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Solzhenitsyn—a Christian Perspective

Olive J. Brose

When the multiple crises of an entire civilization have severely shaken men's confidence in its survival, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn questions the basic goals of that civilization and the direction in which it has been heading for some centuries. To do so is to challenge a much cherished cluster of beliefs about humans and their destiny that together make up, as he wrote in *Letter to the Soviet Leaders* (1974), "the entire culture and world outlook which were conceived at the time of the Renaissance and attained the peak of their expression with the eighteenth century Enlightenment."

Solzhenitsyn speaks not from the depths of a chair of political science or sociology, but out of the depths of the Gulag Archipelago: "I belong as much to the camps as I do to Russian literature....There is where I was formed, and for all time," he wrote in a letter to Tvardovsky. The great fork in the road of camp life occurs at the point where the vow to survive at any price is either taken or rejected: " 'At any price' means: at the price of someone else." If you reject that aim, you may die, but while you're alive you drag yourself along proudly. And when you have ceased to be afraid of threats or to chase after rewards, "you become the most dangerous character in the owl-like view of the bosses. Because—what hold do they have on you?"

An inner transformation takes place, a self-knowledge that begets a transformation of values: "the meaning of earthly existence lies not, as we have grown used to thinking, in prospering, but...in the development of the soul." The reverse is true of the torturers, for "they are turning into swine, they are departing downward from humanity." And so, Solzhenitsyn can say, with the full and bitter knowledge of his own temptations: "I nourished my soul there, and I say without hesitation: 'Bless you, prison, for having been in my life!'"

> It was granted to me to carry away from my prison years...this essential experience: *how* a human being becomes evil and *how* good. In the intoxication of youthful successes I had felt myself to be infallible, and I was therefore cruel. In the surfeit of power I was a murderer, and oppressor. In my most evil moments I was convinced that I was doing good, and I was well supplied with systematic arguments. And it was only when I lay there on rotting prison straw that I sensed within myself the first stirrings of good. Gradually it was disclosed to me that the line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either—but right through every human heart—and through all human hearts. This line shifts. Inside us, it oscillates with the years. And even within hearts overwhelmed by evil, one small bridgehead of good is retained. And even in the best of all hearts, there remains...an unuprooted small corner of evil.
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> Since then I have come to understand the truth of all the religions of the world: They struggle with the *evil inside a human being* (inside every human being). It is impossible to expel evil from the world in its entirety, but it is possible to constrict it within each person.
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> And since that time I have come to understand the falsehood of all the revolutions in history: They destroy only *those carriers* of evil contemporary with them (and also fail, out of haste, to discriminate the carriers of good as well). And they then take to themselves as their heritage the actual evil itself, magnified still more [*Gulag Archipelago*, II, 1975].

Commentators on the *Gulag* volumes have shown great respect for one whose life has been so formed, even if not all of them accept his searing indictment of Marxist-Leninist ideology as leading in a direct line to Stalinism. But with the publication of the *Letter to the Soviet Leaders* and *From Under the Rubble* (1975) the shape of Solzhenitsyn's thought became clearly visible. By and large Western "progressive" intellectuals have agreed with Sakharov's critique of the *Letter*: "the nationalist and isolationist tendencies of Solzhenitsyn's thought, and his own patriarchal religious romanticism, lead him into very serious errors and render his proposals utopian and even potentially dangerous" ("The Solzhenitsyn-Sakharov Debate," in *Kontinent*, 1976). Critics have relied on such condemnatory labels as reactionary, Slavophile messianism, Moscow the Third Rome, archaic, and menacing. (Among many see George Steiner, "More Notes from Underground," *New Yorker*, October, 1975; Hedrick Smith, *The Russians.*)

Having disposed of the Christian worldview long ago, Western critics were especially irritated to find it taken seriously. "People for him are essentially good or bad," and he identifies himself with

OLIVE J. BROSE, whose field of interest is English history, with a specialty in the nineteenth-century Anglican Church, is author of two books, *Church and Parliament* and *Frederick Denison Maurice: Rebellious Conformist 1805-1872*.

"the righteous." He is "steeped in a mysticism distinctively Russian." He is "reactionary, authoritarian, chauvinistic," said Jeri Laber in *Commentary* in May, 1974. *From Under the Rubble* was either ignored or described as a "reader on Russian religious themes," with Solzhenitsyn thundering against the godless trappings of modern life, talking of original sin, collective guilt and national repentance—all in all "an eccentric vision," a "rather incredible scenario," wrote Harvey Fireside in his review in *New Republic* in July, 1975.

Meanwhile, hardline anti-Communists, upholders of a return to the cold war, ranging from the AFL-CIO to William Buckley, rejoiced in Solzhenitsyn's scathing attack on their old enemy, and applauded his speeches in the United States in 1975. Superpatriots have used him to bolster their belligerent foreign policy or to whip up Bicentennial fervor about dying for liberty.

In short, the controversies Solzhenitsyn has stirred in the West have been conducted in terms of political and ideological labels, with some refreshing exceptions. One was George Kennan's perception of the danger that Western readers of *Gulag* might feel smug as they read of the Soviet horrors and thereby miss the "summons to conscience," the direct relevance of the work as an "explanation of the weaknesses in one's own personal behavior and in one's own society" (*New York Review of Books*, March 21, 1974). Leonard Schapiro understood why the average American or West European, whom he calls "Feuerbach Man," with his Utopias of material progress, has difficulty in assimilating Solzhenitsyn (*Russian Review*, October, 1974). And Donald W. Treadgold stated flatly that "In our time Christian writers cannot expect a reception based on an understanding of their position" (*Commentary*, September, 1974).

As these few perceptive comments suggest, the clues to the Western misunderstanding of Solzhenitsyn lie in the inability to conceive any alternate world outlook, any framework of values other than that which had its beginnings at the dawn of the Renaissance and the Reformation: That passionate, secular faith in man's capacity to create an ideal earthly society propelled the West out of its traditional mold into a progressive one, making change itself the chief operative concept. It is significant that by the very nature of its origin the United States has never been a traditional society. Wherever this basic shift occurred, all opposition became, perforce, conservative. Ever since Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, the U.S. role has been either the romantic defense of the past or the justification of an unreformed status quo. Within the framework of a progressive society all thought and discussion, all interpretations of human history, have been viewed in linear fashion as either progressing toward or regressing from the goal of the ideal earthly society. Even the serious questionings raised by the critical problem of the environment (posing doubts about the basic *direction* of society) have not deterred the faithful, as Solzhenitsyn puts it in the *Letter*, from "hoping for new scientific loopholes and inventions to stave off the day of retribution."

It is particularly significant that many who "profess and call themselves Christians" share these basic inherited presuppositions. The accommodation of Christian faith to the world's aims and ideas is an old story. But with the eighteenth century such accommodation became integration, especially in those pioneer industrial nations England and the United States. Far from being the framework of society and imposing the values of the faith upon it, religion has adopted each successive fashion of the world. Jacques Ellul, speaking from within the French Reformed Church tradition, has long commented on the perennial tendency of Christians to participate in the world's goals on the world's terms:

> A century ago nationalism was the ideological fashion, and Christians went along with it, adducing every imaginable Christian motif to justify their stand. Today social revolution, etc., are the fashion. To say so may seem wicked, for I am told, in scandalized accents, that this is not a question of fashion, that all the truth of Jesus is at stake in this social conflict. But I answer that the Christian nationalists of the nineteenth century also had killed each other in the conviction that Jesus had established nations and that love of country was part of love of God [*Violence. Reflections From a Christian Perspective*, 1969].

In the United States a bedrock secularism is as apparent in the fundamentalist and conservative "Bible Belt" as amid the theologically and politically amorphous "liberal" churches. Eagerly conforming to society's empirical concept of historic or scientific "fact," liberals in the nineteenth century discarded any elements of the faith incompatible with that concept. But in the same way fundamentalists (the term itself could not be used before this time) also mirrored this reductive definition of truth by their insistence on the inerrant, literal meaning of the Bible—a concept that would have astonished any ancient or medieval theologian. Furthermore, material well-being has been the goal, whether through the rugged individualist free enterprise capitalism favored by fundamentalists and evangelicals or the varieties of revolutionary or evolutionary socialisms espoused by liberal churchmen. Christ is called in to bless this goal in the name of the more abundant life or of social equality. The present widespread evangelical revival, while exhibiting some concern for social activism, focuses on a narrowly conceived personal salvation, morality, and piety, and continues this extraordinary conformity to the values of a progressive, success-oriented, technological society.

This long integration of religion into a Western secular society has resulted in a truncated theology and a shrunken concept of the role of the Church. Retreats into the realm of individual morality, prayer, and devotion, alternating with immersion in various popular causes and problems of the moment, have been substituted for what was a cosmic Christian vision. This shrinkage has been critical, amounting to an inability to challenge "secular" society with that other all-embracing view of life—the driving passion that seeks the transformation, the transfiguration of man as the means to another goal—the coming of the Kingdom of God.

It is this vision that has surfaced with such force in Solzhenitsyn and his fellow dissident contributors to *From Under the Rubble*. In part the very existence of such a group is due to the fact that Russia underwent the shift from a traditional to a progressive society so very late. The true significance of the nineteenth-century controversy between Westernizers and "Slavophiles" is that it pointed up the continuing existence of a traditional society with a different mindset from the all-embracing progressivism of the West. Indeed it is the very strength of the specifically *Christian* alternative view in Dostoevski and Soloviev, and those early twentieth-century contributors to *Vekhi*, which has nourished Solzhenitsyn and the others, and has in turn aroused the antagonism of Western intellectuals today. (*Vekhi*, *Landmarks*, appeared with seven essays in 1909. Among the authors were N.A. Berdyaev, S.N. Bulgakov, S.L. Frank, and Peter Struve. M. Gershenzon's Preface noted that all seven had in common "the recognition of the primacy both in theory and in practice of spiritual life over the outward forms of society, in the sense that the inner life of the individual and not the self-sufficing elements of some political order is the only solid basis for every social structure"—as quoted by Leonard Schapiro in *Slavonic and East European Review*, December, 1955. A later volume, *De Profundis*, was printed in 1918.)

The *Vekhi* writers are particularly significant when compared to Western conservative thinkers: they knew there had never been a conservative movement that could combine respect for tradition with the reforms necessary if tradition were to remain alive. They all wrote from the far side, so to speak, of their own former socialist or Marxist views. They did not give up their belief in a just and human society; they gave up the *direction*—toward revolution, toward abstract ideologies. Denying that evil is the product of the false organization of society, they affirmed man's responsibility, on Christian grounds, to struggle against his environment. Repudiating the intelligentsia's amoralism, and the revolutionaries' lack of any standard of truth or falsity where party aims were concerned, they viewed materialistic socialism as incompatible with the Christian way of life.

In returning to the *Vekhi* position the essayists in *Rubble* explicitly affirm their determination to continue to strive for a better social order, but acknowledge that "unless we bring about a change in ourselves, all attempt at restructuring society will come to naught"—as put by A.B., pseudonym of a dissident whose identity could not be revealed, in "The Direction of Change." (See too Mikhail Agursky's "Contemporary Socioeconomic Systems and Their Future Prospects" in the *Rubble* volume.) Quite simply, they feel that Russia's unique, bitter experience from the late nineteenth century to the present has enabled them to see in a way that others cannot:

> [A] civilization founded on the ideology of 'progress' gives rise to contradictions that the civilization cannot resolve...the path to Russia's rebirth is the same as the path that will enable man to find a way out of his blind alley, to find salvation from the senseless race of industrial society, the cult of power and the darkness of unbelief. We were the first to reach this vantage point, whence the uniqueness of this path became visible, and it is now up to us to set forth on it and point the way to others [Igor Shafarevich, "Does Russia Have a Future?" *Rubble*].

This understanding of the basic task confronting mankind is again that of Jacques Ellul, that largely unheeded prophet of the West. Ellul has long been trying to shift the attention of Christians from immediate problems to awareness of those values upon which our society is based:

> We must get to the roots of our society (technology, political power, psychological manipulation) and attack it there...it is only through complete refusal to compromise with the forms and forces of our society that we can find the right orientation and recover the hope of human freedom [*Christian Century*, February 18, 1970].

This is precisely what these Russian dissidents endeavor to do as they set forth the basic lineaments of a Christian perspective. On the all-important role of the state, Solzhenitsyn, so often criticized as an antidemocratic authoritarian, refuses to make an absolute of *any* particular form of government—surely a good Christian position.

> In relation to the true ends of human beings here on earth...the state structure is of secondary significance. That this is so, Christ himself teaches us. 'Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's'—not because every Caesar deserves it, but because Caesar's concern is not with the most important thing in our lives....When Caesar, having exacted what is Caesar's, demands still more insistently that we render unto him what is God's—that is a sacrifice we dare not make!

This is the sacrifice—"continuous and active participation in the general, conscious *lie*"—which has been demanded by the Soviet system. Liberation from it does not require political freedom or action, only the will to use one's inner freedom ("As Breathing and Consciousness Return," *Rubble*). External freedom is desirable for undistorted growth, "but it is no more than a condition, a medium, and to regard it as the object of our existence is nonsense. We can firmly assert our inner freedom even in external conditions of unfreedom...we do not lose the possibility of progress toward moral goals."

The emphasis in *Rubble* on the necessity for repentence—a change of mind upon reflection—on the national as well as the personal level has been ridiculed in the United States, despite our recent national soul-searching over Watergate. One might also have expected some sympathy for Solzhenitsyn's sinking heart "at the thought of our age-old sin in oppressing and destroying the indigenous peoples" of Siberia, considering the new awareness of our own past sins against indigenous, native Americans. In view of the charges of chauvinism leveled at him, it is remark-

able no one has noticed that his definition of patriotism "implies not uncritical eagerness to serve, not support for unjust claims, but frank assessment of the nation's vices and sins, and penitance for them." Repentance is conceived as a clearing of the ground, a prelude for moral national actions similar to "reform" in the life of an individual.

Linked with repentance is another key Christian theme—self-limitation—for which, as Solzhenitsyn well knows, the acquisitive West, with the significant exception of the conservation movement, has little inclination. Both in his *Letter* and in *Rubble* Solzhenitsyn appears squarely within the conservationist ethic, advocating a stable instead of a growth economy, another stand disliked by critics who view the entire movement as "élitist" or as nostalgia for a simpler life. (Such is the case even with otherwise sympathetic observers, as for example James V. Schall in "Solzhenitsyn's Letter," *Worldview*, July, 1974.) The many implications of self-limitation on individual and national greed, pursuit of wealth, unlimited economic and technological progress, geographic expansion, ideological and cultural rivalries amount to a "total reconstruction of all our ideas and aims." Such a turning from outward to inward development,

> if it ever happens, will be a great turning point in the history of mankind, comparable to the transition from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance...a complete change not only in the direction of our interests and activities but in the very nature of human beings (a change from spiritual dispersal to spiritual concentration), and a greater change still in the character of human societies [*Rubble*].

The core of these Russian dissidents' message is the core of Christianity: It is man himself who must be transfigured, *changed*, as a prerequisite for the breakthrough of the Kingdom of God. And that prerequisite is what men in all ages have resisted as too difficult. It is far easier to posit a view of man as basically good, but warped by institutions, systems of government, or economic and social conditions. And in the incredibly complex society of the late twentieth century a problem-solving mind-set sees only fundamental "forces"—market, economic, social, etc.—which man must manipulate, direct, and control. Some right combination will be found that will solve man's problems without the necessity for man individually or collectively to change himself. The anthropology of a secular society, even more than the lingering prejudice of liberals in favor of leftist regimes, is the underlying reason for Western rejection of Solzhenitsyn and his friends.

This larger, roomier Christian vision is badly needed in the Christian community today, if it is ever to exercise its proper function as gadfly to "the world" of Johannine terminology. But the radical consequences of this vision must be pressed upon Solzhenitsyn as well, if Christians jointly are to further the universal struggle against Everyman's evil. His perceptive critiques of the moral blind spots of "world progressive opinion," which condones violence on the "left" but condemns it on the "right," have not prevented him in his public appearances from erring the same way himself, by seeming to ignore all forms of injustice and exploitation other than that of the Soviet Union. To my knowledge he has not referred to the terrible *means* by which the United States waged war in Vietnam—the antipersonnel bombs, the napalm, the defoliation of forests, the destruction of a whole people and their culture in order to "save them"; nor has he indicated that protesters against those means were morally right. As the first and so far the only nation to use atomic weapons against a civilian population, does not our moral guilt weigh all the heavier in the light of later resorts to subhuman means toward an end?

Solzhenitsyn is a brilliant analyst, acutely perceiving the true nature of détente as strengthening the grip of totalitarianism in the Soviet Union. He is wholly concentrated on overcoming the form of evil he himself has so cruelly experienced, viewing the world as a battlefield against totalitarianism. But his very steadfastness should expand, not constrict, his sensitivity to other forms of evil. Is there really no spiritual kinship between the struggle of Soviet dissidents and the "dissidents" in the United States who have waged a sincere struggle within the framework of the democratic process against injustice, against threats to civil liberties, and, in Watergate, against the threat to the rule of law and the entire democratic process? (See Richard Morris's pieces in the *New Republic*, August 16 and 23, 1975, for a not unkind critique on this subject.)

Ultimately the question for us all is: How do we resist evil without becoming further enmeshed in it? Solzhenitsyn himself has eloquently described the all-embracing *sameness* of violence, whether it be the "systematic violence of the state," or of the terrorist, or of actual war (in his letter of 1973 proposing Sakharov for the Nobel Peace Prize). The role of the Christian is to understand the pervasiveness of evil but to refuse to participate in the world's *methods* of combatting it, whether it be the evil of Nazism in World War II or that of communism. Jacques Ellul writes in *Violence*:

> We are not to bend or yield before evil, nor to act like cowards or impotent weaklings: we are to overcome, to *surmount* evil, to go beyond it, to stand on a terrain that evil cannot reach, use weapons that evil cannot turn back on us, seek a victory that evil can never attain!
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> Choosing different means, seeking another kind of victory, renouncing the marks of victory—this is the only possible way of breaking the chain of violence, of rupturing the circle of fear and hate.

The burden of Solzhenitsyn's whole life is an eloquent expression of Ellul's words. He understands, as few men do, how evil is transferred to the hearts and minds of the conquerors, whether of war or of revolution, and how they then take to themselves the actual evil as their heritage. His own resistance to the evil of the Gulag Archipelago was not based on force or violence, but on the inner, moral survival of the powerless. In essence this is the Christian way, the only way the mesh of evil can be broken.