

Solzhenitsyn on Russia and the West

In 1998 I had the inestimable pleasure and honour of interviewing Alexander Solzhenitsyn at his home outside Moscow. As I traveled to Russia I had no idea why he should have granted me an exclusive interview when he had shunned the advances of Western writers much more accomplished and better known. He had a reputation as being reclusive and also of being suspicious of journalists and biographers in general, and Western journalists and biographers in particular. I was, therefore, mystified by his acceptance of my wishful letter requesting an interview. When I had written it, I had only one published biography to my name. Why on earth would the great Russian writer say “yes” to me when he had said “no” to everyone else?

As I pondered this question, it seemed that there was only one likely answer. In my letter, I had announced my desire to correct the failure of previous biographies, particularly [Michael Scammell's](#), to pay due attention to Solzhenitsyn's religious beliefs. Perhaps Solzhenitsyn had agreed with my critical assessment and perhaps he shared my desire that a biography be published that emphasized the spiritual dimension of his life and work. Although this seemed the only logical explanation for Solzhenitsyn's surprising acceptance of my request for an interview, it didn't explain why he should think me capable of writing such a book. Perhaps, I thought, Solzhenitsyn knew and admired G.K. Chesterton, the subject of my first and at that time only biography, which I had of course mentioned in my letter. Perhaps Solzhenitsyn had thought that anyone who had written a biography of Chesterton was thereby qualified to write sensibly and seriously on religious matters. Perhaps “Chesterton” was the magic word that earned me the interview. This suspicion was confirmed

upon my arrival when Solzhenitsyn's wife showed me a dozen or so volumes of the Ignatius Press edition of Chesterton's [Collected Works](#). Clearly, Solzhenitsyn not only knew Chesterton's works but was an avid collector of them! Emboldened by this discovery, I asked Solzhenitsyn whether he considered himself part of the movement in Western literature which had responded to the wasteland of modernity with the perennial power of orthodox Christianity. I showed him a list of some of the writers in the avant-garde of this countercultural movement, a list that included not only Chesterton but Hilaire Belloc, T.S. Eliot, C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Siegfried Sassoon, Edith Sitwell, Evelyn Waugh and John Henry Newman. He cast his eyes over the list and chuckled infectiously as he read the names. "I do know that such writers exist," he quipped, "and I also know that they are equally unpopular in the West!" This was the confirmation I sought. Solzhenitsyn not only knew these writers, he evidently saw them as kindred spirits who had shared a similar fate to his own at the hands of the West's secular humanist critics.

At another point in the interview, Solzhenitsyn declared that he no longer saw Russia as being distinct from the West but that, on the contrary, Russia and the West were essentially part of the same threatened Christian civilization, and that both had succumbed to the evils of post-Enlightenment modernity:

"Today, when we say the West we are already referring both to the West and to Russia... And... there are ills that are characteristic, that have plagued the West for a long time and now Russia has quickly adopted them also. In other words, the characteristics of modernity, the psychological illness of the twentieth century, is this hurriedness, hurrying, scurrying, this fitfulness—fitfulness and superficiality. Technological successes have been tremendous but without a spiritual component mankind will not only be unable to further develop but cannot even preserve itself. There is a

belief in an eternal, an infinite progress which has practically become a religion. This is a mistake of the eighteenth century, of the Enlightenment era.”

The fact that Solzhenitsyn saw Russia as part of the West and that he saw himself as part of that movement in Western literature which might be called the Christian literary revival should give us pause for thought. There are moves afoot to whip up the old Cold War angst and anger and to resurrect enmity towards Russia. Liberals in the West, outraged at Russia's resistance to their decadent agenda, are caricaturing Russia as an enemy of Western "values." In the face of this new form of Liberal McCarthyism, we should remind ourselves that Russia has given us Tchaikovsky, Rachmaninov, Pushkin, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Chekhov, Pasternak, as well as the aforementioned Solzhenitsyn, to name but a few of the great Russian composers and writers. We should also remind ourselves that modern Russia is not synonymous with the old Soviet Union, a fact that can be seen by the fact the Solzhenitsyn's anti-Soviet [Gulag Archipelago](#) is required reading in Russia's high schools.

Regardless of Russia's unwillingness to conform to the new "West" being imposed by the secular humanists and radical relativists, she is part of that older and timeless West known as Christendom. Solzhenitsyn knew this and insisted upon it. Then as now, Solzhenitsyn is worth taking seriously. He believed that Russia is part of the Christian West... and so should we.

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