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Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society, Volume 8,
Number 1, Spring 2003, pp. 12-22 (Article)

Published by The Ohio State University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/psy.2003.0016>



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The Moral Masochism at the Heart of Christianity: Evidence from Russian Orthodox Iconography and Icon Veneration

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We belong to the Crucified.

—George Florovsky

The core of Christian dogma may be expressed as follows: nearly two thousand years ago a man named Jesus permitted himself to be tortured to death on a wooden cross. This act is supposed to have “saved” or “redeemed” humankind from an earlier “fall” into sin. We were “redeemed” because we were all sinful to begin with, and because the man who accepted this torture and death was none other than God himself, in the person of God the Son. As Saint John of Damascus wrote in the eighth century: “. . . from the time that God, the Son of God, who is unchangeable by reason of His Godhead, chose to suffer voluntarily, He wiped out our debt, by paying for us a most admirable and precious ransom” (29).

This redemption of debt is the central story of the gospels, but it may be represented visually as well. Icons depicting Christ’s crucifixion often show humankind in the image of the skull of sinful Adam (Russian “*adamova golova*”) at the foot of the cross, thereby directly connecting Christ’s suffering to human sinfulness (Averintsev 65). Psychoanalytically speaking, *God’s* self-willed crucifixion has had the effect of at least conditionally relieving *us* from guilt.¹ This relief comes, however, only if we accept Jesus as God, our savior and redeemer. Exactly what terrible sin was committed by the occupants of the garden of Eden in the first place has been the subject of endless debate.² Whatever it was, it left a legacy of monstrous guilt, hence the need for a redemption which only the God-human (“*Bogochelovek*”) Christ could effect.

Some icons represent the crucifixion of Christ with painful explicitness. Theologically speaking, such icons represent Christ’s “kenosis,” that is, his self-emptying, his temporary relinquishment of divinity, his de-

scend to the human level (Philippians 2:7). Unlike other visual and somewhat abstract representations of Christ, such as a simple cross or a lamb, the representation of Christ as a real human being nailed to the cross and in some cases bleeding from his hands, feet, and chest emphasizes just how much he lowered himself in order to save humankind from sin. Theologian Leonid Ouspensky (Uspenskii) writes:

The subject itself, the image of Jesus Christ, is a testimony of His coming and His life in the flesh, the kenosis of the Deity, His abasement. And the way this abasement is represented, the way it is transmitted in visual representation, reflects the glory of God. In other words, the abasement of God the Word is shown in such a manner that in looking at it we see and contemplate His divine glory in His human image; and we come thus to know that His death means Salvation and Redemption of the world. (Ouspensky and Lossky 29)

Whether Christ’s kenotic self-abasement “reflects the glory of God,” however, is debatable—both from the viewpoint of scripture as well as from the viewpoint of commonsense psychology. How can abasement be glorious? The notion is an oxymoron. Even more questionable is the idea that this self-abasement brought “Salvation and Redemption” to all of the rest of us. How could the humiliation of one man “save” humankind? The Jews merely considered themselves to be the “chosen people,” while Jesus claimed to be—or his followers claimed him to be—God himself. The hubris central to Christianity is beyond compare. How can it possibly be justified without demeaning other religions, especially the Judaism from which it derived?

These questions may here be understood as rhetorical, although serious theological replies could also be

made to them. What is relevant for the psychoanalytic understanding of icons, however, is the stark reality of the central Gospel event: Christ suffered and died on the cross, and voluntarily so. This act has been represented on numerous icons, and most icons which do not represent it directly imply it—for example icons of the Mother of God with her somber anticipation of the crucifixion, or icons of saints who imitate Christ's voluntary sufferings.

I emphasize that Christ took on the terrible sufferings of the crucifixion *voluntarily* (“a voluntary death,” states Father Florovsky; “dobrovol’nost’ zhertvy,” according to a recent scholarly study).³ Christ was God, after all, and he therefore did not *have* to stoop to the wooden cross in order to “save” wayward humankind. For example, he is typically represented in the center of the iconostasis with an icon of the “All-powerful One” (“Pantokrator” or “Spas v silakh”). Being omnipotent, he could easily have washed away the supposed stain of Original Sin (“pervorodnyi grekh,” “grekhopadenie”) by some means other than the self-humiliation and intense suffering he endured on the famous tree/wood. He had already punished humans by banning them from the Garden of Eden, and by inflicting upon them the pains of childbirth, toil, and mortality (Genesis 3). Was that not enough?

But no, the sadistic punishment of those guilt-ridden human beings who so creatively imagined God into existence did not suffice. God insisted on punishing himself as well, in the person of Jesus Christ. This was a stroke of genius. Christ was not the distant God of the Old Testament. He was a fellow human being, he stood in for us, he took on and acted out to the fullest possible extent our need for punishment. He was not a sadist—or not only a sadist—but a *masochist*:

Christ also suffered for you, leaving you an example, that you should follow in his steps. He committed no sin; no guile was found on his lips. When he was reviled, he did not revile in return; when he suffered, he did not threaten; but he trusted to him who judges justly. He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree [grekhi nashi Sam voznes Telom Svoim na drevo], that we might die to sin and live to righteousness. By his wounds you have been healed. (1 Peter 2:21–24)

Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Jesus Christ, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave [unichizhil Sebia Samogo, priniav obraz raba], being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself [Smiril Sebia] and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5–8)

To rephrase these biblical passages in psychoanalytic terms: universal human guilt was erased (or at least achieved the potential for being erased) through Christ's specifically masochistic suffering.

That Christ's behavior constituted what psychoanalysts refer to as masochism is clear from a contemporary psychoanalytic definition of the term: “any behavioral act, verbalization, or fantasy that—by unconscious designs—physically or psychically injurious to oneself, self-defeating, humiliating, or unduly self-sacrificing” (Katz 226).⁴

Christ's sacrifice of himself on the cross was indeed “humiliating” and “unduly self-sacrificing.” He voluntarily took the form of a “slave,” as Saint Paul says, and he voluntarily “humbled himself” to the point of death on the cross. But his was a painful death deemed purposeful only by guilty Christian believers after the fact. Its essence at the time it happened was masochistic, not redemptive. There is no objective indication that humans were redeemed (“iskuplenie”) or saved (“spasenie”) in any but an imagined sense. Only in rare cases did they turn to lives of “righteousness.” Most of them continued to live and die “in sin,” lying, fornicating, cursing, coveting, thieving, and inventing ever more sophisticated and effective weapons for killing each other in warfare—sometimes even in Christ's name. One thinks of the Crusades, or of the eternally warring and supposedly Christian princes of ancient Rus’.

What I say here is not altogether original. For example, in his emotional 1888 polemic *The Antichrist* Friedrich Nietzsche condemned the Christian doctrine of Christ's redemption of guilty humankind. For Nietzsche, Christ was just a “political criminal”:

This brought him to the cross: the proof for this is

the inscription on the cross ["Jesus of Nazareth, King of the Jews"]. He died for *his* guilt. All evidence is lacking, however often it has been claimed, that he died for the guilt of others. (Nietzsche 599; his emphasis)

Lord Byron once wrote (1811) to a religious friend of his about the bogus quality of Christian redemption:

... the basis of your religion is *injustice*; the *Son of God*, the *pure*, the *immaculate*, the *innocent*, is sacrificed for the *Guilty*. This proves *His* heroism; but no more does away *man's* guilt than a schoolboy's volunteering to be flogged for another would exculpate the dunce from negligence, or preserve him from the Rod. You degrade the Creator, in the first place, by making Him a begetter of children; and in the next you convert Him into a Tyrant over an immaculate and injured Being, who is sent into existence to suffer death for the benefit of some millions of Scoundrels, who, after all, seem as likely to be damned as ever. (35; his emphasis)⁵

Byron's judgement is harsh, but who can doubt that there are still plenty of "Scoundrels" in the world—including in Russia—two millennia after the arrival of Christ on earth?

The only sense in which "Scoundrels" may be "saved," from a Christian point of view, is if they recognize their guilt and turn to Christ to wash it away. But Christ himself was not, and is not guilty, for he is God. The "Scoundrels" are the ones who are guilty. What "Scoundrels" do is turn to imitation of the perfect moral masochist as a way out of their scoundrelhood. To quote the Russian proverb: "God endured, and he ordered us [to endure] too."⁶

In other words, people who wish to call themselves Christians are so impressed by Christ's masochism that they repent. If they "fall" into sin again, moreover, they have the opportunity to repent again. As the proverb says, "If you do not sin, you cannot repent" ("Ne so-greshish'—ne pokaesh'sia"; see Kudriumov 346). Orthodox Christians can continue to commit acts for which they feel guilty, but now they can always count on their merciful Christ, their ideal and idealized masochist to take on (at least some of) the burden of *their* guilt. Among Orthodox Russian believers to this

day a sense of guilt is pervasive, and Christ's model masochism is still the antidote to it.⁷

In some more liberal variants of Christianity (e.g., Unitarian Universalism) this attitude has lessened or disappeared. But I would venture to say that, in the majority of Christians today, feelings of guilt and moral masochism are still important. The Roman Catholic Church, for example, continues to teach that "mortal sins" can be washed away by abject confession, and that repeated sinning can be forgiven by repeated repentance. As a former devout Catholic, I know this cycle all too well. In the Protestant space too, especially among Baptists and Evangelicals, guilt and masochistic abjection are important. One thinks of Baptist Bill Clinton humiliating himself before the American public for his supposed sexual misbehavior.⁸ By focusing attention here on Russian Orthodox practices and beliefs, I do not wish to leave the impression that moral masochism is either uniquely Russian or uniquely Eastern Orthodox.

Icon-painters in Russia live their masochism in their art. As Archimandrite Rafail says, "the icon-painter must always feel his sinfulness and his unworthiness" (Karelin 73). Any Orthodox Russian who paints an icon on wood, or who venerates a wooden icon, is aware of the masochistic overtones of this wooden object. The masochistic meaning is especially evident in the case of icons which depict the crucifixion of Christ. Such icons are, in a sense, redundant: *the* tree of the Crucifixion is depicted on *a* piece of tree ("tree" and "wood" are the same word, i.e., "drevo"). From a psychoanalytic viewpoint, there is a double dose of masochistic ideation.⁹

It is not only icons of the crucifixion, however, which exhibit the masochistic side of Russian iconography. Various scholars of Russian icons have commented on the "monastic and ascetic direction" of Russian icons (Buslaev 1: 37), or their "strict and elevated asceticism" (Bulgakov 306). In the seventeenth century Archpriest Avvakum insisted that the figures on icons be represented not as plump, happy people, but as emaciated sufferers the way they were painted in the good old days of medieval Rus': "the face and hands and all senses were rendered thin, were emaciated from fasting and labor and all kinds of sorrow."¹⁰ Early in the twentieth century Evgenii Trubetskoi

agrees, saying that the best Russian icons depict not satiated, self-satisfied, sinful people, but people who, in the midst of performing their *spiritual* feat (“podvig”), are *physically* disadvantaged: “this humbling of the flesh [smireníe ploti] serves as an absolute condition for the spiritualization of the human form”; “to the superficial observer these ascetic visages may appear lifeless and decidedly dried up. In fact, it is precisely because of the prohibition against ‘rosy red lips’ and ‘chubby cheeks’ in [old Russian icons] that an expression of spiritual life flourishes with incomparable force. . .” (Trubetskoi 230). Of a particular icon of Elijah the Prophet, Trubetskoi says that “everything earthly in him has dried up,” and that his “emaciated visage” testifies to a spiritual force not of this world (247). “A figure emaciated by fasting and all kinds of self-flagellation, a real walking skeleton”—is how Trubetskoi characterizes one of his favorite icons, a depiction of Vasilii the Holy Fool (249).¹¹

Here it should be kept in mind that the theme of masochistic suffering which is featured so prominently in icons does not inevitably exclude its apparent opposites—joy, happiness, exultation, etc. Icons of Christ’s Transfiguration, or his Ascension into Heaven, or Mary’s Assumption—all radiate joy to the beholder. Even icons depicting suffering can be a joy to behold if they are painted with skill and taste. Their colors can be a “feast for the eyes” (“prazdnik dlia glaza”), as Trubetskoi himself says of a set of Stroganov icons (257). Anyone who venerates icons is not unaffected by their sheer beauty. Anyone who studies icons enjoys them, and indeed I would not be writing this article if I myself did not gain great pleasure simply from looking at icons.

Nevertheless, there is something essential about Russian icons that is incommensurate with pleasure, particularly for Orthodox believers (as opposed to tourists in museums). The unpleasure is primary, the pleasure secondary, derived. Trubetskoi says: “There is no Easter without Passion Week, and it is impossible to arrive at the joy of a general resurrection without the life-giving cross of the Lord.” In other words, the suffering must come first, it is primary in the temporal sense. Moreover, we view (or pray to) icons in the context of *this* world, which is full of suffering—and by definition we have not yet arrived in the postulated next world.

Yet another masochistic aspect of Russian icons is the very behavior they elicit from their venerators. An Orthodox believer does not merely pray motionlessly before an icon. He or she bows before it in a most abject fashion—sometimes repeatedly, and sometimes so profoundly that the forehead actually strikes the icon, or the floor in front of the icon. Anyone who walks into an Orthodox Church in Russia may readily observe this abject behavior. If the icon itself depicts masochistic suffering, such as Christ’s crucifixion or a saint’s martyrdom, then the behavior of a believer before the icon echoes that suffering. The venerator’s servile prostration, like Christ’s servanthood on the cross, is an act of moral masochism.

From a theological viewpoint, the ideal venerator of icons is a person who is so humble as to have already accepted his or her own death—just as Christ had accepted death on the cross. Imitation of Christ (“upodoblenie Khristu”) is the ideal in Orthodox Russia, as it is elsewhere in the Christian world. There are not many people who actually live up to this extremist ideal, however, either in Russia or elsewhere. That is, there are only a few of those monks, sectarians, stigmatists, flagellants, and assorted cranks who actually behave as Christ did, that is, who do not resist evil but “turn the other cheek” (cf. Matthew 5:39); who punish themselves with fasting, self-flagellation, and other sufferings; who develop symptoms reminiscent of Christ’s wounds; and who—in short—imitate Christ’s perfect and divine masochism.¹²

If perfect imitation of Christ is not for everyone, there are nonetheless other ways to access his sufferings and to fantasize masochistically. If one does not have the strength to be a martyr, for example, one may venerate martyrs. If one does not have the opportunity to die on a cross, one may pray before a crucifix.

A particularly attractive route to masochistic fantasy is veneration of Mary, the Mother of Jesus. She is supposed to have suffered immense psychological pain at the foot of the cross on which her son was dying. In Russian Orthodox tradition Christ’s mother is always thought of as a suffering mother. Fedotov writes: “she remains ever the embodiment of suffering” (49).

Mary’s suffering stance is not uniquely Russian, of course. Before Russia even existed Mary could be found suffering in Byzantine texts and images on

behalf of her son and her venerators. Indeed, the initial promotion of the term “Mother of God” (Greek *Mētēr Theou*) is historically connected to texts and images of Christ’s *crucifixion* in the period immediately following Iconoclasm in Byzantium (Kalavrezou). In the West Catholics are also used to viewing Mary as a *Mater Dolorosa* who accompanies her suffering son to the cross at Golgotha, and as a mourning mother who holds her dead son on her lap in the topos of the *Pietà*. There are weeping statues of the Madonna in the West, just as there are weeping icons of the Mother of God in Russia.¹³ The suffering Mother of God is thus not unique to Russia and the Russians by any means.

There is also Mary’s willingness to be the slave or handmaiden (“raba”) of God in effecting the Incarnation. Russian theologians like to point to her response to the Archangel Gabriel at the Annunciation: “Behold, I am the handmaiden of the Lord [Se raba Gospodnia]; Let it be to me according to your word” (Luke 1:38). This utterance, according to Father Isaiia of the Troitse-Sergieva Lavra, constitutes a “submissive reply” to God’s messenger. It indicates that God could save the world “only with the submissive agreement” of Mary. Here Russian Orthodox theology coincides with views of the Annunciation held elsewhere in the Christian world (Pelikan 81–94). Mary is humble, even humiliated, despite the greatness of her calling. Father Isaiia writes:

Just as Her Divine Son did, She [the Mother of God] carried Her cross Her entire life. This cross consisted of the scandalous discrepancy between the greatness befitting Her as the Mother of God, and the condition of Humiliation in which She lived right up until Her death (121–122).¹⁴

Psychoanalytically put, Christ and his mother share the feature of moral masochism, for they are both represented as voluntarily suffering victims, as willingly humiliated slaves. This fits well with the overall picture of similarity between them (Mary is “divinized,” Christ is “divine,” according to the theologians), and further blurs the boundary between them.

Icons of the Mother of God in Russia bear names like The Joy of All who Sorrow (“Vsekh Skorbiashchikh Radost”), Ease my Sorrows (“Utoli moia pechali”), Surety of Sinners (“Sporuchnitsa gresh-

nykh”), Comfort in Grievs and Sorrows (“V skorbiakh i Pechaliakh Uteshenie”), Deliveress (“Izbavitel’nitsa”), and Comforter of Those Who Sorrow (“Uteshitel’nitsa Skorbiashchikh”). These names suggest that the Mother of God understands and sympathizes with us in our sufferings. She suffered and grieved too, just as we who approach her icons 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” (9). The Mother of God is thus ready and willing to mother all those who suffer, not only her divine son. Mary’s sorrowful glance indicates pity for *me*, *now*, not just for her divine son, back then.¹⁵

The notion that Mary’s suffering is always the suffering of a mother is essential. Even before the fact of her son’s self-sacrifice, when he is still an infant in her arms and no cross is in sight, she suffers for him. 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*” (Tarabukin 85; emphasis added). As Vasilii Rozanov wrote of these icons in 1906, “Golgotha is brought right into Bethlehem” (119).¹⁶

In other words, the young mother Mary has the gift of prescience. Objective evidence for this reading of the icons may be seen in those specific icons where the chief instrument of Christ’s future torture—the cross—is depicted right along with the Mother of God. The Akhtyrskaiia Mother of God, for example, shows a miniature adult Christ hanging on the cross right beside his praying mother.¹⁷ In the Kozel’shchanskaiia Mother of God the Christ child holds a crucifix in his right hand.¹⁸ The Georgian Mother of God has a crucifix attached to a chain which encircles the necks of both mother and child (Snessoreva, 294). 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 (Arkhipov, 210). The so-called Passion icon ("Strastnaia") shows angels bearing the cross, the lance, and a sponge with bile and vinegar (Kondakov, 144–45). The Christ-child looks back at one of the angels as if surprised, or even frightened (Kondakov 153).

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, the lance which pierced Christ's side, and the stick with a sponge for vinegar.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ On the reverse of another icon of the Mother of God ("Bogoroditsa v deianiiakh") is depicted the actual crucifixion of Christ.²¹

In English we might say of these icons: Christ's suffering is the flip side of his earlier mothering.

The sense of foreboding in Mary's attitude in the iconic depictions (as well as in spiritual folk songs and amulet texts) assumes that she can somehow see into the future. But prescience, like omnipotence, is not an objective feature of mothers; it is, rather, a feature children project. In other words, the idea that Mary knows ahead of time what will happen to her unfortunate son indicates regression to a childish viewpoint on the part of an adult venerator who believes this is possible. The belief, moreover, seems to *condemn* Christ to future suffering when he is still only a child on his mother's lap. Mary's sadness about her child gives the appearance of a self-fulfilling prophecy. If Christ had NOT suffered and died on the cross after all his mother's worrying that he would, something would be very wrong. He would be rejecting her, which is unacceptable—both to her and to Christian believers who have made up these images and narrations of her foreboding. It is as if the *condition* of Mary's great love for Christ was that he voluntarily suffer and die at some point in the future.

Imagine, for a moment, that the image of mother Mary with her child in the process of allowing himself to be crucified—is realistic. In such a situation she

should of course intervene, she should stop the child's self-destructive misbehavior. A normal mother does not allow her toddler to play with fire. The Mother of God in typical icons with her child, however, only manages to look mournful. The child must be permitted to play his little crucifixion game to the end. *She* seems to ordain that it be so.

The cross on which Christ suffered and died is sometimes explicitly depicted on the Mother of God icons, as we have seen. But there is also a more subtle depiction of this image of masochistic self-destruction, and it is found on almost every icon of the mother and child together. I am referring to the tripartite cross which is usually superimposed upon Christ's halo—but never on the mother's halo. Theologians refer to such a halo as a cruciferous nimbus, and view it as a specific attribute of Christ. Christ's mother, on the other hand, usually has three stars on her shawl or maphorion—i.e., on the head and on each shoulder—and these are supposed to represent her virginity, or more specifically her intactness before, during, and after the birth of her son.²² Broadly speaking, the cruciferous nimbus means that Christ's body was to be damaged on the cross, while the three stars mean that Mary's body was *not* damaged—neither by defloration, nor by Christ's birth, nor after his birth.²³

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 which lies at the heart of Christianity, we must ever be reminding ourselves that Christ welcomed prolonged torture and eventual death upon a cross.

What is of particular psychoanalytic interest about the mother-and-child icons is the connection of the Christ child's future masochistic suffering with the image of his *mother*. In their 1987 essay on the "essence" of masochism analysts 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” (360). 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” (5). 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 (see especially Lebe). Elsewhere I have surveyed the clinical literature on this subject at some length, and I will just assume for now that this literature has analytic validity (Rancour-Laferrriere 93–121). Here I would add that the “reproduction” of specifically religious masochism from one generation to the next is greatly facilitated by the religious beliefs and practices which—like language and culture generally—are almost irresistibly transmitted from adults (especially mothers) to children within families.

The coincidence of the conventional reading of Mary’s sorrowful facial expression with the psychoanalytic reading of adult masochism is remarkable. The theologians, folklorists, and art scholars say that mother Mary sees her son’s self-sacrificial suffering in the future; the psychoanalysts say that a problematical relationship with the mother may lead to self-willed, masochistic suffering in the future.

Most of the “scholarly” research on icons is devoid of subjectivity. Occasionally, however, an icon scholar will express a personal reaction. One such scholar is Nikolai Tarabukin, a great devotee of the most holy object in Orthodox Russia, the Vladimir Mother of God.

Tarabukin writes: “I will convey my own feeble experience of the spiritual effect of the icon.” At first, he says, the Vladimir Mother of God seems not to look at you, her severe glance (“vzgliad”) seems to pass over your head as if having nothing to do with you (“kak by ne kasaia’s’ tebia”). But then, with prayer, the experience changes radically:

... you begin to sense that the Mother of God is looking already directly at you with a kind of profound reproach. And suddenly you become

ashamed that, before the gaze of the Heavenly Queen, you have laid out all of your life’s baggage and that you are praying for something worldly, human, everyday. Quickly you begin to gather up your trivial little thoughts, and your prayer of pleading gradually turns into a Gloria, a pure and wise contemplation of the magnificence and holiness of the One Who is Wider than the Skies, the Burning Bush, the Indestructible Wall, the Pillar of the Unshakable Church, the Ray of the wise Sun, the Heavenly Stairway, through her God descended, the unsetting stars of the Mother, the Dawn of mysterious day. (157)

What Tarabukin has done here is list some of the traditional epithets and phrases for the Mother of God which designate her icons, or which appear in various prayers about her. These expressions are so numerous and so grandiose, they elevate her to such a height that the one who prays, by contrast, appears to grovel before her.

What is more, the servility pays off. Tarabukin gains the loving, attentive gaze (“vzor”) of the Mother of God:

The gaze of the Mother of God becomes more demanding, more penetrating, warmer. The sorrowful wrinkle between the brows disappears all by itself, the sadness is replaced by joy. And just as the Mother is moved with lovingkindness in beholding her Divine Son, so too She transfers her lovingkindness on to the one who prays. (157)

A great honor—the loving gaze of the Mother of God—is bestowed upon the one who prays, just as it had been bestowed upon Christ himself long ago.²⁴ As a result, the one who prays is encouraged to imitate Christ (as Thomas à Kempis would say), or to identify with Christ (as a psychoanalyst would say). But to identify with Christ is to accept voluntarily—masochistically—all the suffering Christ accepted.

Life is, after all, a Golgotha, says Tarabukin. But a Golgotha accepted leads to resurrection and everlasting life, so perhaps the suffering is not suffering-for-suffering’s sake, perhaps it is not masochistic after all:

... Golgotha is only a way, not a goal. The Golgotha of each and every mortal is a crucible purifying

the spirit and elevating it to celestial heights. Suffering is a path to joy. A barely noticeable smile, like the dawn, glimmers on Her lips, illuminating the sorrow. Foreseeing the coming resurrection of the Son, the Woman chosen by God sees, before the fact, the transformation of everyone who “takes up his cross and follows me.” You notice an extraordinary change in her visage. Warmth fills the soul, and the spirit is filled with wise action. In these moments you see the whole unearthly perfection of this visage, which does not have, and never did have an equal in all of world art. (157)

In other words, my icon of the Mother of God is better than yours. None of the madonnas of the Italian High Renaissance can compare, says Tarabukin, they seem to be “just worldly portraits made from third-class women.” Beside the aristocratic Vladimir Mother of God, Leonardo’s *Mona Lisa* is crude, and Raphael’s *Madonna della Sedia* is but a *femme de chambre* (Tarabukin, 158).

At this point, then, Tarabukin has veered in the direction of ordinary Russian nationalism, and away from any possible sexualization or Oedipalization of the Mother of God. He prefers a safely non-sexual, pre-Oedipal mother figure. Tarabukin is insistent. His Russian Mother of God is purer than *any* Western Madonna. She is perched upon the highest possible pedestal. At the foot of this pedestal is the lowly Tarabukin himself, whose trivial little thoughts—“malen’kie myslishki,” a double diminutive—are brushed aside so that the Mother of God may become all the more exalted. But the self is also diminished in order to gain the gaze, the attention of this mother figure. She is *not* looking past you, she is *not* preoccupied with other things, as she had seemed at first. She is really concerned with you personally, in the same way that she is concerned about the future of her son. This is the “miracle of transformation” (158) that Tarabukin believes takes place as you pray before her.

But the “miracle” is a wishful fantasy. The objective physiognomy of the mother does not change. Her sad facial expression is as frozen as death. This is simply the static, physical nature of an icon. The Vladimir icon is no motion picture. It is Tarabukin’s response to the represented mother that changes. If Tarabukin

begins by admitting that he does not have the mother’s gaze, he ends by asserting that he does have her gaze, her attention. Tarabukin did not gain her attention out of a consideration of the objective properties of the icon as it existed in 1928, roughly the time he was writing his article.²⁵ Rather, he gained it through prayerful fantasy. The fact is that, even if the mother’s gaze is interpreted as directed at the viewer, it is not *concerned* with the viewer. Mary’s face has the vacant expression of one immersed in thought, one preoccupied with a sad truth, one slightly depressed. This particular expression legitimizes the conventional interpretation of the Vladimir Mother of God: she muses sadly over the coming sacrifice of her child. But this very interpretation bars the viewer from interaction with this mother. If she is truly preoccupied with the fate of her son, then the only way to get her attention is to identify with that son, to put oneself in the position of that masochist-to-be who, as is clear from the icon itself, is as desperately seeking the mother’s gaze as the viewer is.

The solution, then, is only in a future seen by the mother. Sacrifice yourself, she seems to say, and you will gain my attention, my lovingkindness. Be like Christ, that paragon of moral masochism. Diminish yourself, humble yourself to the point of accepting pain and death on a cross of your own making. Life is a Golgotha. When you suffer this way, as my son did, I will be with you. When you die I will help take you down from the cross, I will wail over your body, I will wrap you in swaddling rags, then I will help deposit you back into (what Russians call) Mother Moist Earth.

And then, to the amazement of all, you will *arise* from your humiliating state of deadness. You will ascend into heaven and everlasting life. Your need for my gaze will be fulfilled beyond your wildest dreams, and your sufferings will have been only temporary. I will *watch* as your grandiose self prances about unswaddled, high above our Orthodox collective, forever and ever. Amen.

NOTES

¹Guilt, as has been shown in the cross-cultural empirical studies, is a hallmark of religious, including Christian, thinking. See: Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle, 22–24, 176–77, 239–40.

²According to psychoanalyst Theodor Reik, original sin was

not sexual, as is often maintained, but cannibalistic. The tree in the Garden of Eden was a totemistic representation of God. Original sin was the mythical killing and devouring of God the father, while the later crucifixion of Christ upon another tree was the mythical atonement for that sin. The sacrament of the Eucharist repeats the original crime of devouring God, but is also a way for Christians to express their identification with the self-sacrificial Christ.

³Florovsky, 16; Bobkov and Shevtsov, 139.

⁴This sense of the term “masochism” is essentially what Freud meant by “moral masochism” (as opposed to erotogenic masochism). See Freud 19:165–70. On the masochistic essence of Christ’s voluntary suffering and humiliation, see Rancour-Laferriere, 26–28, 44–45, 228.

⁵I wish to thank my colleague Avram Brown for bringing this quotation to my attention.

⁶Russian “Bog terpel, i nam velel.” See Rancour-Laferriere, 27. Mariia Kallash offers a variant of the proverb which is more explicit: “Khristos muki terpel i nam terpet’ velel” (Kudriumov 343).

⁷On chronic guilt feelings among ethnic Russians, see Rancour-Laferriere, 112–16. For some essential readings on sin (“grekh”), repentance (“pokaianie”) and confession (“isповedanie”) in the Russian Orthodox context, see Morozov. In the true Russian Orthodox believer, according to Oleg Klimkov, a sense of guilt exists up to the very moment of death, and there is *always* the possibility that one may perish spiritually (comments made at the conference “Ten Years of Psychoanalysis in Russia,” East European Institute of Psychoanalysis, 5 May 2001, St. Petersburg, Russia).

⁸I wish to thank Marcia Ian for her helpful comments in this connection.

⁹It is also conceivable that viewers of icons of the crucifixion gain sadistic gratification from the sight. This is unlikely for normal venerators in the Orthodox context, however, for only the sufferer (Christ, sometimes his mother, and other supporters) is depicted, and the viewer is encouraged to identify with the sufferer. In the Catholic devotional tradition of the “Stations of the Cross,” however, those who inflict the injuries and cause the suffering (the Roman executioners) feature prominently, and sadistic fantasies are encouraged in those who participate in this devotion (see Carroll, *Catholic Cults* 41–56), although masochistic fantasies are encouraged as well. It is a curious fact that the notion of “Stations of the Cross” does not exist in the Russian Orthodox tradition. However, there are plenty of icons of saints’ lives (“zhitiinye ikony”) which depict beatings and other gruesome tortures appealing to the sadistic imagination.

¹⁰As quoted by Trubetskoi, 229; cf. also Bychkov, 200. Curiously enough, Avvakum’s arch-enemy Patriarch Nikon also disapproved of fleshy, Western-influenced figures in icons (Uspenskii 1: 517, n. 49).

¹¹Cf. Martynovskii on the need for icon-painters to avoid “tuchnost’” and “miasistost’” in the figures they paint (85–86).

¹²Viacheslav Ivanov (330) sees “imitation of Christ” as essential to the “Russian idea.” For examples from the history of Russian religious masochism, see Rancour-Laferriere, 18–28.

¹³See, for example: Warner, 177–91, 203–223; Ebertshäuser et al., 177–79.

¹⁴Cf. Rancour-Laferriere, 146. It is worth noting that the idea of *shared* suffering and humiliation of mother and son is not particularly Orthodox, but may be observed in Western Christianity as well. Thus Saint Alphonsus Liguori wrote in 1786: “God . . . made himself one and the same thing with her”; “Jesus and Mary . . . both offered one and the same sacrifice.” In 1848 John Henry Newman wrote: “Depend upon it, the way to enter into the sufferings of the Son is to enter into the sufferings of the Mother.” As quoted by Hilda Graef, vol. 2, 76, 107.

¹⁵It is possible as well to view those who suffer as a *collective*, rather than as individuals. This collective could be analyzed in Marxist-Leninist terms (for example, Sapunov). More productive, in my opinion, is straightforward sociological analysis. There is no denying that large numbers of people venerate icons in Russia. It follows that sociological breakdowns of these people—by class, by ethnicity, by occupation, by gender, etc.—could be made. No doubt they will be made in future quantitative studies by social psychologists.

¹⁶Rozanov, 119. Rozanov has some other things to say about Russian icons of the Mother of God which are quite objectionable, for example he claims that in them Mary gives the appearance of a nursemaid, not a mother (“vid ne Materi, a niani”), who is looking after someone else’s unhappy child. But Rozanov’s opinions are always interesting, even when they are wrong. A psychobiography of this repulsive and influential genius would be a worthy undertaking.

¹⁷Snessoreva 205; Poselianin 411.

¹⁸Snessoreva, 109; Poselianin 168.

¹⁹See Bruk 37. Hodegetria icons often have the crucifixion on the reverse side, starting from the twelfth century (Cormack, 57).

²⁰See illustrations in the catalogue edited by Guseva et al., 98, 124, 133, 139, 140.

²¹Anisimov 62. For a comparable Western image which brings the crucifixion into the scene of mother and child, see Carlo Crivelli’s Madonna of the Passion (Ebertshäuser et al. 125). Another example would be 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, *Cult of the Virgin Mary* 167).

²²See, for example: Arsen’ev, 141–42; *Zakon Bozhii*, 510; Averintsev, 127.

²³It would appear that a (Kleinian) reparative fantasy is being expressed by the doctrinal insistence that mother Mary’s body was never harmed by her child. Note also that her body was never even permitted to rot in the grave, according to the official doctrine of Mary’s Assumption (“Uspenie”) into heaven, soul *and* body. Not even any of the saints were so honored.

²⁴Compare Kohut (117), who interprets the loving glance of the mother (“the gleam in the mother’s eye”) as an affirmation of the child’s grandiosity, and as an essential element in building the child’s self-esteem.

²⁵See editorial notes 185 and 188 on p. 203, as well as Tarabukin’s comment on p. 153. It is possible that the “miracle of transformation” was facilitated by a real memory in Tarabukin’s

case. That is, it is possible that in 1928 Tarabukin is remembering the somewhat less severe appearance of the icon before its restoration in 1918–1919. Tarabukin had certainly seen the icon before its restoration, and here he may be unconsciously remembering the softer, more rounded features of the Vladimir Mother of God in her earlier incarnation (see photograph on p. 29 of Guseva et al.). In particular Tarabukin may be remembering that the pre-restoration Mother of God was looking directly at the viewer, i.e., at Tarabukin, rather than slightly askance. The “miracle” that Tarabukin speaks of may thus be, in part, the restoration of a memory.

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