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Vladimir Bibikhin: His Biographical Notes and the Moscow Circle of Religious Intellectuals

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Abstract

This article is a reading of Vladimir Bibikhin's biographical notes and offers a sketch of the dynamics among the Moscow circle of religious intellectuals during the last decades of the Soviet Union and later. Bibikhin's personal testimony and philosophical work offer an example of how the tradition of pre-revolutionary religious philosophy, Orthodox thought, and critical philosophy, survived Soviet suppression and censorship, and emerged to new life after the fall of communism. Bibikhin also reminds us that Russian religious thinkers were often read in support of Russian nationalism and he was deeply critical of this trend.

Keywords

Averintsev, diary, ideology, life, Losev

The personal testimony and philosophical work of Vladimir Bibikhin (1938–2004) offer an example of how the tradition of pre-revolutionary religious philosophy, Orthodox thought, and critical philosophy survived Soviet suppression and censorship and emerged to new life after the fall of communism. As representative and chronicler of the Moscow circle of religious intellectuals, Bibikhin is part of this larger story, a story whose protagonists were Aleksej Losev, Sergej Averintsev, Sergej Horuzhy, Ol'ga Sedakova, among many others. In this article, I have decided to focus on this side of Bibikhin's work and in particular on his biographical writings and diaries. In my opinion, his personal experience with, and attitude toward the fate of Russian religious philosophy, provide an important background to understanding Bibikhin as a philosopher, and a translator of Heidegger.

The most prominent figures in the religious intelligentsia from the 1960s to the 1990s were certainly Aleksej Losev (1893–1988) and Sergej Averintsev (1935–2004), who are considered to have provided an intellectual bridge between the pre-revolutionary religious philosophy, and the late-Soviet period, when this philosophy was officially re-appropriated. They managed to introduce their students to the thought of Solovyov, Florenskij, Bulgakov etc., and teach them the fundamentals of Orthodox theology under the guise of lectures on Byzantine literature and classical philosophy. Bibikhin's work creates a link between these two thinkers and puts them in context: he was Losev's trusted student and secretary for many years, and he was Averintsev's close friend. Shortly before his death in 2004, he published a book of notes he took during conversations with Losev and Averintsev over the course of several decades (Bibikhin 2004). In the introduction to the otherwise unrevised notes he writes that, having just finished writing up his conversations with Losev since 1964, as well as the notes he took referring to him after his death, the news of Averintsev's unexpected passing away in 2004 prompted him to bring them together in a single volume. "Talking about the one without remembering the other", he writes, "is impossible" (Bibikhin 2004: 305). Bibikhin's notes are an interesting document about the dynamics between religious intellectuals during the 1970s and 80s. Not only their intellectual commitment and philosophical orientation, but also their professional ambitions and the personal animosities emerge quite clearly from them, and they help us understand the development of religious thought in Russia.

Let me stress that Bibikhin's memories of Losev and Averintsev are a deeply personal document. While reading, I at times felt a kind of embarrassment at so much psychological and emotional insight. I do not want to quote too much from these notes, but only select some of the more significant episodes.

Vladimir Bibikhin became a student of Losev in 1964 and maintained regular contact and scholarly meetings with him until 1984. From 1970 to

1972, he worked as a secretary in Losev's home office. Being a student of Losev granted him access to the secluded life Losev was living as a scholar in his house on Arbat, and admitted him into a world of thought radically different from the ideological humanities at Moscow State University. The following recollection by Bibikhin is worth quoting at full length, because it conveys the atmosphere of his meetings with Losev particularly well:

When I walked down the Arbat towards the centre after my first lesson with Aleksandr Fedorovich, I had become a different person. The city had changed, the air was rich, the space around me was deep. I could move easily in this new density. Every time I approached Losev's house, the Arbat began to appear particularly empty, the people around me very agitated. The room on the second floor with the window to the courtyard spoke of strict reclusion from the world. Here people thought. A big man in an imposing armchair among books stacked on the table and in the former fireplace kept vigil in silent contemplation. 'Good evening, Vladimir' (Bibikhin 2004: 11).

The conversations with Losev revolved around Plato and Aristotle, Hegel and Husserl, Solovyov and Florensky, around aesthetics, mysticism, and Orthodoxy, but also around the experience of persecution and oppression. In a conversation recorded by Bibikhin he encourages his students to study the works of the church-father Gregorios Palamas, while he himself, he says, will confine his studies to Neo-Platonism:

Father Pavel [Florensky. — *K.St.*] was reserved, between him and me there was no contact, he was afraid of me as a worldly man. Even though it should have been clear that I was also searching. And then, also the times began to wind up. It became necessary to interrupt the acquaintance. Only some brave people remained, who would come to see me, and I would go to see them. All of this immediately became known: oh, so you met among two-three of you, you spoke about Sofia the Divine Wisdom in the house of Losev? We spoke... At that time, everything immediately came out into the open like through some kind of sorcery. You have no idea what it meant to be meeting in groups of two or three. I survived by a miracle then. The classical philosophy saved me. [...] Now, of course, everything is easier, and the times in general are different. You did not have to survive, to suffer, the road was paved by us, not by you, we bore everything on our shoulders, not you, we shed our blood, not you. Go along now, translate Palamas. For me it is already too late. If one were to switch to theology now, to Migne [Losev is here presumably referring to the complete edition of Patristic scriptures by Abbot Migne, 1875–1884. — *K.St.*], then all literature will have to be changed. No, I will concern myself with Plotinus, as before. There I have a lot of material (Bibikhin 2004: 233).

Losev's encouragement to study and translate Palamas bore fruit. Bibikhin translated the *Triads in Defence of the Holy Hesychasts* by Gregorios Palamas.

It should also be mentioned that Bibikhin eventually broke from his teacher, Losev. In the 1980s, Bibikhin was already suspicious about the religious renewal under state-tutelage and the use of Orthodoxy for nationalistic purposes. In 1985, he broke with his former teacher, Losev, over an interview that the latter had done for the newspaper *Pravda*. I will quote a part of the letter that Bibikhin wrote to Aleksey Losev and his wife Aza Takho-Godi on January 3, 1985. He published this letter in his diaries because it conveys his disappointment in his former teacher over what was thought to be a common struggle against the ideologization of the humanities:

Thank you for your 'January epistle'. I had not seen this copy of 'Pravda' with the interview from Aleksey Fedorovich before, but I had heard a lot of talk about it. Of course, instead of naming Lunacharsky as an example of 'an outstanding lecturer' one could have cited Fedor Stepun, and instead of 'the mad excesses of bourgeois-capitalist civilization' one might simply have said 'technological civilization': the censor would have had no problem allowing that. As for 'materialist understanding of history' and 'class-enemy', these are also extra titbits thrown to the guard dogs, like overfeeding those who are already full. But on the whole, this is probably the first time that a paper for so many million readers has published such powerful and positive words by such a genial thinker (Bibikhin 2004: 293–294).

Also after the fall of communism in Russia, a period followed during which Orthodox religion was seen as a basis for national identification. Bibikhin categorically rejected nostalgia for pre-revolutionary Russian religious philosophy, and on these grounds opposed those who were turning Losev into a saint-like figure of religious resistance. This becomes clear in his reflections on the adaptation of Losev's house into a museum and centre for the study of Russian religious philosophy (Bibikhin 2004: 299–302).

Bibikhin's notes document his conversations, work, and friendship with Averintsev from 1969 until Averintsev's death in 2004. They do so in an irregular way, sometimes with years of silence between entries. In the introduction, he writes about his friend:

Averintsev's presence anywhere would always turn into a celebration or an event. Therefore, it's one thing to speak about his virtues. One would need to read his books, a goal for the future. But understanding who he was is a different question; it is a question of faith (Bibikhin 2004: 305).

The notes from the 1970s and 80s are rich, giving us a sense of the activities and the ideas developed in the intellectual circle around Averintsev and Bibikhin. The later notes, taken after 1991, create a link to our contemporary period. For example, in the notes from the year 1995–1996, Sergej Averintsev, Konstantin Sigov, Olga Sedakova and Sergej Horuzhy visited Pope John-Paul II (if I am correct, Bibikhin could not join them due to ill health), and meetings at the Sv. Filaretovskij Institute are also recorded. Bibikhin's thoughts on Averintsev's decision to move to Vienna, and his disappointment in an intellectual world disintegrating under the impact of political change and economic hardship, are also interesting. Apart from a sense of a deep friendship between Bibikhin and Averintsev built on many meetings and shared moments in their private and professional life, these notes convey the tensions and difficulties which he and Averintsev encountered with each other and with the intellectual context of their time.

Bibikhin's oeuvre conveys the image of an uncompromisingly non-ideological thinker, so passionately non-ideological that his thought never seems to come to a rest, to a point of conclusion, to an end-point. I have often wondered whether his premature death caused the publication of many of his major works as lectures. *The Early Heidegger*, *Mir*, *Energy*, *The Language of Philosophy*, *Wittgenstein*, *The New Renaissance* are lecture-books, reprinted date by date, lecture by lecture. Obviously, this is difficult material for a non-native speaker of the Russian language, but it is apparently also difficult material for Russians, because I have been told that giving lectures (direct confrontation with his audience) was an integral part of Bibikhin's style of philosophy. It seems to me that Bibikhin's philosophical style could be symptomatic of his thinking. Spoken language is different from written language. We do not speak about philosophy in the way we write about it. When we write philosophy, the genre of the philosophical essay requires us to respect a certain set of rules, such as formulating the introduction, definitions, deductions, and conclusions. The philosophical lecture is a different genre, it certainly also has the elements of the philosophical essay, but it can arrange them differently. The lecturer can move backward and forward in his argument, he can take his readers on a detour, and reformulate his question as his argument moves along. The advantage of the spoken philosophical text is that it remains open to some degree. It remains open to reactions and questions. Instead, the written philosophical text is a closed text, to a certain extent. Therefore, maybe it is not by chance that Bibikhin favoured the genre of the lecture for his philosophy. It is the best possible medium to transport a philosophy that went incessantly against the grain of any totalizing conclusion.

Bibikhin's attitude towards the legacy of Russian religious philosophers very well illustrates the extent to which he was aware of the danger of ideologizing philosophical ideas. By this I do not mean his own assess-

ment of the works of Bulgakov, Berdyaev, Florensky etc., but his attitude towards the way these authors were used in the late Soviet period and in post-communist Russia. In an essay entitled *For Administrative Use* published in the book *A New Beginning* Bibikhin recalls a period in his life when he was employed in a government-sponsored project to prepare philosophical digests on Russian and Western philosophy. Bibikhin critically recollects how the Soviet government was interested in Russian religious thinkers so far as it could shape their ideas into an official canon supporting Russian nationalism, and as an anti-individualist philosophy of communism. “The ones in power started to look for ideological alternatives to Marxism early,” Bibikhin writes. As early as 1973, political strategists began considering Orthodox patriotism to be an easy way out of an ideological dead-end. State organs busied themselves with the elaboration of ideological alternatives, especially with regard to an ideological underpinning for the Soviet army. To this end, they even employed “innate dissidents”, as Bibikhin refers to himself and his lot. These scholars translated and reviewed *spekhran*-literature, their texts were published in a numbered series signed DSP (*dlya sluzhebnogo pol'zovaniya*, transl. for administrative use), and limited editions were carefully distributed among state-officials. Since the authorities imagined that Orthodoxy could provide a particularly useful ideological basis for patriotism, research in this field was intensified. Bibikhin recalls that at the end of the 1970s, religion was a particularly well-financed part of the DSP-series. These studies were conducted on a superficial, ideologically-correct level, he writes— a level which merely reflected the parlous state of religion in the country as a whole (Bibikhin 2003, 193).

Bibikhin also worked on Western philosophers, whose works he reviewed and translated. He translated Kierkegaard, Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, and Dietrich Bonhoeffer for a publication on contemporary Protestantism. In 1974, Bibikhin began translating Heidegger, and with his colleagues, he also worked on Merleau-Ponty, Ortega-y-Gasset, Sartre, and Wittgenstein. In 1976, Umberto Eco and Jacques Derrida, key authors of European structuralism and post-structuralism, were translated. The employees of the Department for Scientific Information and Study of Foreign Literature of the Soviet Academy of Sciences prepared digests of Western philosophy and social science that ‘official’ scholars would then study and comment. Bibikhin recalls that the translators were painfully aware that they were not writing for a reading public, and that, above all, they were working years behind scholars in the West. “When Heidegger was finally published,” Bibikhin writes, “deconstructivism was already in full swing in the West” (Bibikhin 2003: 188). Bibikhin evaluates the long-term effect of these efforts critically. In his opinion, the texts were too fragmented, and chosen from too particular a perspective. They would hardly serve as a solid basis for the reception of Western thought, once it was no longer forbidden.

The inevitable fragmentation of the information, the excited tone of the abstracts, the delicacy of the unusual point of view, and especially the lack of grounding in this kaleidoscope of abstracts is a poison rather than a blessing [...] Today, as the former body of the Moscow milieu has dissolved, one could rightfully think and say that the air in the country would be lighter, but cleaner, if social science ‘for administrative use’ had never existed (Bibikhin 2003: 196).

On the other hand, he writes that the work for the information department opened up a window to the West, especially for those who would not have otherwise gotten permission to travel to the West. Bibikhin’s memories make it clear how immensely important access to the humanities and social sciences in the West was for scholars working in the Soviet Union at the margins of the official Marxist-Leninist canon. It provided them with an outside perspective on their own situation as scholars, on the absurdity of being confined to a closed library, working for a non-public, even forbidden to take home their translations and papers. Making DSP-literature (*dlya sluzhebного pol’zovaniya*, transl. for administrative use) available outside of controlled circulation was a criminal offense and it is shocking to read that the secrecy of these years still tormented Bibikhin in 2001:

There were cases, quite frequently, when dissidents were found to have such numbered editions, and an entire investigation set in. These cases probably played a role in the dispersal of our department, even though I am only aware of a few minor incidents. That I might be charged for the possession of numbered volumes is a constant fear of mine, even today, in spring 2001 (Bibikhin 2003: 189).

For readers knowledgeable in 20th century Orthodox theology, Bibikhin’s intellectual biography at first sight looks familiar to the intellectual background of an important Greek theologian of our days, Christos Yannaras. What Bibikhin shares with Yannaras is a profound knowledge of Heidegger. Bibikhin translated Heidegger’s *Being and Time* into Russian. He also translated Gregorios’ Palamas *Triads*. That means that he had the exact same material in front of him as Yannaras in the 1960s and 70s, when he wrote his books *Peron and Eros* and *Heidegger and the Aeropagite* (Yannaras 1982: 2005). Unlike Yannaras, however, Bibikhin never drew a direct line between Heidegger’s “Fundamentalontologie” and the Palamatian theo-ontology based on the “energy-essence distinction.” Bibikhin did not find it plausible to read Palamas with a Heideggerian vocabulary, as Yannaras does, and he most certainly must have rejected the radical anti-Western and anti-Enlightenment conclusions of Yannaras. What I also learned is that Bibikhin did not, as his friend and colleague Sergey Horuzhy, see the ultimate key to a renewal of religious

philosophy in the neo-patristic turn of Orthodox theology. He lectured about the notion of “energy,” where he also makes use of Horuzhy’s work on Hesychasm, but the concept of “synergic anthropology” remains outside of his philosophical argument.

Bibikhin quite clearly did not sustain a civilizational type of argument that sees the watershed for the entire history of East and West in the difference between Palamas and Latin scholasticism. Instead, my impression is that Bibikhin was interested primarily in the philosophical problems themselves; energy, freedom, and language—these were problems of *European* philosophy for him, not of a Western European philosophy to which Orthodoxy, in one way or the other, already possessed the key.

What I try to offer in this article is a brief sketch of Bibikhin as member and chronicler of the Moscow circle of religious intellectuals. This is a limited enterprise and not everybody may be convinced that this background provides useful information for understanding the philosophical work of this exceptional Russian thinker. Be that as it may, I leave the task of exploring Bibikhin’s philosophical oeuvre to the other contributors to this publication who are more competent in the field.

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