquity, demanded that people demonstrate ‘virtues’: courage, justice and wisdom. Only later did a suspicious medieval Christian dogma of the immortality of the soul backfire into worldly subjectivism (Bibikhin 1998a: 172).

In connection with this, Bibikhin devotes special attention to refuting the claim that the Renaissance completely dictated the subsequent development of European civilization—both in the Early Modern and Late Modern periods. This opinion is extraordinarily widespread and provides the framework for the most popular and oft-repeated explanation for the crisis of modern civilization. The responsibility for this crisis is attributed to the Renaissance, since all of the trends of contemporary modernity seen as carrying an obviously negative meaning—the cult of science and technology, the disregard for the religious foundations of culture, a sim-

plified individualist and naturalistic idea of humanity—are acknowledged as originating in the Renaissance era. When the logic of Europe’s historical development is perceived in this way, the Renaissance is revealed to have been an important transitional period, which led to all the goals set by its ideologues *being achieved to the utmost*, and civilization took on an utterly new impulse for development, which to this day has yet to be depleted. Meanwhile, the most direct consequence of the Renaissance is considered to be the Enlightenment, with its atheism, individualism and mechanicism.

In his book, Bibikhin overturns accusations that the Renaissance is responsible for all of our contemporary problems.

A gut instinct tells us that there is no fatal continuity between the historical shift of the 14-16th centuries and today’s piling-up of global problems. But in order to bring something encouraging about Renaissance principles out into the light, to clarify it and give it historical sense, one must overcome the aesthetically descriptive approach, which puts inappropriately rapturous emphasis on commonplaces like ‘the discovery of the world,’ ‘new culture,’ ‘anthropocentrism,’ ‘free creation of the self and of one’s existence,’ ‘the hymn to human genius.’ The trouble with these concepts lies in their non-functional character, not only in the fact that they nearly inevitably produce actions opposed to the wishes of passionate researchers, and provoke the same empty ‘critique of the Renaissance’ in response (Bibikhin 1998a: 247–248).

A proper understanding of Renaissance era’s meaning is possible only if we reject simply reducing the era to a single tendency, which clearly resounds after the fact and remains significant to the present day. What the Renaissance was trying to accomplish does not fit into any one single formulation; moreover, if the goals of the Renaissance had been achieved, our civilization would today would be the direct opposite of what it actually is. In this sense, the most important principle for understanding the Renaissance is to establish that *it did not succeed*: the Early Modern period became a direct denial of the Renaissance. It returned European civilization to the same state that the Renaissance had sought to overcome. The failure that befell this great era, and the unsolved problems that it posed, led to all the subsequent negative phenomena in society and culture, which manifest themselves in the current crisis of civilization. Such an assessment of the results of the Renaissance explains why Bibikhin identifies the *repetition* of the Renaissance in a new form, as the primary challenge of our time. Nevertheless, Bibikhin provides a “formula” for the Renaissance that looks deceptively simple: “Humanity was returning to the fullness of its being” (Bibikhin 1998a: 58). According to Bibikhin, this thought originates as far back as Dante, whom he unequivocally recognizes as the first Renaissance thinker: “Everything speaks to him of the attainability of the happy full-

ness of existence. [...] With ultimate effort—the purpose, perfection and happiness of the individual. For this reason we should not fear the energies hidden in the individual; their unfolding with the flowering of human nature is how the human being achieves harmony” (Bibikhin 1998a: 265).

It would seem that Bibikhin is contradicting himself. On the one hand, he expresses a very skeptical view on the possibility of reducing the Renaissance to “anthropocentrism,” a declaration of the personality’s independence, or a quest for the free creation of oneself and one’s world. On the other hand, he now formulates a very similar thesis, in which the central focus of the Renaissance is the revelation of human essence and of the fullness of human being. Nevertheless, if we truly understand what Bibikhin has in mind, then the apparent contradiction disappears. After all, the essence of the Renaissance is usually attributed characteristics like “anthropocentrism,” “free creativity,” the “hymn to humanity,” and so on, and are clearly understood and seen as achieving complete fruition in the subsequent development of European civilization. For Bibikhin, the starting definition of the essence of the Renaissance is the *revelation of the fullness of the human essence*, and cannot be explicated completely through its content, mainly because the human being is an absolute, mystical, inscrutable being, whose essence cannot be understood abstractly. It can only reveal itself gradually in its immediate temporal and historical state of being. However, this happened to a very limited degree due to the incompleteness of the Renaissance, and to the fact that the process of the *historical* revelation of human essence was interrupted: the human being returned (or was returned) to old, customary forms of being, in which they hid and stifled their essence, rather than revealing it.

However, it was impossible to stifle completely those elements of human essence that had already developed and become reality. Therefore, along with the general evaluation of the Renaissance as a historical failure, its decisive influence on the course of subsequent history must nevertheless be recognized. As a result, any ultimate description of the role of the Renaissance turns out to be complicated and contradictory, since nearly all the main subsequent trends of development originate in the Renaissance era. However, these trends ultimately evince a negative rather than positive meaning for our civilization. This speaks to the fact that the realization of these trends in subsequent eras did not correspond with the initial ideas conceived during the Renaissance. As a result, the way in which these trends played out in history led to the suppression of the human being’s infinite creative essence, rather than to its revelation. This transformation is particularly obvious with regard to contemporary European science. Having emerged in the Renaissance era as the human being’s most profound aspiration toward the revelation of one’s unity with being, in the final account science was transformed into the most effective means for repressing humankind, for locking it into the framework of formal laws, for separating it from infinite and unpredictable being.

In criticizing traditional ideas about the Renaissance era, Bibikhin emphasizes the fact that there is no reason to contrast the Renaissance to the Middle Ages in terms of evident descriptions of social life and culture. To some degree, all of the characteristic features of the Renaissance are present in the centuries preceding, and the main components of the medieval way of life and culture remain significant throughout the 14th–16th centuries as well. In this sense, Bibikhin sees the opinion of those historians who do not distinguish the Renaissance as its own era, but rather consider it a formation of the late Middle Ages, as justified. However, if we give less treatment to the more apparent characteristics of social life and culture, and more to less noticeable factors, to human sense of self and ideas about the aims of their actions, we then find the absolute shift that compels us to consider the Renaissance as a form of historical accomplishment completely different from the medieval period. Bibikhin describes this fundamental difference as follows:

The dispute between Renaissance humanism and the Scholastics was obviously over style, but its subject was the human being. The question of how medieval man understood himself was indirectly addressed by the thousand-year litigation over universals. [...] The individual man was not an indivisible whole in his own right; he was made up of aspects and functions, and in some of his functions evidently belonged to himself, while in others—to his stock, his species, the universality. However his functions might be redistributed, he remained a passive subject from an active source, the latter being represented by the universal order, which predetermined a place, significance, form and aim for each function. [...] The new era turned away from logical constructions completely, having placed its faith in poetic intuitions. The unifying source was found in the unique quality of the moment, rather than in the ordered whole of a rational system, the purpose of which was to indicate to everything its place. The individual ceased to determine their task in life through their place in the universe, and with the self-disciplined strength of knowledge, capability and will, they now wished to incarnate his uniqueness here and now. Preceding history had not known such readiness to tether thought, word and action to the experience of the present (Bibikhin 1998a: 295–297).

Only through this approach does the absolute meaning of the Renaissance become clear. After all, it was only during this era that the human being finally became aware of their predestination to be a free creator of history and culture. As Bibikhin constantly reminds us, it is no accident that the ideas of coherent history, and continuity in the development of culture, emerge during the Renaissance era. Prior to this moment, if the human being considered themselves to be the subject of history, it was only unconsciously, only as the conductor of influences from above.

It should be emphasized once more, that human revelation of their creative essence did not at all denote the triumph of individualism, as many advocates and critics of the Renaissance claim. Bibikhin himself, as we have said, does not recognize the essence of humanity to be isolated from the essence of the world and its absolute source (God). For this reason, he does not reduce the revelation of human essence in the Renaissance era to the domination of individualism. In their creative work, humanists do not cultivate an egoistic isolation by any means. For them, creativity was a form of serving the higher tasks of humankind as such, as well as a form of becoming one with the world and its universal essence.

Cosmic distances shine forth from the Beautiful Lady, the whole world is hidden in her and, in any case, the soul of the world. And the opposite: the world is understood as a mirror of the human soul or its history. [...] Leon Battista Alberti—one of those talents of the Renaissance whose multifacetedness was limited only by the human lifespan—experienced the confluence with nature ecstatically; he would weep from tender emotion and the reproaches of conscience at the sight of lush trees and fields ripe with grain; he would recover from illness if he managed to place himself within view of a beautiful landscape (Bibikhin 1998a: 319).

The inexhaustibility of human essence, as demonstrated in the work of the Italian humanists, was reflected in the infinite diversity of the forms of this activity, which led to the incomplete and somewhat chaotic quality of each of its individual manifestations. “People were rushing to sketch out the contours as fully as possible, to at least draft a model of the new artistic and emotional interrelations with the world. Their complexity and number did not yet allow the space for thorough elaborations” (Bibikhin 1998a: 329).

This boundless quality, which arose in the imagination of people of the Renaissance, who were trying to reveal their diverse possibilities in the world, was probably one of the reasons behind the historical failure of the Renaissance. Referring to the opinion of Jules Michelet, Bibikhin writes that “the Renaissance broke down when it had seized too much, an entire infinity in space and time. Beginning with philosophical poetry, the compassionate relationship to nature and the world (understood as a whole) through its own internal logic started an avalanche of cognitive and practical tasks; over time, even the most versatile and active individual began to lack the strength to complete them” (Bibikhin 1998a: 368).

Nevertheless, the main reasons for the failure of the Renaissance are found not within its own notion of itself, but in the historical reality it was trying to change. At this point, we are approaching a topic that is unequivocally central for Bibikhin’s thought: an understanding of the relationship between the Renaissance (and by extension, the possible *new*

renaissance) and Christianity, including the latter's complicated fate in the history of European civilization.

In the "standard" explanations of the historical role of the Renaissance, which reduce it to the rebirth of the classical ideal of beauty and the entire classical (i.e. pagan) worldview, it naturally appears as an *anti-Christian* era from which the process of culture's secularization begins, leading to the near-total disappearance of the religious from the life of the contemporary individual.¹ By rejecting the major significance of the classical era in understanding the Renaissance (antiquity was only important for humanists as an era in which the human being succeeded in revealing their *virtue*, i. e. their authentic significance in the world), Bibikhin also overturns the dichotomy between the Renaissance and Christianity. It must be noted once again that for Bibikhin, the authentic and mature Renaissance begins with Dante. Dante presents a problem for standard models of the Renaissance: he has no substantial inclination toward the classical era, and in spirit, he is a deeply Christian artist. Bibikhin, meanwhile, has no problem at all including Dante in the Renaissance. In fact, for him, Dante is characteristic of the era, since the *main* theme of the Italian Renaissance actually concerns Christianity, rather the classical period.

According to Bibikhin, the Renaissance was a reaction to the unbelievable degradation of ecclesiastical Christianity in the preceding centuries. Since Christianity was the cornerstone of medieval culture, its decline led to an equally notable decline in culture. Dante's work, focuses on the rebirth of culture, also inevitably connects with the desire to see a renewed and reborn Christianity.

Bibikhin categorically rejects the idea of the "monolithic" quality of medieval Christian ideology, rooted in ecclesiastical circles, which Renaissance individualism supposedly undermined. He contrasts early Christianity, which maintained its fidelity to the teachings of Jesus Christ, with medieval ecclesiastical Christianity, which substantially diverged

¹ It is curious that representatives of radically polarized ideological orientations come together around this profoundly false idea. Thus, the positivist Bertrand Russell in his *History of Western Philosophy* reduces the meaning of the Renaissance to the struggle with the authority of the Church and the emancipation of subjectivism and individualism, as a prerequisite for the development of science in the Early Modern period. Meanwhile, he does not place particularly high value on the main actors of the Renaissance precisely because of their inconsistency in the struggle with Church authorities (i.e., with Christianity, in Russell's interpretation) (see Russell 1993: 18–20). The Russian Orthodox ideologue I.A. Il'in evaluates the Renaissance in similar fashion: "The process of isolating culture from faith, religion and the church began long ago and will be completed over the next few centuries; worldly or 'secularized' culture has long since been growing and consolidating in Europe and America, and this secularization process was begun as early as the Renaissance era (13th–15th centuries)" (Il'in 1993: 285).

from Christ's teachings and thus ultimately reached a historical impasse, being unable to meet the demands of the developing culture or to help humanity to discover its absolute essence. The significance of the Renaissance consisted in its attempt to bring European civilization out of this impasse and to give a new impulse to *Christianity itself*, by providing a solid religious foundation for the subsequent development of European culture. Bibikhin captures this most important trend of the Renaissance with maximal precision.

There is an important aspect to the situation that garners too little attention. In reviving antiquity, poetic-philosophical thought returned to early, classical Christianity, skipping over the medieval variety. This thinking thus often found itself closer to the authentic Christian tradition than the Church ideologues did, and confidently sought out conflict with the latter, sensing its own advantage in terms of fidelity to authority [...]. The specific value of the Renaissance was not its reestablishment of museum-style classical culture, but rather its new merging with Christianity. This merging was the rebirth of a synthesis that had taken shape long before. Calling themselves the keepers of the truth, the official ideologues of Christianity did not always have a very clear idea of what they were protecting. Renaissance thought felt itself to have perhaps even more right to that which the ideologues considered their inherited property. Having understood the extent to which ancient Christianity had merged with the classical school, renaissance humanists recognized in the Church fathers their direct teachers, alongside 'pagan' authors (Bibikhin 1998a: 337–339).

The historical opposition between true and false Christianity turns out to be a topic of such importance to Bibikhin that he devotes a whole section of his book to it. In "The Undermining of Christianity," he provides an account of the Protestant historian Jacques Ellul's view (see: Ellul 1984). "To what extent is our culture Christian? To what extent was the Renaissance created by Christianity or, on the contrary, called Christianity into question? Instead of following the crowd in attempting to solve these insoluble problems, let us listen instead to an extreme opinion that is graced by distinct clarity and convincing simplicity" (Bibikhin 1998a: 206). Bibikhin's opening words show that he completely agrees with Ellul's point of view, and considers it very important for solving the problems the book poses.

Ellul's initial thesis is the claim that all the historical failures of European civilization arise from the refusal to follow the teachings of Jesus Christ. Historical Christianity and the Christian church are not a development of these teachings, but rather are directly opposed to them.

The trouble is not in the glad tidings of the Gospels in and of themselves, but in their inhuman, unbearable loftiness. The incarnation of

God, the church as the body of Christ, Christian life in truth and love—if they are fully understood and accepted—make such extreme demands on people that they resist customary definition, and Ellul prefers to designate them with the symbol ‘X.’

Bibikhin goes on,

ecclesiastical Christianity, beginning in the 2nd century and even more so later, had very little in common with this primordial ‘X.’ Ellul is right: the only person who would argue over this would be someone who had no idea what is meant by the spirit of God sojourning within humanity, as promised by Jesus Christ to his bride the Church (Bibikhin 1998a: 206)

The Christian Revelation makes it possible for the human being to become absolutely free through a union with God. It indicates the potential for acquiring one’s creative spiritual essence and realizing this essence in this world. This was so new and unusual in the context of pagan religions (which, in essence, were reduced to a system of moral restrictions and slavish subjugation to the will of the gods) that the Romans were entirely justified in calling the first Christians “godless.” But the emergence of the church marked a rejection of all that was most important in this Revelation: “official Christianity opposed this revolution of the spirit with its buttoned-up conservatism; in religion it turned into a repetition of ancient priesthood, in morality—into the most petty and oppressive dogmatism, and in culture; a toothless omnivorousness” (Bibikhin 1998a: 208).

The teachings of Christ were considered “anti-moral,” in the sense that they revealed the potential to transform human essence into a state of limitless creative freedom, unlimited by any law and repudiating any law (including moral law). In ecclesiastical Christianity this was reduced to “moralism,” aimed at limiting freedom and subjugating humanity to the dictates of the church itself. Ellul particularly emphasizes the negative significance of the idea of sin, as inculcated in original Christianity (where it did not exist) and radically distorting it. This idea helped create an impassable separation between people and God. The individual finally lost the possibility of becoming, through union with God, a free and creative being, and lost the possibility of mastering their own *divine* essence.

However, incapable of finding oneself, and one’s authentic essence, people finally lose faith in their responsibility for what is happening around them, and the hope that this world can become better and more humane. This becomes the main reason for *nihilism* and the radical *anthropological catastrophe* in which the human being ultimately loses their capacity to understand themselves and turn into a “human-machine,” submitting to their own phantom creation, technology. Bibikhin confirms the total domination of this trend in the late 20th century, and follows Ellul by considering the *Christian Church, which has perverted the glad tidings of Christ*, responsible for this final catastrophe’s advancement.

Modern Christianity, understood naïvely, teaches morality, tradition and participation in history. In fact, it's not so simple. The Christian church stands at the base of all the historical evil of modern nihilism, although it is not the only one to blame. The primary error of the church lies in its having moved God off to an excessively transcendent distance. If there is no God, then everything is permitted. But it would be even more true to say that if God is unapproachable in his eternity, then all that is left is cold loneliness. Absolute divinity soars at such heights that to the earthly gaze, it merges with nothingness. The transcendence evacuated God from the world and in so doing, made everything on earth relative. If everything is equally far from his infinitude, everything is equally worthless. [...] Through the efforts of generations of preachers, an important idea in Christian dogma—the inborn sinfulness of humanity—was rooted in the collective consciousness in the form of a sense of doom, the idea that all human affairs conceal within them a fateful rot. Humanity is caught in the nets of evil in advance, and everything that happens on earth has been condemned beforehand by the fact that it is infinitely distant from a transcendental God. Post-Christian and non-Christian ideologies adopted the thesis of the aboriginal depravity of humankind. True, modern psychology removed the burden of conscience. But although in a secularized world the concept of sin has been forgotten, everything that is conveyed to us every day on TV, in the papers, not to mention the floods of popular fiction, strengthens the suspicion of human sinfulness and malice and cultivates the conviction that the evil of the world is not to be reformed (Bibikhin 1998a: 219–220).

An extraordinarily important fact should be noted here: although Bibikhin reproduces the thoughts of his Western contemporary, the main conclusions he and Ellul arrive at reproduce the main motifs of the critique of historical Christianity made by prominent Russian thinkers of the 19th and early 20th centuries, such as Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Vladimir Solov'ev and Vasily Rozanov.

It is no less important to see the similarity between their thoughts and those of Friedrich Nietzsche, who in his *Antichrist* very clearly opposed the glad tidings of Christ and their radical distortion in ecclesiastical Christianity (see: Evlampiev 2013b: 121–132). Nietzsche sees the essence of the new experience of life brought by Jesus in the removal of the distance between people and God, and in demonstrating the possibility of humanity discovering divine perfection in oneself: “In the whole psychology of the ‘Gospels’ the concepts of guilt and punishment are lacking, and so is that of reward. ‘Sin,’ which means anything that puts a distance between God and humanity, is abolished—*this is precisely the “glad tidings.”* Eternal bliss is not promised, nor is it conditional: it is conceived as the *only* reality—what remains consists merely of signs useful in speaking of it” (Nietzsche 1990: 658–659, aphorism 33). However, in the concept of

the church "...humankind should be on its knees before the very antithesis of what was the origin, the meaning and the *law* of the Gospels" (Nietzsche 1990: 661, aphorism 36). Ideas of the Judaic tradition, cast aside by Jesus, were used in order to guarantee the obedience of all Christians to the church and its servants: the idea of sin and redemption, as well as the idea of a *posthumous* reward in the form of a mythical 'Heavenly Kingdom.' "[...] sin, humanity's self-desecration *par excellence*, was invented in order to make science, culture, and every elevation and ennobling of humanity impossible; the priest *rules* through the invention of sin" (Nietzsche 1990: 675, aphorism 49). And: "From this time forward the type of the Saviour was corrupted, bit by bit, by the doctrine of judgment and of the second coming, the doctrine of death as a sacrifice, the doctrine of the *resurrection*, by means of which the entire concept of "blessedness," the whole and only reality of the gospels, is juggled away—in favour of a state of existence *after death!*..." (Nietzsche 1990: 665, aphorism 41).

The similarity between Nietzsche's viewpoint and the conclusions in Bibikhin's *New renaissance* is no accident—after all, in spirit, Nietzsche is one of the closest thinkers to Bibikhin. This primarily has to do with their understanding of Christianity. Since many of Bibikhin's adherents would dispute this claim, consider one of his statements found in a diary entry from the late 1970s: "...and would Christ really be baptized today, consent to hiding beneath a roof? The forces of God and the devil in this world parted ways long ago, such that the church is crammed into a corner and hopes at best to remain a 'cultural value.' Christ is, of course, with Nietzsche, Joyce and Heidegger, Böll, not with the church" (Bibikhin 1998b: 542).

The opposition between two forms of Christianity allows us to better comprehend the religious content of the Renaissance. True Christianity, or Gnostic Christianity, is close to Jesus Christ himself and existed only as a hidden "heretical" tendency in history, whereas false ecclesiastical Christianity distorted the teachings of Christ using the idea of sin, and in turn established an impassible boundary between people and God. In the context of the radical crisis of ecclesiastical Christianity, which had proven its inability to be the foundation for human creativity, Renaissance actors sought to revive *true Christianity* and return European civilization to the path of development prescribed by Christ's teachings. It is highly characteristic that, in establishing the particulars of the Italian humanists' Christian faith, Bibikhin points out several times that this faith did not attach any significance to the idea of life after death, which meant imbuing life on earth and the earthly perfection of the human being with absolute meaning, in precisely the same sense as Nietzsche described it.

Bibikhin finds this in Dante's worldview: "Dante's cult of the valiant feat assumes that any self-realization on earth is better than a sluggish expectation of benefits beyond the grave, which the idlers would never see anyway" (Bibikhin 1998a: 395). This is typical of Petrarch to the same

degree: “Petrarch reproves the ‘elders of holy life,’ who had advised him and Boccaccio to abandon their literary affairs for the sake of worrying solely about their future life and salvation of their souls” (Bibikhin 1998a: 341). Meanwhile, Petrarch could rely entirely on the authority of St. Augustine: “Life after death, as conceived by Augustine, could be compared with developing film shot on earth. Nothing new in addition to that which was earned through labor on earth will be added. Old merits will shine forth in glory, old vices will be publicly unmasked” (Bibikhin 1998a: 341). Finally, the same kind of relationship to the ecclesiastical conception can be found in the work of Leonardo da Vinci: “Leonardo, like Dante, believed that to hope in a life beyond the grave was a crime, given earthly unfitness; and he hated Christian self-satisfaction as the cause of frivolous or egotistical behavior” (ibid., 400). Bibikhin affirms that even Burckhardt had distinguished this feature of the Renaissance worldview: “According to Burckhardt, Renaissance people were not very interested in Christianity beyond the grave” (Bibikhin 1998a: 348).

As a result, in the true Christianity being revived by the humanists, earthly life is *religiously illuminated*. Yet this does not imply that just *any* life would be recognized as proper and worthy, far from it: a life is worthy when a person manages to reveal, at least to some small extent, his infinite, divine essence, and realize it in creation, in the same way that God realizes his essence. Art, by creating sublime beauty and overcoming the world’s imperfections, becomes identical to religion, yet rejects the latter’s “formal” elements, such as dogma and ritual. In the Middle Ages, “poetry ultimately followed ideology. Now [in the Renaissance], on the contrary, poetry has subjugated everything else. In this way the thousand-year discourse of pastors and spiritual instructors was imperceptibly brought to a close, although it is possible that only Dante in his time understood that he, as a poet, had begun speaking louder than the other voices of his time” (Bibikhin 1998a: 260–261). Further, however, this truth about the possibility a different form of religiosity, separate from the traditional church, becomes a general conviction. “The ‘soul’s fervor,’ as Boccaccio defined poetry, was a sort of new godliness, in which philosophical humbleness combined with a feeling of primacy that recognized no other human authority above itself” (Bibikhin 1998a: 349). Finally, Bibikhin comes to a conclusion, “...from the very beginning, through all the stages of relations between Renaissance culture and the church there passes the immutable confidence of the poet, the artist, the scholar, that inspiration, self-knowledge and mental effort better suit the sense of Christianity than ceremony, ritual and cult; that is, the certainty that Christianity is at core not a religion” (Bibikhin 1998a: 358).

If the convictions gradually coming to fruition in the work of the Italian humanists had been realized through some concrete actions, (a sketch of which is given by Nicholas of Cusa’s program of uniting all of the various faiths into a new religion, as found in “On the peace of faith” (see:

Nicholas of Cusa 2010) the church might have experienced a transformation more radical than the one that happened under the influence of Luther's Reformation. "Over the two thousand years of its existence, the church was probably never as fraught with all-encompassing reconstruction as in the early 14th through the early 16th centuries" (Bibikhin 1998a: 344).

However, Bibikhin claims that it was Luther's Reformation, which began in the 16th century, that became the factor that *saved* the Christian church from a more radical (i.e. real, and not merely apparent!) transformation. The return of true Christianity, which would not have repressed, but rather emancipated the creative source within humanity, did not happen. Traditional Christianity, having "split" into Catholicism and Protestantism, preserved its former essence and its dominion over European humanity, and this is precisely what led to the inevitable cultural catastrophe in the centuries to come. "The Reformation and the Counter-reformation turned out in this sense to be a breakdown that rendered null and void the possibilities gathering strength in the depths of Christianity. Roman Catholicism was stabilized by the Reformation at the cost of its loss of cultural and historical energy" (Bibikhin 1998a: 344).

Despite appearing paradoxical, this idea is not particularly new. In this case, Bibikhin refers to Burkhardt: "Burkhardt believed that the dynamic of the Renaissance, which was overall not inimical toward the church, sooner or later would have collapsed Roman Catholicism from the inside out; instead, the church was saved by its worst enemy, Protestantism" (Bibikhin 1998a: 357). But it is far more important that this idea is found in Nietzsche (*The Antichrist*), whose influence on Bibikhin is beyond all doubt.

The Germans have destroyed for Europe the last great harvest of civilization that Europe was ever to reap—the Renaissance [...]. A German monk, Luther, came to Rome. This monk, with all the vengeful instincts of an unsuccessful priest in him, raised a rebellion against the Renaissance in Rome [...]. Luther saw only the depravity of the papacy at the very moment when the opposite was becoming apparent: the old corruption, the *peccatum originale*, Christianity itself, no longer occupied the papal chair! Instead there was life! Instead there was the triumph of life! Instead there was a great yea to all lofty, beautiful and daring things! [...] And Luther *restored the church*: he attacked it. [...] The Renaissance – an event without meaning, a great futility! (Aphorism 61 (Nietzsche 1990)).

Bibikhin could easily have borrowed the idea of the Renaissance's failure and Luther's central role in the restoration of false Christianity's dominion over European humanity from another thinker, Alexander Herzen. In his early philosophical work *Letters on the Study of Nature*, Herzen lays out an original concept of history that closely resembles

Bibikhin's in *The New Renaissance* (see: Evlampiev 2013a: 35–45). Herzen claims that a false “dualist” version of Christianity had triumphed in the Middle Ages, one that divided people from both God and nature. In the 15th–16th centuries, some thinkers emerged (Herzen lists Bruno, Vanini, Cardano, Campanella, Telesio, Paracelsus) who attempted to overcome this depraved dualism, but ecclesiastical Christianity crushed this impulse, and the Middle Ages thus dominated over the entire Early Modern period.

Many people imagine that the last three centuries [15th–18th. — I.E.] were just as distinct from the Middle Ages as the latter are from the ancient world; but this is wrong: the time of the Reformation and *Bildung* represent the final phase of the development of Catholicism and the feudal system; perhaps they went far beyond the circle drawn by the Vatican, but they nevertheless represent the organic continuation of the previous era [...]. Neither Luther nor Voltaire drew a line of fire between that which was and the new (Herzen 1955: 228–229).

Bibikhin speaks in exactly the same way about how the failure of the Renaissance essentially marked the return of the medieval way of life and the medieval worldview to European history. “Once again in the Early Modern period, recalling the Middle Ages, the wheels of the world-machine began to subjugate humanity, which had made itself more rational. The Renaissance type nearly disappeared from the face of the earth, along with free cities, and it now takes an effort to recreate that unique combination of patience, inclusiveness and brave feats” (Bibikhin 1998a: 412). The church's teachings, deprived of the mystical depth that should be present in every true religion, easily transformed into the atheism and mechanicism of Enlightenment ideology. These later gave rise to the 20th-century nihilism discussed above, which led European humanity to its current situation of “the death of the human being.” There is no way out of this situation other than through a *new renaissance*, whose core, as we now understand, should be a return to authentic religiosity in the life of European humanity. That is, a return to the true teachings of Jesus Christ, which were tossed aside long ago and forgotten by the historical church, and which remain alive only in the works of the great mystic philosophers: Joachim of Fiore, Meister Eckhart, Nicholas of Cusa, Giordano Bruno, Leibniz, Fichte, Dostoyevsky, Vladimir Solov'ev, and Heidegger.

Now, we can probably add the name of our distinguished compatriot Vladimir Bibikhin to this list.

Translated by Ainsley Morse

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