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Psychoanalytic Remarks on Russian Icons of the Mother of God

Summary:

The special value given to the image in Russian Orthodox icons depicting Mary and the Christ child reveals a specifically Russian problematic in relation to real mothers. Thus, it may lead to specific theories of addiction in Russia concerning a possibly Russian ideal of avoiding pain through the intervention of one's mother in relation to one's father.

1. The Theologically Incorrect Dominance of the Mother of God

Icons of Christ and of the mother of Christ were apparently the first icons to be painted in the early history of Christianity. Icons of the saints came later. Icons of Christ and of his mother are also primary in the sense that they depict the two central figures who effected the *incarnation* of God on earth in the person of Christ. It was not even possible to become a saint until after Mary—supposedly without being impregnated by a man—gave birth to Christ. Only after this remarkable event was it possible for Christ to accomplish the so-called *redemption* of humankind from sin (1). And only after Mary gave birth to Christ was it possible for Mary to perform her function of *intercession* with her son Christ on behalf of human petitioners (2)

Icons of Christ and of his mother therefore occupy a special place in the wide panoply of Christian icons. As Kira Tsekhanskaia says, “On these two images is founded the whole of Christian iconography.” (3)

Theoretically, moreover, one of these two images does not take precedence over the other. Between them there is a balance of iconographic power, as it were. Pavel Florenskii puts it thusly: “In iconography, a great many of the icons are of the Mother of God. Both in the iconostasis and in the liturgy, the Mother of God occupies a place that is symmetric and as though equivalent to the place of the Lord.”(4) This is a theological impropriety, strictly speaking. Mary, after all, is seldom mentioned in the four gospels, and very rarely does she even interact with her famous son there. Jesus Christ was the Savior (“Spas,” “Spasitel”), not his mother. Yet the words “Most Holy Mother of God, save us!” constitute one of the most common and familiar prayers uttered by Orthodox believers, who *feel* that Mary is just as important as her son. In some respects she is even more important than he. In Russia, as Joanna Hubbs observes: “The icons of Mary were always deemed miraculous, those of her son rarely so.”(5)

Outside of Russia as well Mary has been and continues to be an important object of devotion among Christians. Her cult has been promulgated at various times and places throughout the Christian world(6). That everyone has a mother is a truism. That veneration of icons of the Mother of God has been and still is extremely common in Russia is also a truth generally accepted. That this veneration is based on people's feelings about their own mothers is a psychoanalytic truth which I hope to establish. I believe that icons of the Mother of God (along with narratives and popular beliefs associated with these icons) express what Orthodox Russians might otherwise be unable to express about their own mothers.

2. Mother of All Humankind

To begin with, it is sometimes held that Mary was not only Christ's mother, but that she was and is to this day the mother of the Christian church, and even "mother of all." There are texts from old Rus', for example, which refer to her as "the general mother to all Orthodox Christians" ("obshchaia mati vsem pravoslavnyim khristianom")(7). In his book on the Mother of God Sergii Bulgakov calls her the "Mother of the whole human race."(8) Georgii Fedotov states: "The Russian Mary is not only the Mother of God or Christ but the universal Mother, the Mother of all mankind."(9) By simple deduction, we may conclude from these grandiose designations that the Mother of God is the mother of each individual Orthodox Christian who venerates icons of her. She is everybody's mother, *ergo* she is *my* mother.

Not literally, of course. But the metaphor – "mother of all" – is powerful, evocative. At the very least it suggests that the Mother of God is *like* one's own mother. Otherwise, why would the maternal imagery be utilized? In particular, why would one address the Mother of God as if she were very familiar, a family member even? In the spiritual songs, for example, she is sometimes addressed as "Mother of mine, little Mother [Matushka] Maria."(10) L. Lebedev and V. Lebedev write:

From the earliest times the Russian people has found in its soul only one true word for addressing the Mother of God. In ordinary speech this people has called-and still calls-Her what one would call one's own mother [rodnuiu mat'], namely "Matushka!"-a form of address full of tenderness and love.(11)

One's "Matushka" is special. She is one's own dear mother. She is even more special than one's father. Or, in the religious sphere, the Mother of God is even more special than God the Father: "in the most difficult moments of life, when it seems that one's sins are so great that it would be terrible to take them to the Father, we come running in tears to the Mother, as children in families do!"(12)

It seems, then, that the Mother of God is more accessible, more approachable than God the Father for the ordinary Orthodox Christian. In this particular case-a scene conjured up in a devotional text-the occasion for approaching the Mother of God rather than God the Father himself is a *feeling of guilt*. The sins of the child-like Christian are "so great" that only a maternal figure can deal with them.

Devotional works on the Mother of God – as opposed to theological and academic treatises – display no hesitation in comparing her with real mothers, or in comparing attitudes toward her with the feelings ordinary Orthodox people have toward their mothers. Christ himself, after all, needed her as a real mother. The human need for her intervention is similar to the Christ-child's own need for care and attention from her. It is no accident that most icons of the Mother of God also show Christ as a child in his mother's arms, or perched on her arm.

Mary's solicitous care for Christian believers thus resembles her care for the Christ-child. In the introduction to his devotional compendium on icons of the Mother of God Evgenii Poselianin writes: ". . . pressing close to the human soul which has become crazed with suffering and despair, just as once She bent over Her Divine Infant, She whispers to that soul true words about better days. As a mother, she knows how to approach the human heart. . . ." (13) According to Poselianin, the Mother of God is even more solicitous to suffering humanity than God himself is. She does not inspire fear, as God often does. She does not judge-as God will judge us on the judgement day. She never turns away from us in time of need. On the contrary, she turns her attention to us, however sinful and unworthy we may be. The question of our worth is not even relevant to her, for she loves us the way an ideal mother loves her child, that is, she loves us simply because *we exist*:

Reverence for the Mother of God is one of the most gratifying aspects of Christianity, and it will pass away only when the hunger for maternal love, for maternal tenderness and care is exterminated in the human soul. We have a need for a heart that is all-forgiving [v serdtse vseproshchaiushchem], a heart that loves us not because we are good or pleasing, but because we exist [za to, chto my sushchestvuem], because it has embraced us once and for all, and is no more capable of refusing us than a river is capable of not flowing, or a star is capable of not shining.(14)

Psychoanalytically speaking, the Mother of God is the perfectly empathic mother. We may have sinned terribly, we may be wracked with guilt feelings, but she understands and is not offended, she forgives everything, she washes away our guilt and continues to love us. However badly we may feel about what we have done, she makes us feel good again. As a result of her ministrations, humans are also relieved of whatever anxious, guilty and depressive feelings may have come over them.

Poselianin's use of the past tense does not mean that the Mother of God worked her soothing, antidepressant effect on people only during her lifetime here on earth. True, when she died and was taken directly up into heaven soon after her death (her "Dormition" or "Assumption"-Russian "Uspenie"), she was no longer among earthly beings in the physical sense. But the Mother of God did not abandon her children in the spiritual sense. And even at some physical level she remained with us, as Poselianin explains: "The Holy Virgin permitted the apostle Luke – a skillful artist – to make several depictions of Her, and She promised that Her grace would always reside in these depictions, these icons of Her."

Poselianin does not mention that both the Assumption of Mary into heaven and her friendship with Luke are just legends, nowhere mentioned in the four gospels (and of course the gospels themselves are beyond question). The only hint in the gospels that Mary might legitimately function as *our* maternal comforter and protector is a passage in John where Christ is dying on the cross: "When Jesus saw his mother, and the disciple whom he loved standing near, he said to his mother, 'Woman, behold your son!' Then he said to the disciple, 'Behold, your mother!' And from that hour the disciple took her to his own home" (*John* 19:26-27). The theological leap usually made here is that the disciple-probably John himself-is a representative of all humankind who will now love Mary as their own mother(15).

The theology may be tenuous, but the popular thinking which Poselianin reports (and advocates) is clear: the Mother of God, personified in her icons, occupies a very special space, or an unusual ontological status for all Orthodox Christians. The physical Mother of God is no longer with us, but physical icons of her originally painted by Luke (or copies of icons painted by Luke, or copies of copies, etc.) have for many generations brought us into her spiritual presence, and once we are in her presence she can do no other than to mother us just as she mothered her son Christ God. In psychoanalytic terms, we need not experience *separation anxiety* over the absence of this maternal figure.

3. More a Mother Than a Virgin

Some icons of the Mother of God are simply beautiful. The Mother of God herself is beautiful – in the unanimous opinion of all those Orthodox folk who venerate her icons. But the beauty ascribed to her by her venerators is neither aesthetic nor sexual. As Georgii Fedotov puts it, Mary's beauty is "the beauty of a mother, not a virgin."(16)

What does this mean? Maternal beauty is something incomparably greater than the beauty of a sexually inexperienced young woman termed by Catholics "The Blessed Virgin Mary." True, Mary did remain a virgin all her life even according to Orthodox belief. Indeed, as Sergii Bulgakov and other Orthodox theologians argue, Mary was absolutely perfect in the sense that she never once sinned in her personal life(17). But sexuality (or its negation) is not the issue. Western artists err in making Mary feminine, and even sensuous, according to Bulgakov(18). Russian icons, instead, make her warm, tender, sympathetic, and beautiful in a somewhat schematic rather than sexual sense. Russian icons depict her as *close* to those who venerate her, as capable of suffering along with them in their trials and tribulations. In other words, Russian depictions of the Mother of God make her not so much feminine as *maternal*: "This closeness corresponds to maternal love, which is dear to the heart of all creation, and the feeling of this closeness may be observed in the special warmth with which Her icons are venerated."(19)

In the Russian context Mary is most commonly referred to as a mother, not a virgin. For example, all items referring to Mary in the table of contents of the recently re-published *Complete Orthodox Prayerbook for All Occasions* refer to her as "God-Birther" ("Bogoroditsa"), never as virgin(20). The titles of some standard Russian devotional and inspirational texts are also indicative: *The Earthly Life of the Most Holy Birther of God and a Description of Her Holy Miracle-Working Icons*; *Stories About the Miracle-Working Icons of the Mother of God and About Her Merciful Favors to the Human Race*; *Prayers to the Most Holy Mother of God*; *Stories About the Earthly Life of the Most Holy Mother of God*(21). The popularity of such texts has

been and continues to be enormous. The last-mentioned item, for example, was reprinted from the *eighth* edition (1904) during the early post-Soviet period with a print run of 100,000 copies. The standard and widespread terms for Mary are “Bogoroditsa” and “Bogomater” (or “Bozh’ia Mater”), i.e., “God-birther” and “Mother of God” – the former a calque from Greek *Theotokos*. Both of these words, unlike “prisodeva,” are widely used and readily understandable. Both of these words – not “Deva,” or “prisodeva” – are also the ones normally utilized in designating icons. As for the “titly” themselves inscribed on these icons, they are normally acronyms for Greek “Mother of God” (*MR ThU*, i.e., *Meter Theou*). Western writing on Russian icons all too often mistakenly labels icons of Mary as “the Virgin” rather than “The Mother of God.”(22)

4. Many Mothers

Much has already been written about the overall importance of mothers and mother-imagery for Russian society and culture(23). Here it suffices to note that in Rus’, and later in Russia proper, there have existed such pagan and semi-pagan maternal figures as Makosh (Mokosh), (Baba) Yaga, Paraskeva (Piatnitsa), Mother Moist Earth, and others which resembled – and in some cases existed alongside with or overlapped with – the Orthodox Mother of God. In the Pereslavl-Zaleskii region as late as the 1920s, for example, it was forbidden to beat chunks of dried *earth* in the fields because this action was the same as “beating the Most Holy Mother of God herself.”(24) In the old ceremony of swearing an oath by the *earth* (“kliatva zemlei”) one would pronounce the words while holding a piece of turf on top of the head and an icon of the Mother of God in the hand(25).

In the historical background of veneration of icons of the Mother of God lies a vast story of changing religious and political beliefs and practices. In the *ontogenetic* background of this veneration in individual believers, however, lies a rather more limited story of previous mother-child interaction. It is important to distinguish the two kinds of stories, that is, the two kinds of reconstructions which may be made. Today’s religious woman who prays before the Tikhvin Mother of God, for example, is not likely to know the pagan historical background of the icon. But she does know that she has a mother, and her relationship with that mother is relevant to the way she feels about the Tikhvin Mother of God. Her act of veneration is more directly and more personally connected to her mother than to the old pagan mother earth.

Another way to express the primacy of ‘one’s own mother’ is to observe that everyone has a mother, and therefore everyone must have a concept of a mother. But not everyone has a concept of the Mother of God, or of mother earth. In many cultures outside of Russia, for example, these two latter concepts are nonexistent. Even within Russia the concepts are nonexistent or at least alien for many people, for example, Jews, or Buddhists.

Even where all three concepts-Mother of God, mother earth, and one’s own mother-coexist in the same culture, it has to be recognized that the concept of one’s own mother has psychological priority. Consider, for example, the widespread belief among simple religious folk in Russia that mother-swearing (“mat,” “matershchina”) is an unacceptable practice because it is offensive and hurtful to all three of the “mothers” in one’s life(26). This obscene language is indeed offensive, and still is today. But it is just as offensive for atheists (who have only one, real mother) as it is for religious people. Also, if we look closely at the content of such language, we will find that only the real mother is mentioned, or is implied. Thus expressions such as “I fucked your mother!” (the literal meaning of “Eb tvoiu mat’!”), “Fuck your mother!” (“Ebi tvoiu mat’!”), “Go to your fucking mother!” (“Idi k ebanoi materi!”), “son of a bitch” (“sukin syn”), etc. are typical, while “Fuck the Mother of God!” or “Fuck mother earth!” are-as far as I have been able to determine-unheard of.

Consider also the following passage from a spiritual song collected in the middle of the nineteenth century:

The first mother is the Most Holy Mother of God;

The second mother is moist mother earth;

The third mother is the one who took on pain [i.e., inchildbirth](27).

From a Christian viewpoint, the Mother of God is certainly ‘number one,’ as indicated here. From a historical viewpoint, however, this ditty is wrong. Moist mother earth is first, not second, for this pagan

figure (among others) was revered in Rus' before Christianity officially arrived there in the tenth century. From a psychological viewpoint, neither the Mother of God nor mother earth is primary, however. One's own mother is 'number one,' for she is the first human being an individual interacts with from the moment of conception, and for quite some time after birth the preponderance of interaction is with this particular, literal mother. Both mother earth and the Mother of God are experienced relatively late in development-if at all, depending on which culture the child is reared in.

The fact that there are so *many* mothers in Russian culture-from mother earth to the Mother of God, from the Mother Church to the mother who is abused in mother-cursing, etc.-is certainly meaningful. From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, the multiplication of something usually indicates a problem with that something(28). The multiplication of mothers in Russian culture (or even just within Russian religious culture) indicates problematical mothering in the lives of individual Russians.

There is an enormous psychoanalytic literature on early childhood development, and there are various schools of thought regarding the role the mother plays in co-constructing the core of the child's psyche. All of the approaches, however, be they Freudian, Kleinian, Winnicottian, Mahlerian, etc. agree that the mother (or a mother-substitute) is essential in the early stages of life, and that an internalized representation (or representations) of her remain throughout life. It is not necessary here to survey all the different approaches, nor even to explore any one particular approach in any great depth(29). All that is necessary for the specific task of understanding adult attachment to (icons of) the Mother of God in Russia is the simple idea that this attachment harkens back to the child's strong emotional attachment to its mother. Or, to put it somewhat differently, certain features of childhood interaction with the mother persist and reappear in adult attitudes toward the Mother of God.

5. Her Grandiose Properties

Georgii Fedotov quotes from some of the folkloric spiritual songs ("dukhovnye stikhi") which indicate that Mary is sometimes thought of as the very "birther and creator of the world." She is the one

Who created for us
The sky, the earth, the sun, the moon,
And the many stars(30).

With this attitude, says Fedotov, praying to God and praying to the Mother of God become "one and the same thing."(31) However, so extreme an attitude is theologically incorrect, and even among the ignorant and illiterate folk it was uncommon by comparison to the idea of Mary as a protector and an intercessor with God rather than as an equivalent of God.

Metropolitan Sergii quotes some of the grandiose epithets for her in the Orthodox liturgy:

"higher than all heavenly and earthly creatures"
"more honored than the Cherubim, incomparably more grand than the Seraphim"
"Your glory modelled on the Divine [bogolepnaia]"(32)

Pavel Florenskii lists some of the grandiose topoi from the Church liturgy about the Mother of God:

The Mother of God stands at the boundary separating creation from the Creator, and since what is intermediate between the two is utterly unfathomable, the Mother of God is also utterly unfathomable. She is "a height that cannot be scaled by human thoughts." She is "a depth that cannot be plumbed even by angelic eyes." She is "higher than the heavens," and "vaster than the heavens." She is "more honored than the Cherubim and incomparably more glorious than the Seraphim." She is the "Queen of the Angels." About her it is said: "Thou hast appeared Pure and Most Honored above the fiery-eyed Seraphim." Bearer of purity, Manifestation of the Holy Spirit, Principle of spiritual creation, Source of the Church, the supra-angelic "Maiden Bride of God" stops being *One of many* in the Church. Even in the Church of saints, she is not *prima inter pares*. She is special, She is the exclusive center of Church life. She is the Heart of Jesus. She is the Church(33).

After another half page of these hyperboles, Florenskii admits that he is only haphazardly remembering liturgical expressions, and that there exist many more such expressions—so many more that, “to give a systematic view of the unsurveyably abundant content of the liturgical literature would constitute the task of a whole science, a science which—alas!—we do not have at all.”(34) In other words, the hyperbolic *topoi* for the Mother of God are themselves not enough, and Florenskii feels obliged to pile on another hyperbole of his own about their abundance. This is done, as he says, “more for personal reasons than as a strict necessity in the development of my ideas.”(35) It would be interesting to investigate what these “personal reasons” are, but that will have to be a task for Florenskii’s psychobiographer. Here it suffices to observe that a theologian such as Florenskii can be just as enthusiastic about Mary’s grandeur as are the common folk who expect her to perform outright miracles for them.

6. Her Miracles

Icons of the Mother of God are famous among the people for the miracles they perform. From a psychoanalytic perspective, the Mother of God is treated as an *omnipotent maternal object*. In the person of her icons she assists individual Orthodox believers (e.g., cures a case of blindness, eases the pain of childbirth), or she assists the Orthodox national-religious collective (e.g., the Vladimir Mother of God drives Tamerlane away from Moscow, the Kazan Mother of God breaks the German blockade of Leningrad, etc.). By ascribing great powers to icons of the Mother of God, Orthodox believers are regressing to an early, *pre-Oedipal position* where they were essentially helpless and passive with respect to the mother who cared for their needs, and who controlled their behavior by such means as swaddling, punishment, and reward. Most icons of the Mother of God include the Christ *child* as well as his mother, and this encourages the venerator to adopt an infantile attitude toward the iconic image.

As a concrete example of the miracle-working powers of an icon, let us consider the icon of the type called The Surety [Intercessor] of Sinners (“Sporuchnitsa greshnykh”). This icon shows the Christ-child perched on the left arm of his mother and—with both his little hands—holding her right hand. Such a gesture is generally interpreted as a guarantee empowering the mother of God to intercede in the affairs of sinful humans on God’s behalf.(36) Both mother and child wear a crown in precious stones. Among the words usually inscribed around the periphery of this icon are: “I am the Intercessor of sinners for My Son” (“Az Sporuchnitsa greshnykh k Moemu Synu”). The first miracles attributed to this icon took place in the Nikolaev Odrin Monastery in Karachev, Orlov province, during the 1840s, after some inhabitants of the area had dreams affirming the miraculous power of this previously obscure and forgotten icon. For example, a widow by the name of Aleksandra Pochevina approached the monks of the monastery and asked them to pray before the icon on behalf of her son, who suffered sometimes as many as five seizures per day. The brothers performed the service, and afterwards they received word that the boy was completely cured of his seizures. In similar fashion another boy was cured of convulsions, and a little girl recovered her vision after having been blinded by scrofula. A copy of the icon painted in Moscow supposedly cured a woman of osteoarticular tuberculosis (“stradala ot kostnogo tuberkuleza”) after she spent a night chanting the akathist of the Pokrov Mother of God before the icon. Two young Muscovite women were cured of cholera after swallowing some oil from the icon’s lamp as well as applying the oil to their skin. A hysterical woman (“klikusha”) was cured of her convulsive fits after some of the oil was applied to her abdomen. A sort of oil formed drops on the surface of this copy of the icon both before and after it was moved from a private residence into the Church of Saint Nicholas the Wonderworker in Khamovniki in 1848. For some time after the move mysterious lights were seen flickering in the vicinity of the icon at night, and this phenomenon was regarded as miraculous. Many claimed that they survived the cholera epidemic of 1848 through the intercession of the Khamovniki icon. An 1855 manuscript written by a local priest enumerates 116 miracles attributed to this icon (or copies of it) after it was moved to the Khamovniki church. Still other miraculous cures were attributed to copies of the Khamovniki variant which arrived in parts of Siberia later in the nineteenth century.(37) As for the Khamovniki icon itself, it continued to work miracles well into the twentieth century: a church priest was cured of typhus in 1918, his family was saved from starvation in 1919, his home was saved from a fire in 1939, and so on.(38)

The hundreds of miracles attributed to the Surety icon give some indication of the great power Orthodox

believers attribute to the Mother of God. Multiply these hundreds of miracles by the hundreds of types of icons of the Mother of God which exist in Russia, and the result is a truly phenomenal collective aggrandizement of God's humble slave: "Se raba Gospodnia" (*Luke*, 1:38).

7. Masochism

The Mother of God may be capable of working miracles, but she also knows pain, suffering, and humiliation. Icons themselves often depict her suffering-not her own physical suffering, that is, but her suffering on behalf of her son. She is obviously in great psychological pain as she contemplates her son dying on the cross. She is usually rather sad even when her son is still a smiling child in her arms.

Mary's evident unhappiness encourages the infantilized venerator to bring his or her own suffering into the icon's presence. Here time is erased both in ontogeny and in history. Christ's sufferings twenty centuries ago are somehow relevant to my suffering right now. Mary's sorrowful glance indicates pity for *me, now*, not just for her divine son, back then. Her icons have names like "The Joy of All who Sorrow" ("Vsekh Skorbiashchikh Radost"), "Ease my Sorrows" ("Utoli moia pechali"), "Intercessor of Sinners" ("Sporuchnitsa greshnykh"), "Comfort in Grievs and Sorrows" ("V skorbiakh i Pechaliakh Uteshenie")- because she understands, she suffered and grieved too, just as we suffer and grieve now. Of the icon "Last Resort of the Lost" ("Vzyskanie pogibshikh") Evgenii Poselianin writes: "There She is, holding on to and embracing ever so tightly with both arms Her Infant, who is reaching out to her, as if in fear that someone is going to take Him away from Her-and in the same way She is ready to take into Her arms and embrace any person who is threatened by the vicissitudes of this world."(39) In effect, the Mother of God is ready and willing to mother all those who suffer, not only her divine son.

A conventional interpretation of icons of the Mother of God with the Christ child runs as follows: "The Mother of God of Tenderness looks at her Child simultaneously with the joyful eyes of a happy Mother and with the sorrowful gaze which already beholds the whole Passion of Her Son." Or: "Mary's eyes in her narrow face appear serious and sad, as if she foresees the passion of Christ."(40) Mary thus sees into the future from the perspective of the present, represented moment of maternity. Objective evidence for this reading may be seen in those icons where the chief instrument of Christ's future torture – the cross – is depicted along with the Mother of God. The Akhtyrskaya Mother of God, for example, shows a miniature adult Christ hanging on the cross right beside his praying mother(41). In the Kozel'shchanskaia Mother of God the Christ child holds a crucifix in his right hand(42). The Georgian Mother of God has a crucifix attached to a chain which encircles the necks of both mother and child.(43) The Holy Cross icon, recently painted in commemoration of the Budennovsk massacre (1995), shows a young Mary praying with eyes lowered and head bowed before the cross.(44)

The original Vladimir Mother of God shows nothing but mother and child, but on the reverse side of this most venerated of all Russian icons is depicted the entire sadomasochistic tool kit of Christ's passion ("orudiia strastei"), namely: the cross, the four nails, the crown of thorns, and the lance which pierced Christ's side.(45) These instruments of torture are also shown on the reverse side of at least two variants of the Vladimir icon, and on three icons on the theme of the Vladimir icon.(46) On the reverse of another icon of the Mother of God ("Bogoroditsa v deianiakh") is depicted the actual crucifixion of Christ(47). In the majority of the mother-and-child icons a tripartite cross is superimposed upon Christ's halo-but not on the mother's halo. Theologians refer to such a halo as a cruciferous nimbus, and view it as a specific attribute of Christ.

The cruciferous nimbus around the head of Christ asserts the reality of the cross. Christ would not be Christ without his suffering and death on the cross. There would be no Christianity without the cross. Indeed, the cross itself is such a commonplace representation of Christ and of Christianity generally that we tend to forget something very fundamental about it: the cross is literally an instrument of torture and suffering. To understand the *moral masochism* (Freud) which lies at the heart of Christianity, we must ever be reminding ourselves that Christ welcomed prolonged torture and eventual death upon a cross. Being God, after all, he could have eliminated the alleged guilt of mankind ("pervorodnyi grekh") by some other, non-masochistic act.

What is particularly interesting about the mother-and-child icons from the viewpoint of psychoanalysis is the

connection of the Christ child's future masochistic suffering with his *mother*. In their 1987 essay on the "essence" of masochism Kerry Kelly Novick and Jack Novick state that "the first layer of masochism must be sought in early infancy, in the child's adaptation to a situation where safety resides only in a painful relationship with the mother."(48) Earlier psychoanalysts, too, had stressed the importance of the mother in the ontogenesis of masochism. Edmund Bergler represented the masochist's stance in 1949 as follows: "I shall repeat the masochistic wish of being deprived by my mother, by creating or misusing situations in which some substitute of my pre-Oedipal mother-image shall refuse my wishes."(49) To this day psychoanalysts are generally agreed that early (i.e., pre-Oedipal) interaction with the mother is the starting point of masochistic behaviors and fantasies(50). Elsewhere I have surveyed the extensive clinical literature on this subject, and I will just assume for now that this literature has some validity.(51) What is remarkable here is the coincidence of the conventional reading of Mary's sorrowful facial expression with the psychoanalytic reading of adult masochism. The theologians and art scholars say that mother Mary sees her son's self-willed suffering in the future, while the psychoanalysts say that a problematical relationship with the mother may lead to self-willed, masochistic suffering in the future.

True, the temporal perspectives are different. Theological and art critical interpretations of icons of the Mother of God with the Christ child look to the future. Psychoanalytic interpretations of adult masochism look to the past. But the cast of characters is the same: mother and child (with the father nowhere to be seen). The semantic action is also the same, namely, the erasure of time. Nothing is "forgotten," whether past or future. The mournful Mother of God with the Christ child is always there. This stark image is now, was then, and will be forever. In effect, time is irrelevant. Or, as Freud said of the unconscious, the image is time-less, *Zeit-lo*(52).

8. Conclusion

Poet Sergei Esenin once wrote of his religious belief:

From birth I began to believe
In the Protective Veil of the Mother of God.

The word Esenin uses-"Pokrov"-can refer to the church holiday, the icon, or simply to Mary's "protection" of Christian folk from the trials and tribulations of life. But whatever the word's meaning, the ontogenetic context is clear: "from birth" is when this feeling came to Esenin, i.e., from that pre-Oedipal epoch when he was closer to his own mother than he would ever be again, and when she was more powerful in his eyes than she would ever be again. Anyone who venerates icons of the Mother of God is temporarily located at this humble scene from the past.

Notes:

(1)Cf. Marina Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex: The Myth and the Cult of the Virgin Mary* (New York: Vintage Books, 1983 [1976]), p. 221.

(2) For an insightful treatise on Mary as intercessor, see Warner, cit., pp. 271-331.

(3)Kira Tsekhanskaia, *Ikona v zhizni russkogo naroda* (Moscow: Pravoslavnyi palomnik 1998), p. 13.

(4)Pavel Florenskii (1914), *Stolp i utverzhdenie istiny: Opyt pravoslavnoi feoditsei v dvenadtsati pis'makh* (Westmead, England: Gregg International, 1970), p. 366, as translated in P. Florenskii (1914), *The Pillar and the Ground of the Truth*, trans. by Boris Jakim (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), p. 265.

(5)Joanna Hubbs, *Mother Russia: The Feminine Myth in Russian Culture* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988). p. 104.

- (6) See, for example: Hilda Graef, *Mary: A History of Doctrine and Devotion* (New York and London: Sheed and Ward, 1963-1965). 2 vols; Marina Warner, cit.; Michael P. Carroll, *The Cult of the Virgin Mary: Psychological Origins* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986).
- (7) As quoted by Boris Andreevich Uspenskii, *Izbrannye trudy*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (Moscow: Shkola "Iazyki Russkoi Kul'tury," 1996-1997), vol. II, p. 92.
- (8) Sergii Bulgakov, Kupina neopalimaia, *Opyt dogmaticheskogo istolkovaniia nekotorykh chert v pravoslavnom pochitanii Bogomateri* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1927), p. 187.
- (9) George P. Fedotov (1946), *The Russian Religious Mind*, 2 vols. (Belmont, Massachusetts: Nordland, 1975), vol. 1, p. 361. See also: Georgii P. Fedotov (1935), *Stikhi dukhovnye (Russkaia narodnaia vera po dukhovnym stikham)* (Moscow: Progress-Gnosis, 1991), pp. 56-57; see Hubbs, cit., p. 101.
- (10) As quoted by Fedotov 1991 (1935), cit., p. 49.
- (11) L. Lebedev and V. Lebedev, "Pravoslavnoe pochitanie Bogomateri v sviazi s pochitaniem Ee sviatykh ikon" in *Pochitanie Bozhiei Materi v Russkoi Pravoslavnoi tserkvi i Rimsko-Katolicheskoi tserkvi v Pol'she*, pp. 132-39, Warsaw/Moscow, Novum/Moskovskii Patriarkhat, 1989, p. 133.
- (12) Lebedev and Lebedev, cit., p. 139.
- (13) Evgenii Poselianin (1909), *Skazaniia o chudotvornykh ikonakh Bogomateri i o Ee milostiakh rodu chelovecheskomu* (Kolomna: Sviato-Troitskii Novo-Golutvin zhenskii monastyr', 1993), p. 4. Sergii Bulgakov expresses a similar sentiment; cf. Sergii Bulgakov, *Ikona i ikonopochitanie: dogmaticheskii ocherk* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1931), p. 156.
- (14) Poselianin 1993, cit., p. 6.
- (15) For example: Bulgakov 1927, cit., p. 187; Ieromonakh Filadel'f., *Zstupnitsa userdnaia*, 2nd ed. (Novosibirsk: Novonikolaevsk, 1998), p. 100.
- (16) Fedotov 1991, cit., p. 49.
- (17) Bulgakov 1927, cit., pp. 7-76.
- (18) Bulgakov 1931, cit., p. 153.
- (19) Bulgakov 1931, cit., p. 156.
- (20) Sergii Filimonov, ed., *Polnyi pravoslavnyi molitvoslov na vsiakuiu potrebu* (St. Petersburg: Obshchestvo Sviatitelia Vasiliia Velikogo, 2000).
- (21) Sofiia Snessoreva (1898), *Zemnaia zhizn' PRESVIATOI BOGORODITSY i opisanie sviatykh chudotvornykh ee ikon*, ed. by T. N. Spirina. (Iaroslavl': Verkhniaia Volga, 1999). Poselianin 1993, cit. I. Dorenskaia, compiler, *Molitvy ko Presviatei Bogoroditse pered chudotvornymi ikonami Eia* (Moscow: Eleon, 1999). *Skazaniia o zemnoi zhizni presviatei Bogoroditsy*, n.d. (reprint of 1904 edition)(Moscow: Peresvet).
- (22) For example: David and Tamara Talbot Rice, *Icons and Their History* (Woodstock, New York: Overlook Press, 1974), pp. 95-97, pp. 161-63.
- (23) See, for example: Hubbs 1988, cit. Daniel Rancour-Laferriere, *The Slave Soul of Russia: Moral Masochism and the Cult of Suffering* (New York: New York University Press, 1995), pp. 134-44). Adele Barker, *The Mother Syndrome in the Russian Folk Imagination* (Columbus: Slavica Publishers, 1986).

Uspenskii 1996-97, cit., vol. II, pp. 67-161. Fedotov 1975, cit. (especially vol I, pp. 11-20, pp. 296-98, pp. 348-51, pp. 358-62; vol II, 135-39). Fedotov 1991 (1935), cit., pp. 49-57, pp. 65-78. David L. Ransel, *Mothers of Misery: Child Abandonment in Russia* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988). N. Matorin, *Zhenskoe bozhestvo v pravoslavnom kul'te: piatnitsa – bogoroditsa* (Moscow: Moskovskii rabochii, 1931). D. T. Strotmann, “Quelques aperçus historiques sur le culte marial en Russie.” *Irénikon*, 32, 1959, pp. 178-202. James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe: An Interpretive History of Russian Culture* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), pp. 19-20

(24) Nikita I. Tolstoi, ed., “Bogoroditsa (Bogomater', Mater' Bozh'ia, Deva Mariia)” in *Slavianskie drevnosti: etnolingvističeskii slovar'*, vol. 1, pp. 217-19 (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 1995), p. 218.

(25) Uspenskii 1996-97, cit., vol. II, p. 91.

(26) Uspenskii 1996-97, cit., vol. II, pp. 83-107; cf. Rancour-Laferrriere 1995, cit., p. 141.

(27) Quoted both in Fedotov 1991, cit., p. 78, and Uspenskii 1996-97, cit., vol. 2, p. 85.

(28) Consider, for example, Freud's famous evaluation of Medusa's head: the multiplication of phalluses indicates castration (*SE XVIII*, p. 273).

(29) Some of the (admittedly diverse) psychoanalytic sources I have found useful for gaining an understanding of early mother-child interaction include: John Bowlby, *Attachment and Loss*, 3 vols. (New York: Basic Books, 1969-80). Heinz Kohut, *The Analysis of the Self* (Madison, CT: International Universities Press, 1971). Melanie Klein, *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945* (New York: Delta, 1977). Jay R. Greenberg & Stephen A. Mitchell, *Object Relations in Psychoanalytic Theory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983). Stephen A. Mitchell and Margaret J. Black, *Freud and Beyond: A History of Modern Psychoanalytic Thought* (New York: Basic Books, 1995). Margaret Mahler (1979), *The Selected Papers of Margaret S. Mahler, M.D.*, 2 vols. (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1994). Donald W. Winnicott (1971), *Playing and Reality* (London: Routledge, 1990).

(30) Fedotov 1991 (1935), cit., p. 56.

(31) *Ibidem*.

(32) Metropolitan Sergii (1932), “Pochitanie Bozhiei Materi po razumu Sviatoi Pravoslavnoi Tserkvi.” *Pochitanie Bozhiei Materi v Russkoi Pravoslavnoi tserkvi i Rimsko-Katolicheskoi tserkvi v Pol'she*, Warsaw/Moscow, Novum/Moskovskii Patriarkhat, 1989), pp. 115-118, p. 115.

(33) Florenskii 1970 (1914), cit., pp. 358-59, as translated in Florensky 1997 (1914), cit., p. 259. I have deleted Florenskii's endnote references in the passage quoted.

(34) Florenskii 1970 (1914), cit., p. 359, as translated in Florenskii 1997 (1914), cit. p. 260. There is a similarly bewildering number of titles and expressions referring to the Blessed Virgin Mary in Western Catholicism (cf. Carroll 1986, cit., p. 180).

(35) Florenskii 1970 (1914), cit., pp. 359-60, as translated in Florensky 1997 (1914), cit., p. 258.

(36) Aleksei Konstantinovich Svetozarskii, *Moskovskii khram SVIATITELIA NIKOLAIA CHUDOTVORTSA v Khamovnikakh i chudotvornaia ikona Bozhiei Materi “SPORUCHNITSA GRESHNYKH”*, v nem prebyvaiushchaia (Moscow: Otchii dom, 1998), p. 53. David Coomler, *The Icon Handbook: A Guide to Understanding Icons and the Liturgy, Symbols and Practices of the Russian Orthodox Church* (Springfield, Illinois: Templegate Publishers, 1995), p. 234; Snessoreva 1999 (1898), cit., p. 115.

(37) See Svetozarskii 1998, pp. 62-63, 77, 79-86, 190-215; Snessoreva 1999 (1898), cit., pp. 115-118.

- (38) Svetozarskii 1999, cit., pp. 111-13.
- (39) Poselianin 1993 (1909), cit., p. 9.
- (40) Nikolai Mikhailovich Tarabukin, *Smysl ikony* (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Pravoslavnogo Bratstva Sviatitelia Filareta Moskovskogo, 1999), p. 85. Essentially the same interpretation is offered by many other scholars, e.g.: Konrad Onasch and Annemarie Schnieper (1997), *Icons: The Fascination and the Reality*, trans. Daniel G. Conklin (New York: Riverside Book Company, 1995), pp. 159, p. 166. Tatiana S. Eremina, *Mir russkikh ikon i monastyrei: istoriia, predaniia* (Moscow: Nauka, 1998), p. 297.
- (41) Snessoreva 1999 (1898), cit., p. 205; Poselianin 1993 (1909), cit., p. 411.
- (42) Snessoreva 1999 (1898), cit., p. 109; Poselianin 1993 (1909), cit., p. 168.
- (43) Snessoreva 1999 (1898), cit., p. 294.
- (44) V. V. Arkhipov, *Nerushimaia stena: Iavlennia Bogomateri v Russkoi zemle* (Moscow: Russkii Khronograf, 2000), p. 210.
- (45) See Ia V. Bruk, ed., *Gosudarstvennaia Tret'iakovskaia galereia: katalog sobraniia. Tom I, Drevnerusskoe iskusstvo X – nachala XV veka* (Moscow: Krasnaia ploshchad', 1995), p. 37.
- (46) See illustrations in the catalogue edited by E. A. Guseva, N. Lukashov, G. Rozanova, G. Sidorenko, compilers. *Bogomater' Vladimirskaia: K 600-letiiu Sreteniia ikony Bogomateri Vladimirskoi v Moskve 26 avgusta (8 sentiabria) 1395 goda* (Moscow: Avangard, 1995), p. 98, 124, 133, 139, 140. For a comparable Western image, see the reverse side of the so-called "Miraculous Medal" of the Blessed Virgin Mary, which shows a cross and two hearts, one wrapped in the crown of thorns, the other pierced by a sword (Carroll 1986, cit., p. 167).
- (47) Aleksandr I. Anisimov (1928), "Vladimirskaia ikona Bozhiei Materi." In E. Guseva, A. Lukashov, N. Rozanova, G. Sidorenko, eds., cit., p. 62.
- (48) Kerry Kelly Novick and Jack Novick. "The Essence of Masochism" in *Psychoanalytic Study of the Child*, 42, 1987, pp. 353-84, p. 360.
- (49) Edmund Bergler, *The Basic Neurosis: Oral Regression and Psychic Masochism* (New York: Grune and Stratton, 1949), p. 5.
- (50) See especially Doryann Lebe, "Masochism and the Inner Mother." *Psychoanalytic Review*, 84, 1977, pp. 523-40.
- (51) Rancour-Laferriere 1995, cit., pp. 93-121.
- (52) Freud, *SE*, XIV, p. 187.