

## RELIGIOUS ENLIGHTENMENT IN EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY RUSSIA: A MODEL FOR CHANGE

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*Abstract: In "Religious Enlightenment in Eighteenth-Century Russia: A Model for Change," historian Elise Wirtschafter uses the teachings of Metropolitan of Moscow Platon (Levshin, 1737-1812) to raise questions about educational reform and technological development in the twenty-first century. Metropolitan Platon preached at the Court of Empress Catherine the Great (ruled 1762-96), and like religious enlighteners across Europe, he sought to reconcile Christian faith and Enlightenment ideas. His effort to come to terms with scientific learning, philosophical modernity, and new societal priorities provided Russia's educated classes with Christian answers to Enlightenment questions. As is evident from Platon's understanding of equality, enlightened churchmen bridged the intellectual divide between tradition and innovation in a manner that has implications for current discussions about how to reform education in the age of information technology.*

AS AN HISTORIAN, I know that change is inevitable—that what people believe or think necessary one day is appropriately dispensed with another day. I also know that traditions, habits, and cultures endure. My current research is devoted to traditions that have endured. I am writing a book about the Russian religious Enlightenment in the reign of Catherine the Great<sup>1</sup> You are no doubt familiar with the Enlightenment writ large—either in the form of canonical Enlightenment thinkers such as Hume, Smith, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Diderot, or in the form of the American Revolution and the founding of our republic. Documents that we live with every day—the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and the Bill of Rights—are quintessential products of Enlightenment principles and practices. Probably you also are surprised that the eighteenth-century Russian Empire, a society built upon serfdom and absolutist monarchy, can be associated with Enlightenment ideas. I will spare you the esoteric historiographic debates and say only that scholars today tend to avoid the notion of a single Enlightenment. Instead, they speak of multiple Enlightenments, including the moderate mainstream and religious Enlightenments, which help to elucidate the Russian case.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> On the plurality of (the) Enlightenment, see Dan Edelstein, *The Enlightenment: A Genealogy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010); Antoine Lilti, "Comment écrit-on l'histoire intellectuelle des Lumières? Spinozisme, radicalisme et philosophie," *Annales HSS* 64, no. 1 (2009): 171-206; J. G. A. Pocock, "Historiography and Enlightenment: A View of Their History," *Modern Intellectual History* 5, no. 1 (2008): 94-5.

Modern historians are inclined to emphasize the Enlightenment's optimism and celebration of reason, but in so doing, they ignore the religious, or at least providential, sensibilities of many eighteenth-century thinkers. Enlightenment culture did indeed strike an optimistic note, and Enlightenment intellectuals did assume that through the proper cultivation and application of human reason moral and material progress could be achieved. But Enlightenment thinkers also understood the vulnerability of human life in the face of uncontrollable passion and harsh physical reality. They understood that while moral clarity and rational criticism might be possible, the realization of morality and reason in human affairs required constant struggle. In other words, the Enlightenment belief in the possibility of progress—the idea that the human condition could and should be ameliorated—remained tentative and muted. Despite the expectation of "human flourishing" and ongoing improvement, Enlightenment thinkers also recognized that truth and reality sometimes exceed human understanding.<sup>3</sup> Throughout the eighteenth century, important representatives of Enlightenment thought continued to believe in the existence of a God-given natural order, the workings of which human beings could never fully comprehend. Scholars living in a post-Holocaust, post-Hiroshima, post-Gulag age may see in Enlightenment assumptions about progress an attitude of arrogance and utopianism, yet it is clear that eighteenth-century reformism did not come close to the hubris or presumptuousness of social engineering in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

The pan-European religious Enlightenment, which provides the framework for my research, grew out of efforts to find a reasonable faith, neither excessively enthusiast nor rigidly doctrinaire, that would be capable of sustaining belief in an age of ongoing scientific discoveries and new societal priorities.<sup>4</sup> The religious Enlightenment sought to reconcile the new learning of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries—the natural philosophy and mechanical arts derived from Cartesian, Baconian, and Newtonian science—with established authority and religious belief. Religious enlighteners generally supported the absolutist politico-religious order of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, but they also promoted egalitarian Enlightenment ideals that to this day continue to generate social and political change.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> The phrase "human flourishing" belongs to Charles Taylor. Quoted in Robert Miles, "Romanticism, Enlightenment, and Mediation: The Case of the Inner Stranger," in *This Is Enlightenment*, ed. Clifford Siskin and William Warner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), pp. 182-5.

<sup>4</sup> On the religious Enlightenment, see David Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment: Protestants, Jews, and Catholics from London to Vienna* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2008); Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Joris Van Eijnatten, ed. *Preaching, Sermon and Cultural Change in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Leiden, The Netherlands: Brill, 2009); James E. Bradley and Dale K. Van Kley, ed. *Religion and Politics in Enlightenment Europe* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2001).

<sup>5</sup> For recent statements in this direction, see Tzvetan Todorov, *L'Esprit des Lumières* (Paris: Robert Laffont, 2006); James Swenson, "Critique, Progress, Autonomy," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture* 36, no. 1 (2007): 1-11.

Through the incorporation of modern knowledge into Christian teachings, religious enlighteners responded to the principles and concerns of philosophical modernity. They produced innovation in the guise of tradition and in the process connected a world understood with reference to God and the promise of salvation to one in which human beings look to science and their own cognitive powers for immediate solutions to earthly problems.<sup>6</sup> In Russia, the teachings of religious enlighteners encouraged the Russian monarchy, church, and educated classes to come to terms with European modernity within the framework of Orthodox Christian belief. The intellectual bridge provided by enlightened churchmen helps to explain how educated Russians so readily assimilated and made their own the European cultural models that poured into Russia during the eighteenth century.

To explore the relationship between innovation and tradition I have been studying the devotional writings of Metropolitan of Moscow Platon (Levshin, 1737-1812), a prominent prelate in the reigns of Catherine the Great (ruled 1762-96), Paul I (ruled 1796-1801, and Alexander I (ruled 1801-25). Platon rose from the parish clergy of Moscow province to become a monk, bishop, and eventually metropolitan. As a student at the Kolomna Seminary and the Moscow Slavonic-Greek-Latin Academy, he received a Jesuit-style Latin education. Platon also was self-taught in Greek and French, and as Archbishop of Moscow and archimandrite of the Trinity-Sergius Lavra, Russia's most important monastery, he supported the teaching of German, Hebrew, geography, history, and mathematics in seminaries under his authority. Among contemporaries, Platon achieved renown for his religious moderation, literary eloquence, and enlightened educational policies. In 1763 Empress Catherine the Great brought him to Court to serve as teacher of catechism to her son and heir, Tsesarevich Paul. While at Court, Platon regularly delivered sermons in the presence of royals and other powerful members of the civil elite. Thanks to a twenty-volume collection of Platon's sermons and catechisms published during his lifetime, educated Russians outside the capitals also had access to his teachings. Without dwelling on the metropolitan's homiletic sermons, I would like to share one example of how Platon provided traditional Christian answers to the Enlightenment concerns of the eighteenth century.

This may sound surprising, but if we study the history of Christianity, we see that in Christian thought and practice, progress always has meant more than the promise

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<sup>6</sup> For a theoretical statement of this dynamic, see Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Tradition," in *The Invention of Tradition*, ed. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, Eng.: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 1-14. The notion of philosophical modernity comes from the work of Jonathan Israel and includes: 1) recognition of mathematical-historical reason as the sole criterion of truth; 2) rejection of all supernatural agency, magic, and divine providence; 3) equality of all humankind, including racial and sexual equality; 4) belief in a secular, universalistic ethics grounded in equality and concerned with equity, justice, and charity; 5) full toleration and freedom of thought; 6) freedom of expression, political criticism, and the press; 7) acceptance of democratic republicanism as the most legitimate form of politics; and 8) personal liberty of lifestyle and sexual orientation. See Jonathan Israel, *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity, and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 866.

of salvation or the attainment of eternal happiness in the life to come. Ideas about God's providence/care for the world and the oneness of his creation also require the betterment of life on earth. In the eighteenth-century context of an educated public increasingly attuned to possibilities for self-improvement and societal reform, there developed a natural bridge between religious teachings and the modern expectation of earthly solutions to human problems—a bridge that is illustrated by the concept of equality. Equality is a key Enlightenment principle that resonates in our own day. Equality is also a principle that church intellectuals such as Platon blended into the teachings of Orthodox Christianity. Legislative, literary, and religious sources from eighteenth-century Russia show that among church intellectuals and Enlightenment thinkers, equality meant moral rather than legal or socioeconomic equality. Thus while the vast majority of educated Russians accepted social hierarchy, absolutist monarchy, and gender inequality as natural or God-given, they also believed that all human beings possess an equal capacity for moral development. Their understanding of equality as the potential for moral goodness transcended social distinctions, echoing the Christian belief in free will, the idea that every human being possesses the freedom to choose between God and sin (what we would call the freedom to choose between good and evil).

In a sermon from 1795 celebrating the feast day of Saint Nikon, Platon delivered a stunning message of what today would be called gender equality. Of course, the metropolitan did not think in modern democratic or feminist terms, but his teaching illustrates the ongoing transformative power of Enlightenment ideas.<sup>7</sup> For Platon, Saint Nikon personified the feat of virtue and piety that the preacher equated with the spiritual struggle and courage of Christians. According to Platon, the Christian ascetic or zealot (*podvizhnik*) is a person, male or female, who seeks not human glory, but the glory that comes from God. Saint Nikon may have been a male model of perfect zealotry, but Platon was quick to point out that there is no difference between men and women in the Christian feat of virtue and piety. All ascetics, male or female, are equally brave, equally armed with spiritual powers, and equally crowned with heavenly glory. Nor did Platon's spiritual egalitarianism end with gender. In other sermons, the metropolitan highlighted the humble origins of the apostles in order to show that social status and worldly success do not guarantee spiritual enlightenment. In the sermon devoted to Saint Nikon, he likewise added that the physically deformed or disabled person also can carry within himself a beautiful soul. Physical eyes may not see this beauty, the preacher noted, but it is strikingly visible to God, the angels, and all "enlightened spiritual eyes."

Repeatedly in the sermons of Metropolitan Platon the path to salvation is equated with the feat of virtue that every Christian believer is called upon, and possesses the capacity, to seek. Precisely because, as Orthodox Christianity teaches, every person

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<sup>7</sup> Platon (Levshin), *Pouchitel'nyia slova pri vysochaishem dvore E. I. V. . . . Gosudaryni Ekateriny Alekseevny i drugikh mestakh s 1763 goda po 1778 skazyvannia . . . .* (Moscow, 1779-1806). In the complete collection of 20 volumes, the titles, publication dates, and publishers of individual volumes vary. For the sermon discussed here, see *PS*, 17: 350-60 (17 November 1795).

possesses “the freedom to choose between good and evil . . . which is one aspect of humanity created in the image of God,” there is an essential equality in the God-given nature of human beings. This equality is then linked to the promise of salvation, understood as “a process of growth . . . whereby the sinner is changed into the image and likeness of God.” The basic idea is that the human being decides whether or not to open his or her heart to the Holy Spirit, which then makes possible the living of a virtuous life. What could be more powerfully egalitarian than the idea that every human being—male or female, well-born or lowly, rich or poor, beautiful or deformed—is “called to be transformed by the Holy Spirit into the image and likeness of God”?<sup>8</sup> The egalitarian implications of Christian free will are striking. Understood as moral choice, Christian free will gives to equality a deep, fundamental, and all-encompassing significance that the merely social understanding of equality surely lacks. God gives the possibility of salvation to all human beings on an equal basis, and it is the freely acting person, the human being as autonomous moral subject, who decides whether or not to answer the divine call.

Given that Russian Enlightenment thought tended to bolster old regime institutions, it might seem to belong to the Counter-Enlightenment, which historians of Europe’s Radical Enlightenment see as an obstacle to the progress of egalitarian, democratic, and secular principles. According to these historians, the spread of Enlightenment ideas produced a long and bitter struggle that in some parts of the world continues to this day.<sup>9</sup> The emphasis on the incompatibility of the liberal democratic Enlightenment and the conservative or moderate mainstream Enlightenment is not unfounded, but it overlooks what is arguably the most outstanding quality of Enlightenment culture—the quality, moreover, that made the democratic ideals of the Radical Enlightenment not only imaginable but also eventually attainable. This was, and remains, the capacity of Enlightenment ideas to generate reform and change without appearing to destroy established beliefs, practices, and customs. It is the capacity to strive for progress, for the improvement of society and the amelioration of the human condition, in a non-dogmatic, non-doctrinaire, and non-ideological manner—in a manner that is capable of reconciling tradition and innovation, established beliefs and new knowledge, ideals and realities. The Russian Enlightenment embodied this non-dogmatic, cosmopolitan quality. This is precisely the approach that we should take as we try to rethink education in the twenty-first century.

Russia’s religious enlighteners were serious, if not gifted, thinkers who reconciled Christian teachings about enlightenment, reason, freedom, and equality with the idea

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<sup>8</sup> *The Orthodox Study Bible. New Testament and Psalms. New King James Version* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers; St. Athanasius Orthodox Academy, 1993; Conciliar Press, 1997), pp. 797, 799, 807, 809.

<sup>9</sup> Jonathan Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind: Radical Enlightenment and the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010); Darrin M. McMahon, *Enemies of the Enlightenment: The French Counter-Enlightenment and the Making of Modernity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Dorinda Outram, *The Enlightenment*, 2d ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

of progress as "human flourishing." In the process, they provided a cultural bridge to European modernity that for a time allowed modernity to be understood in indigenous Russian terms. Through the filter of Orthodox religious teachings, Enlightenment ideas served to strengthen Russia's established social and political order. The result was a cultural openness uniquely characteristic of the eighteenth century—an openness that would be lost in the nineteenth century (as romantic nationalism took hold) but that allowed educated Russians to experience the joy of becoming self-consciously enlightened, civilized, and European.

To conclude, I would like to suggest that the joy of becoming self-consciously enlightened and civilized—the joy of discovering that one has a mind that deserves to be developed—is the primary goal of education. It is a goal, moreover, that flows naturally from traditional Socratic methods of teaching. In a university setting, intellectual development results from the give and take of enlightened conversation with a teacher whose mind is more mature or better informed than that of the student. In my own life I benefitted personally and professionally from strong relationships with wise mentors and teachers, people who knew more than I did about life and history. I have also been teaching for close to thirty years, and I have raised three children of my own. The core lesson I have learned is that at all levels of intelligence and schooling the path to creativity begins with intellectual engagement—with the experience of living the life of the mind.

The life of the mind can be lived in any occupation or social condition. But before a person can do anything innovative or creative, he must learn that his mind is worth developing. The enduring message of the Enlightenment in all its various forms is that every human being has intellectual and moral potentialities that he or she can choose to cultivate. This is an old message, yet it remains critical to the reform of education. As in the past, education needs to be not just about getting a job or acquiring technical skills, but also about nurturing the internal intellectual resources that bring happiness in times of hardship and preserve dignity in times of oppression. In the words of Immanuel Kant, "Enlightenment is man's release from his self-incurred tutelage. . . 'Have the courage to use your own reason!'" (Kant 1995, 83)<sup>10</sup>

The information technology being discussed today offers exciting opportunities for enhancing enlightened, knowledge-based communication across the globe. But in utilizing this technology, we cannot lose sight of the importance of face-to-face human contact in the learning process. Imagine educating a child without the physical presence of other human beings. Imagine also trying to master a foreign language without living in a society where that language is spoken in the streets. Human beings cannot progress, Enlightenment philosophers taught, without developing their moral sense, the sense of empathy that is stimulated by direct human interaction.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Immanuel Kant, "What is Enlightenment?" in *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 2d rev. ed., trans. Lewis White Beck (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1995), p. 83.

<sup>11</sup> On the moral sense, see Jerrold E. Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Clifford Siskin and William Warner, ed. *This Is Enlightenment* (Chicago: University of

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