

Anton Chekhov: Atheist, Agnostic or Struggling Orthodox Christian?

I

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

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

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

II

One of six children, Anton Chekhov was born into a merchant's family in the latter part of the 19th century. He was immersed in a culture that was on the one hand ostensibly Orthodox in its Christianity yet on the other hand, due to the political, social and religious reforms of Tsar Peter the Great, was receptive to the philosophical, spiritual and artistic trends of Western Europe. Contact with the West helped to catapult Russia into the center of European culture from which its intellectual contribution in the areas of science, mathematics, philosophy, literature and theology still remain to be appreciated. However, the culling and absorption of disparate worldviews and spiritualities into the salons of Russia's cultural elite helped to generate a mood of religious confusion and restlessness that led, in some cases, to the abandonment of Christianity. Father Georges Florovsky characterizes the Russian intellectual's often impatient and uncritical quest for religious experience as being "unorthodox, vague, dreamy, erratic, syncretistic... often a psychological mood or aesthetic rapture, or else a kind of moralistic psychoanalysis" that

did not evoke a “sober and firm belief.”^[2] It is in this religious milieu that Chekhov lived and wrote.

Though no stranger to the new and popular ideas of the day, Chekhov’s literary output does not tend to support or negate any particular movement or trend. By no means a passive bystander, Chekhov presented people and events as they were, thus leaving the reader or audience with the task of interpretation. For the official critics of his time, Chekhov’s work was void of social value. His stories and plays did not offer a moral lesson and therefore social compass. For the conservatives, Chekhov was not willing to support the status quo. For the liberals Chekhov was too much of a rogue and therefore unable to be conscripted into any camp of the avant-garde. Writing to his literary “godfather”, the poet Alexei Pleshcheev (4 October 1888), Chekhov affirms his independence: “I am afraid of those who look for a tendency between the lines and who insist on seeing me as necessarily either a liberal or conservative. I am not a liberal, not a conservative, not an evolutionist, nor a monk, nor indifferent to the world. I should like to be a free artist and nothing more, and I regret that God has not given me the power to be one...Pharisaism, stupidity and tyranny reign not in shopkeepers’ houses and in lock-ups alone; I see them in science, in literature, in the younger generation...I regard trademarks and labels as a kind of prejudice. My holy of holies is the human body, health, intelligence, talent, inspiration, love and absolute freedom – freedom from violence and falsehood no matter how the last two manifest themselves. This is the program I would follow if I were a great artist.”^[3]

III

Was Chekhov an atheist or agnostic? In gleaning his personal correspondence, one might easily label him as one or the other. In a letter dated March 9, 1892 and addressed to his friend Ivan Leontiev-Shcheglov, Chekhov recalls how during his youth he was enveloped by a prevailing melancholia generated by an oppressive religious upbringing. To a great extent this oppression was linked to his father, Pavel Egorovich who, in addition to being a local merchant was a choir director at one of the churches in Taganrog. Pavel coerced his children into singing the many and lengthy services of the Orthodox Church. “When I recall my childhood, the latter appears rather somber. Now I do not have religion. You know, when we came to sing in church...we felt as if we were convicts.”^[4] Chekhov would often say to his brothers, “What an unhappy lot we are! Other boys may run, play, visit their friends. We can only go to church.”^[5] In addition to singing daily in the parish choir, Chekhov knew first hand of the brutal and dark atmosphere of official ecclesiastical learning institutions of the earlier grades. These schools often attracted faculty who were better at disciplining a student than being a mentor and guide. Poorly chosen teachers who did not hide their indifference and insincerity when it came to the educational and spiritual formation of their students made a lasting impression on Chekhov. Writing to his friend and editor, A.S. Suvorin (17 March 1892), Chekhov comments on the parish school in his native Taganrog: “It is not astonishing that so many atheists are from the seminaries.”^[6]

Drawn to the literary genius of Leo Tolstoy, Chekhov expressed his admiration in the latter's brand of belief. In his letter to Mikhail Menshikov (28 January 1900) Chekhov emphasized that he embraces a comprehensive belief: "I am an unbeliever, but of all the faiths, I esteem the faith of L. Tolstoy the nearest to my heart and most suited to me."^[7] Nearly one year before his death Chekhov, in his response to Serge Diaghilev's invitation to become a member of the editing committee of the "World of Art Review," he confesses that he has lost his faith. He writes on 12 July 1903 (Chekhov died on 2 July 1904): "I do not see how I would be able to live under the same roof as D. S. Merejkovskii. He believes in a very resolute way as a professor, while *I have squandered my faith* a long time ago and only look upon a believing intellectual with perplexity."^[8]

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

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

Though critical of institutional Christianity, the reader encounters through Chekhov's characters a writer who neither rejects the Scriptures nor turns from the teachings of the Orthodox Church. Much of his writings show more than a casual or superficial interest in the liturgical calendar. So many of Chekhov's stories have the feasts of the Incarnation and Resurrection as the context through which his characters reveal their personal uniqueness. Each character is opened to eternity and therefore cannot be defined by any predetermined anthropology. While seeking communion with the other, each character is continually developing in as much as there is an encounter with truth, evil, light and darkness.

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

IV

Ironically, or perhaps providentially, Soviet scholars in the 1970's made available to a wider readership the complete and uncensored works of Chekhov. Though the critical apparatus of this invaluable contribution held firmly to a Marxist/Leninist hermeneutic, it nevertheless was a major step towards producing new impressions and studies of Chekhov.

For Russian scholars, a re-examination of Chekhov's Christianity would have to wait until the fall of communism. Beginning in the 1990's scholars outside of Russia gradually came to an appreciation for what they saw to be more than a superficial deference to Christianity. In 1994, the Second International Chekhov Conference held in Badenweiler (the place of Chekhov's death), focused on the philosophy and religion of Chekhov as presented in his life and in his work. In France, the Review of Comparative Literature (October 1995) dedicated an entire issue to the "New Faces of Chekhov." In 2004, marking the centennial of Chekhov's death, a conference in Melikhovo, located about 40 miles south of Moscow and home to Chekhov from 1892-1899, devoted itself to the theme: 'Anton Chekhov, Yesterday and Today.' Part of the conference included a visit to the newly and fully restored monastery of St. David (Davidova Pustyn) where Chekhov spent more than a little time getting to know many of the resident monks. Of these monastics, the hieromonk Ananias became the model for Father Sisoies in **The Bishop**.^[10] In 2005 the journal "Le Messager Orthodoxe" published a collection of articles focusing on Religion, Culture and Sanctity. Among these articles is "The Christianity of Anton Chekhov According To The Published Stories For The Feasts of Pascha and Christmas" by Jacqueline de Proyart.^[11] This article is one of the more recent and most comprehensive testaments to the Christianity and Orthodoxy of Chekhov.

As an artist and as a doctor of medicine, Chekhov was open to, as well as critical of new ideas and movements. He was very interested in Darwin and like the Victorian biologist and philosopher Herbert Spencer (1820-1903) he recognized that art, science and religion were completely integrated. Consequently, for Chekhov all paths to knowledge led to the truth but all knowledge did not exhaust the truth.

Yet, Chekhov was also keenly aware that truth could not be separated from God and neighbor. In **A Boring Story**, as the dying Professor Nikolai Stepanovich

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

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

In one of his earliest published works, “**The Sinner from Toledo**” (1881), Chekhov asks through the character of Maria: “Is it possible for those who do not love man to truly love Christ?”^[13] Here is more than an echo of 1 John 4:20. For Chekhov the inability or refusal to draw near and to embrace the other annihilates both love and faith. Writing to A.S. Suvorin (18 October 1888), Chekhov laments over a person’s inability to love. What is unfortunate, he writes, “is not that we hate our enemies who are few but that we do not love enough our neighbor who is infinitely numerous.”^[14]

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

The human person’s ever pressing desire to enter and experience the mystery of life permeates the works of Chekhov. Through the beggar Grigory Liharev, one of the main characters of “**On The Road**” (1886), the reader *unexpectedly* encounters the profound sentiment of an all-embracing love of life. For the unreliable Liharev “the meaning of life lies in unrejected martyrdom, in the tears which would soften a stone, in the boundless, all forgiving love which brings light and warmth into the chaos of life.”^[16] Love and forgiveness are Christ like qualities that narrow the gap of human separation and overcome the horror of existential loneliness. Liharev’s words are directed to Mademoiselle Ilovaisky, a self centered one-dimensional woman who by chance encounters the articulate beggar in a train station during a snow storm on Christmas Eve. Listening to Liharev’s words about unconditional love and forgiveness – themes

central to the Nativity Event – Mlle. Ilovaisky encounters a brief moment of ecstasy. In this moment a communion of persons is forged which allows her to catch a glimpse of the depth and mystery of life; “She gazed wonderingly into the darkness, and saw only a spot of red on the ikon and the flicker of the light on Liharev’s face. The darkness, the chime of the [church] bells, the roar of the [snow] storm, the lame boy, Sasha with her fretless, unhappy Liharev and his saying – all this was mingled together and seemed to her fantastic, full of marvels and magical forces. All that she had heard was ringing in her ears, and human life presented itself to her as a beautiful poetic fairy tale without an end.”^[17] God’s beautiful and wonderful world is brought to Ilovaisky by a wandering man who has no place to rest his head.

It would not be an exaggeration to say that loving one’s neighbor is a major part of the corner stone of Chekhov’s faith. But this love for the other is not an end in itself. Loving the poor, the hated, the oppressed and the wounded are interwoven with a desire to transcend one’s self and the present moment. In “**The Lady With The Little Dog**” (1899) Chekhov creates a scene in which the unhappily married Dmitry Gurov appears to wrestle with his adulterous affair with the newly married and well to do Anna: “Sitting beside a young woman who in the dawn seemed so lovely, Gurov, soothed and spellbound by these magical surroundings - the sea, the mountains, the clouds, the wide sky – thought how everything is really beautiful in this world when one reflects: everything except what we think or do ourselves when we forget the higher aims of life and our own human dignity.”^[18]

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

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

The Other approaches her home.
He places his saddened gaze.

And for the first time, evil became a horror to her.
In this gaze, full of goodness, she reads
His condemnation during her days of debauchery
And His pardon and mercy.
She falls down in tears with her face the ground
Before the holiness of Christ.

The works of Chekhov present a series of moments that point to the yearning and need for interpersonal communion. In these moments Chekhov himself points to how the relationship of persons rooted in the truth and love of Christ cannot be bound to any fixed or unchanging belief. In the words of Jacqueline de Proyart Chekhov's faith and Christianity "cannot be constrained in an ensemble of certitude inculcated by a channel of authority, [or] closed in a system of devotions and of obligatory rites of a bureaucratic Church."^[19] In reading the works of Chekhov one is able to see that certitude is only found in the ever changing dynamics of personal relationships and not in static systems, ideologies and philosophies that are imposed by any ecclesiastical institution unable to commune with the person.

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

When he who beholds that Divine and limitless Beauty, [and] sees the things discovered at every step to be so altogether new and unexpectedly marvelous in comparison to what he saw previously, he is overcome with awe by what unfolds before his eyes at every step. His desire to see [God] never subsides, because what he anticipates is far more magnificent and divine than anything he has yet seen"^[20]

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^[1] See Alexandre Schmemmann, *Journal (1973-1983)*, translated from the Russian by Anne Davidenkoff, Anne Kichilov and Rene Marichal, Editions Des Syrtes, Paris, 2009

- [2] “The Quest For Religion In 19th Century Russian Literature, Three Masters: Gogol, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy,” in Theology and Literature, collected works, Belmont, Ma. 1989, vol. xi, p.13.
- [3] The Portable Chekhov, ed. Avrahm Yarmolinsky, Penguin Books, 1977, p.605. See also, The Selected Letters of Anton Chekhov, ed. Lillian Hellman, trans. Sidonie K. Lederer, New York, 2007 edition, pp.55-56.
- [4] Cf. Jacqueline de Proyart, “Le Christianisme d’A. Tchekhov, » Le Messenger Orthodoxe, no.143, Paris, 2005, p.26.
- [5] In “Chekhov Pievchii”[Chekhov the Singer], by Alexander Chekhov in Viestnik Evropy [European Messenger] 1907. Quoted by Princess Nina Andronikova Toumanova in Anton Chekhov, The Voice of Twilight Russia, Columbia University Press, 1960, p.13.
- [6] Jacqueline de Proyart, op.cit. p.27.
- [7] The Selected letters of Anton Chekhov, ed. Lillian Hellman, trans. Sidonie K. Lederer, Barnes and Noble Edition, 2007, p.262.
- [8] Jacqueline de Proyart, op. cit., pp. 28-29.
- [9] Ibid p.28
- [10] Ibid. p.2. In Melikhovo Chekhov also established ties with the privileged and underprivileged. As a landowner he dedicated himself to improving the lives of the peasants living on his estate. During an outbreak of famine and cholera in 1892, he provided relief and comfort to the peasants. In Melikhovo he also built three schools, a clinic and fire station. As a doctor he spent hours visiting the infirm – both poor and wealthy.
- [11] No.143, pp.19-50
- [12] Anton Chekhov, Stories, trans. by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, Bantam Books, 2000, pp. 104-105.
- [13] de Proyart, p.22
- [14] Ibid. p.34, note34
- [15] Ibid. p.30ff
- [16] On The Road
- [17] Ibid.
- [18] The Portable Chekhov, p.420
- [19] Op. Cit. p. 29
- [20] Song of Songs, IX