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Ruth Coates

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

This book is about Christian motifs in the writings of the philosopher Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin (1895–1975). As such it is already contentious if one is to judge by the way in which this writer's work has been received, especially in the West. For although Bakhtin has been appropriated for a wide variety of critical and literary theoretical positions, ranging from Marxism to post-structuralism, it has been generally assumed that he is a secular thinker even where it has been accepted that he was a religious man. I believe that this assumption stands in need of some correction. If at first critical neglect of Christian motifs in Bakhtin was due to pardonable ignorance – certain crucial, early and late, texts being made available only by the mid 1980s (in Russia) and the early 1990s (in the West) – it now seems attributable to a certain, uncanny 'blindness', at least among Slavists, who have had time enough to respond to this particular voice among the many that contend for attention in Bakhtin's work. By focusing on the Christian voice in Bakhtin to the exclusion of all others, I hope to provide what I believe to be a necessary counterbalance to extant readings, and something of an 'eye-opener' for those who would dismiss the idea of a religious dimension in his work as unfounded, irrelevant or naive. I do not, however, take on opposing views within the bounds of the book; my task is to demonstrate the presence and development of Christian influences in Bakhtin's work. Although there is biographical evidence to support the view that Bakhtin was acquainted with and sympathetic to Christianity, I do not appeal to this in the body of my text, as I hope that my reading will be found justified on purely textual grounds. However, for background and general information with a tangential relevance to my topic I have devoted the first part of the Introduction to a review of Bakhtin's 'religious biography'. The second part aims to situate the book with respect to

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critical literature on Bakhtin; since a total orientation is unfeasible, I have restricted my overview to full-length works on Bakhtin and articles in English and Russian which touch on my subject. Finally, I give some attention to the title, content and structure of the book.

BAKHTIN'S RELIGIOUS BIOGRAPHY

L. E. Pinsky is reported to have said, in a lecture at a conference held in Bakhtin's honour shortly after his death, that Bakhtin was a *filosof–molchun*, a philosopher and a man who kept silence (Kagan 1991, 87). In particular, his friends and helpers of the sixties and seventies agree that he rarely and with great reluctance talked about himself (for example, Kozhinov 1992, 111; Gachev 1993, 106–7). This, taken together with the fact that he was one of the last survivors among the intelligentsia of the early decades of the twentieth century (both time and the Stalinist purges having taken their toll), means that almost nothing is known of his life, still less of his inner life. Even the taped interviews with V. D. Duvakin, recorded in the last years of Bakhtin's life and later transcribed serially in the journal *Chelovek* (Duvakin 1993a–1994d), yield next to nothing about Bakhtin's personal convictions. Nevertheless, there is a general consensus among those who knew him that Bakhtin was a religious man. And indeed, it is possible to piece together the little reliable data available to us and construct a fragile framework that might be called Bakhtin's 'religious biography'.

In doing so, it is first necessary to say something about the only full-length biography of Bakhtin that has been written to date: Clark and Holquist's *Mikhail Bakhtin* (1984a). Clark and Holquist also construct a framework from firm documentary evidence and mostly reliable anecdotal evidence (interviews with Bakhtin's young and old acquaintances), padding it out with information about the social, intellectual and political conditions of the time drawn from a wide range of sources unconnected with Bakhtin. The result is an apparently seamless narrative which creates an image of Bakhtin as an integral personality with a well-documented personal history. This image is, however, deceptive. Whilst both methodologies are valid in their own right, Clark and Holquist's combination of the two can result in a misleading impression of substantiality. Bakhtin is placed into his historical context in such a way as to suggest he had definite connections with trends of thought, even specific organisa-

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tions, when in fact there is no hard evidence that he did. Or if there is hard evidence, Clark and Holquist do not attest it: there tends to be scanty or non-existent footnoting at precisely those points in their narrative where the attested historical Bakhtin is blended so seamlessly with the attested historical Vilnius, or Odessa, or Vitebsk, or Petrograd. If one is acquainted with the primary biographical material on Bakhtin, Clark and Holquist's sources are sometimes detectable, leading one to suppose their lack of attestation to be the result only of negligence, but such an acquaintance can also leave one wondering how they came to certain conclusions. In general, a more scholarly approach to Bakhtin's biography is needed in order to inspire trust in the narrative, which seems in places to border on fiction.

One of the weakest chapters of the biography in this respect is, unfortunately, Chapter 5, 'Religious Activities and the Arrest' (1984a, 120–45), the chapter which deals with Bakhtin's religious orientation. It opens in this way:

Bakhtin was a religious man. In his childhood he had had a conventional upbringing as a Russian Orthodox. By the 1920s, religious thought had become one of Bakhtin's central interests. He was known in intellectual circles of those days as a *cerkovnik*, a 'churchman' or 'adherent of the church'. This term does not mean that he was a churchgoer but implies simply that he was ideologically committed to the church. Although he later became less involved with religion, he remained a believer in the Orthodox tradition all his life.

The only attested statement in this paragraph is that which refers to Bakhtin's reputation as a 'churchman', taken from an interview with V. Shklovsky in 1978, yet in their footnote Clark and Holquist qualify even this by admitting that 'Shklovsky may have exaggerated Bakhtin's involvement in the church, since he himself was far from those circles' (1984a, 370). Chapter 5 continues with a description of the nature of Bakhtin's religious convictions:

Bakhtin was never a conventional Russian Orthodox in the sense of conforming to an organized religion. Rather, he was a religious intellectual from the Orthodox tradition. His religious views came not so much from traditional Orthodox thinking within the church as from the religious revival in the early twentieth century among Russian intellectuals who sought to break new ground in theological thought. Bakhtin's Orthodox theology was not of the run-of-the-mill seminary but of the highbrow

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intelligentsia. Indeed, he was not interested so much in religion as in the philosophy of religion. (1984a, 120)

However plausible this account may be, and however attractive to a late-twentieth-century readership, it is pure speculation, based, one must hazard (since the reader is not informed), on the tenor of Bakhtin's writing.

Clark and Holquist proceed to give an informative and lively overview of religious–intellectual life in Leningrad in the 1920s as it went on in the form of various societies, periodically giving the reader to understand that Bakhtin took an active part in them. However, on close examination it becomes clear that there is almost no proof of any connection, and many of Clark and Holquist's bridging statements are qualified with a 'probably', 'possibly' or 'almost certainly'. To cite some examples, in reference to the Free Philosophical Association it is said 'it is possible that Bakhtin attended occasional meetings of the association on his visits to Petrograd' (1984a, 125); of Voskresenie they write 'Bakhtin was not definitely a member of Voskresenie, though Yudina and Pumpyansky attended meetings from the fall of 1920' (1984a, 126). (Yudina and Pumpyansky were members of the so-called Bakhtin Circle. Frequently the religious activity of Bakhtin's friends is adduced to enforce speculation about Bakhtin's own leanings, a practice which seems not entirely satisfactory. Often, even these 'facts' are not attested.) With respect to the Brotherhood of Saint Seraphim, 'there is no conclusive evidence that Bakhtin was a member' (1984a, 133), further, 'Bakhtin is not known to have been a member' of the True Orthodox Catacomb Church (1984a, 140). Bakhtin is associated with some of these groups by alleged friendship with their leading members. Specifically, he is said to have known A. A. Meier of Voskresenie, A. V. Kartashev of the Brotherhood of Saint Sophia, and Archpriest F. K. Andreev of the Josephite schism, although no proof is offered. Another way of linking him with religious intellectuals is by way of intellectual affiliation, Clark and Holquist providing brief surveys, for example, of his alleged affinities with Fr P. A. Florensky, S. A. Askoldov and G. P. Fedotov. But these approaches, I suggest, do not in the end tell us anything substantial about what Bakhtin really believed during the 1920s, let alone, of course, during the rest of his life.

What, then, can be said about Bakhtin's religiousness from the

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biographical evidence available? Bocharov testifies that in 1916, while he was studying at Petrograd University, Bakhtin was introduced to the Religious–Philosophical Society by Kartashev, where he made the acquaintance of D. S. Merezhkovsky (Bocharov 1993, 81; see also Clark and Holquist 1984a, 29–30, where the influence of Fr Florensky and Meier is also claimed, but not substantiated). In the Duvakin interviews, Bakhtin confirms that he attended meetings of this society (Duvakin 1993b, 141; 1993c, 147–51). It is known that on 27 November 1918 Bakhtin took part in a debate entitled ‘God and Socialism’ in Nevel’, where he lived between 1918 and 1920, because a review of the debate in the local newspaper, *Molot*, has been preserved. Nevel’skaya (1981) quotes extensively from the not unbiased reviewer, who writes:

After comrade Deikhman comrade Bakhtin took the floor. In his speech, in which he defended religion, that muzzle [*namordnik*] of darkness, he hovered somewhere in the region of the heavens and higher. There were no living examples from the life and history of humankind in his speech. At certain points of his discourse he showed recognition and appreciation of socialism, but could only wail and was disturbed that this same socialism showed no concern at all for the dead (what, it doesn’t celebrate requiems?) and that, as he put it, with time the people would not forgive it for this. When, I wonder, ‘won’t it forgive’? In 100 years from now or more? – when the people will be 100 times more enlightened than the present generation! ‘That won’t happen,’ someone answered Bakhtin. Generally speaking, listening to his words you might think that any minute now all the hosts lying decayed in their graves will be resurrected, rise up and sweep all communists, and the socialism they are carrying out, from the face of the earth. (Nevel’skaya 1981, 274, quoted from *Molot*, 3 December 1918, No. 47)

From the same newspaper we know that there were other public meetings devoted to topics including ‘On the Meaning of Life’, ‘On the Meaning of Love’, ‘Christianity and Criticism’ and ‘Nietzsche and Christianity’ (Bocharov 1993, 84; see also Clark and Holquist 1984a, 42–3).

The next set of documentary evidence provides glimpses of the religious Bakhtin in Leningrad, to which he returned in 1924 and where he lived until he was sent into exile in 1929. Recently, a set of lecture notes made in 1924–5 by Pumpyansky, one of the original members of the Bakhtin Circle, has been published, and provides an invaluable insight into the circle’s activities during that period (Nikolaev 1992). The notes include a paper on ‘The Problem of Well-

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founded Peace' read by Bakhtin, in which he outlines what he considers to be the proper task of the philosophy of religion, analyses the position of the tax collector of the gospel parable as one who finds justification not in himself, like the Pharisee, but in an 'incarnated Third Person' (Nikolaev 1992, 235), and posits well-founded peace as that which is reached when one abandons self-assurance and passes through a period of restlessness and penitence to arrive at a condition of trust in God (Nikolaev 1992, 236). Pumpyansky also notes Bakhtin's responses to papers given by M. I. Tubyansky on Schell's theology at the end of 1925; these include an especially interesting analysis of the self-revelation of God as personal in character, and of the relationship with God as a relationship of two consciousnesses: 'A personal relationship with a personal God: this is the sign of religion, but it is also the special difficulty of religion, thanks to which a peculiar fear of religion and Revelation may arise, a fear of its personal orientation' (Nikolaev 1992, 246). That theology was one of the main preoccupations of the circle in 1925–6 is attested further by Pumpyansky's reading list of the period (Nikolaev 1992, 251), and by a letter of 1926 from Pumpyansky to another founding member of the circle, M. I. Kagan, then resident in Moscow:

We have been missing you . . . all this year – all these years – but especially this year, because we have been doggedly studying theology. The circle of our closest friends remains the same: M. B. Yudina, Mikh. Mikh. Bakhtin, Mikh. Izr. Tubyansky and I. Believe me, we often exclaim: what a shame that M. I. isn't here, he could have helped disentangle that question! (Nevel'skaya 1981, 265–6)

In the night of 24/25 December 1928, Bakhtin was taken into custody as part of a wave of arrests connected with the liquidation of Leningrad's religious society Voskresenie. The documentation of the affair, held to date in the KGB archives, runs to five volumes (Savkin, 1991, 108–9). Savkin relates that he and other scholars were allowed access to the material, but that they were unable to complete work on it for reasons outside their control (1991, 108). However, they were able to collect and publish transcripts of Bakhtin's interrogations under Stromin (on 26 December) and Petrov (on 28 December). It appears that Bakhtin was accused of participation in the 'counter-revolutionary' organisation Voskresenie, but that nothing Bakhtin said during his interrogations supported the claim (1991, 109). It is

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known, however, that Bakhtin was well acquainted with the leader of the society, A. A. Meier; Bakhtin's literary executor, S. G. Bocharov, testifies that Bakhtin made Meier's acquaintance while still a student and spoke of him as one of those closest to him during the 1920s (Savkin 1991, 109–10; see also Bocharov 1993, 82). In the Duvakin interviews, Bakhtin confirms that he knew Meier and found him very impressive, but did not sympathise with his views and did not attend his meetings; rather, it was Meier who occasionally visited Bakhtin (Duvakin 1993c, 151). During his first interrogation Stromin wrote down from Bakhtin's words, 'Political convictions: Marxist-revolutionary, loyal to Soviet power, religious' (Savkin 1991, 110). Strangely, Yu. P. Medvedev's citation of the same interrogation differs somewhat: 'no party affiliation. Marxist-revisionist. . . religious' (1992, 97). Which of these is the more accurate cannot as yet be verified, but Bakhtin clearly admitted faith in God.

During his interrogations Bakhtin was asked to give information about his lecturing activities in Leningrad, where they had taken place, who had attended, and what they were about. To this end he outlined the content of two papers given on M. Scheler, in which his treatment of the concepts of confession and resurrection were examined:

According to Scheler, confession is the laying bare of oneself to others, making social ('discourse') what used to strive towards its extra-verbal limit ('sin') and was an isolated, unconquered, alien body in the inner life of a person. The second paper was about resurrection. The gist: life will rise from the dead not for its own sake but for the sake of that value which only love can disclose in it. (Savkin 1991, 111)

Meier had taken part in the discussions following one of these papers (Savkin 1991, 111). Bakhtin was released on 5 January 1929, but interrogated again on 13 March. This time he admitted to meetings held at his flat for former students of the Petrograd Theological Institute, which had been closed down in 1923 (Clark and Holquist 1984a, 138) but had continued to operate in private homes under the organisation of one of the teaching staff, Shcherboi (Savkin 1991, 113; Clark and Holquist call him Sherbov, 1984a, 138). In the end Bakhtin was sentenced to five years in prison camp on the Solovetsky Islands (Savkin 1991, 114), commuted after a great effort on the part of his friends to a period of internal exile in Kustanai, Kazakhstan.

For about thirty years after Bakhtin's departure into exile there is next to no documentary evidence about his life, let alone his religious

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life, whose public dimension naturally vanished in the wake of his conviction and under the pressure of a militant ideological atheism. In the early 1960s, however, three graduate students at the Institute of World Literature in Moscow (S. G. Bocharov, V. V. Kozhinov and G. D. Gachev) discovered that Bakhtin was still alive and began to visit him in exile, eventually rehabilitating him, seeing through the publication of his works and resettling him and his wife in Moscow. The first visit took place in June 1961 (Bocharov 1993, 76). Both Kozhinov and Bocharov recall that on their very first meeting Bakhtin went out of his way to assure them that he was not a Marxist (Bocharov 1993, 76–7; Kozhinov 1992, 113). Before long, other scholars also began visiting the philosopher; two of these, V. N. Turbin and L. S. Melikhova, became intensively involved in the physical care of the Bakhtins. As a result of these working relationships with Bakhtin, which extended until his death in 1975, we have sporadic but highly trustworthy anecdotal evidence that he had not abandoned his faith during his long period of obscurity but had continued to meditate on religious themes. Kozhinov, for example, relates the following in an interview with the editor of a new journal on Bakhtin:

What Bakhtin often used to call the ‘philosophy of dialogue’ lay at the basis of all his literary-critical works: all of life is a dialogue, a dialogue between person and person, person and nature, person and God . . . Even simply the very existence of a person, if you like, is also a ‘dialogue’, the exchange of substances between the person and the surrounding environment. And in this regard Bakhtin several times repeated the phrase that, as it were, objective idealism maintains that the kingdom of God is outside us, and Tolstoy, for example, insists that it is ‘within us’, but I think that the kingdom of God is between us, between me and you, between me and God, between me and nature: that’s where the kingdom of God is. (Kozhinov 1992, 114–15)

If God is related to Bakhtin’s dialogic concept, his other famous conceptual tool, carnival, appears also to have been associated with religion in Bakhtin’s mind, judging by Turbin’s testimony that Bakhtin once reflected in his presence that ‘the gospel, too, is carnival’ (1990, 25). Melikhova, for her part, likes to show visitors the icon of St Seraphim of Sarov which the Bakhtins held in their flat in the 1920s and which accompanied them (albeit hidden away) into exile. She relates that Bakhtin considered the saint to be his ‘heavenly protector’ (Bocharov 1993, 87; Clark and Holquist 1984a, 133).

Bocharov’s recent publication, ‘Ob odnom razgovore i vokrug

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nego' ('On and around a certain conversation') (1993), sheds highly interesting light on Bakhtin's attitude to his own silence on religious matters in his work, indicating that the fear of repression was influencing him even in the 1920s. Bocharov relates a conversation that took place on 9 June 1970, from which I quote the relevant passage in full (the two books referred to are Voloshinov's *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language* and Bakhtin's first monograph, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Creative Work*):

BAKHTIN: Everything that was created over the course of this half-century on this graceless [*bezblagodatnoi*] soil under this unfree sky, it is all depraved to some degree or other.

BOCHAROV: Mikhail Mikhailovich, leaving [Voloshinov's] book aside for a moment, that's a complicated matter, but what is depraved about your book on Dostoevsky?

BAKHTIN: Oh come now, could I really have written like that? I tore the form away from the most important thing, you know. I couldn't talk directly about the main questions.

BOCHAROV: Which questions, M. M.?

BAKHTIN: Philosophical questions, what Dostoevsky tormented himself with all his life: the existence of God. I had to prevaricate all the time, to and fro. I had to take a firm hold of myself. As soon as a thought got going it was necessary to stop it. To and fro (Bakhtin repeated this several times during the conversation). I even qualified what I said about the Church. (1993, 71–2)

A little later on in the conversation Bakhtin implicitly accused himself of treachery. Referring to the literary-critical work of Bocharov and his colleagues he said: 'You, at least, do not betray. If you don't assert, it's because you're not sure. But I prevaricated – to and fro' (1993, 73). What did Bakhtin feel he had betrayed? Gachev's recent reminiscences give the answer: whilst consulting with Bakhtin about a book he was planning to write on the history of conscience, Bakhtin asked him: 'But what point of support will you adopt for conscience? For me that point of support is God' (1993, 107).

CRITICAL LITERATURE ON BAKHTIN AND THE
QUESTION OF A CHRISTIAN READING

Full-length works

There are many possible ways of dividing up the list of full-length works on Bakhtin that are currently on the market: those written by

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Slavists and those by non-Slavists, by Russians and non-Russians, by Europeans and non-Europeans, and so on. A discussion of the secondary literature under these headings would yield interesting results, not least from a culturological point of view. What does it say about the West and the East, for example, that to date only one slim monograph has been produced on Bakhtin in his native Russia,¹ where there is no language barrier to prevent access to Bakhtin's entire *oeuvre* and where the texts have been available for a long time, whereas upwards of twelve books devoted to him have appeared in the West over the past thirteen years, despite cultural and linguistic barriers to understanding Bakhtin and with some key texts unavailable in translation until very recently. Russian scholars have tended to comment on this phenomenon in a self-critical spirit; Volkova, for example, laments the slowness of native scholars to respond to Bakhtin, pointing out the discrepancy between the quantity of articles and books published in Russia and the West (a ratio, she claims, of 285 to 412 as of the end of 1990) (Volkova 1990, 5), whilst Averintsev (1988b) finds the feet-dragging attitude of the Soviet/Russian academic establishment to its national heritage scandalous. However, a Western 'other' might point out, to the Russians' credit, a certain modesty in their measured appropriation of Bakhtin from which our rather brasher, more hasty Western academics might learn. The broad thrust of Russian literature on Bakhtin has comprised meditative conceptual studies and contributions towards his historical contextualisation, in particular his position in the history of Russian thought, whereas Western literature has tended to concentrate on 'extensions and challenges' (as Morson and Emerson's 1989 collection of articles is succinctly headed), the application of Bakhtinian concepts or their refutation, perhaps before they have been adequately understood. These two, intensive and extensive, approaches are, of course, complementary: what is needed, perhaps, is more communication between them.

Most of the full-length studies of Bakhtin discuss his writings as a whole, although their methodologies differ widely. Of the three comprehensive introductory works available, Todorov's pioneering monograph (1981, translated into English in 1984) comprises a systematic, synchronic exposition of Bakhtin's thought; Clark and Holquist (1984a), as we have seen, take a chronological and a biographical approach; whilst Morson and Emerson (1990) opt to combine the two in their long book, which presents thematically a