

## Peter Chaadaev and Catholic Unity

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“This was a shot, resounding in the dark night.”<sup>1</sup>) Alexander Herzen’s frequently quoted remark conveys the impact which Peter Jakovlevitch Chaadaev’s “philosophical letter” made on public opinion in the Russia of Tsar Nicholas the First. To the brilliant young radical, the appearance in a Moscow publication of Chaadaev’s somber views of Russia’s past, present and future was a fact so astounding he read the article again and again with disbelief but with growing excitement.<sup>2</sup>

If atheistic “westernisers” such as Herzen felt the significance of the attack, the importance of Chaadaev is even greater in stimulating the “slavophilic” religious school,<sup>3</sup> in suggesting Dostoyevsky’s “messianic” notions, and in influencing Vladimir Soloviev and the revival of religious thought at the end of the nineteenth century.<sup>4</sup> “Our first Christian philosopher,” as one Russian critic in 1910 called him,<sup>5</sup> is, it is apparent, at least an indirect influence on the religious views of the Soviet writer, Boris Pasternak, and on such well known Russian exiles as the late Nicholas Berdayev.

Occupying a major place in the extremely rich intellectual history of nineteenth century Russia, Chaadaev introduced a philosophy of history which clarified the question of Russia’s position in the story of the development of civilisation. That the answer remains obscure testifies both to the complexity of the problem and to the receptivity and expansiveness of Chaadaev’s intellect. He developed no rigid doctrine, but helped to shape the views of the most varied schools of Russian thought. On the one hand he called attention to the magnificence of the history of the Roman Catholic Church, and on the other he urged the role of Orthodoxy. On the one hand he gave weapons to the “westernising” opponents of Russia past; on the other he contributed to the “slavophilic” argument of Russia’s glorious destiny.

A major contributor to several schools of thought, he belonged to none. And the story of his intellectual position resembles that of his personal life. A friend to a number of the great figures of thought and literature, a frequent visitor to the salons, yet he remained isolated: respected, admired but never fully understood or

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<sup>1</sup> A. I. Herzen, *Byloye i Dumi*, two vols., Minsk, 1957 vol. one, p. 378.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 379.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 378.

<sup>4</sup> N. O. Lerner, “Peter Jakovlevitch Chaadaev,” in *Istoriya Russkoy Literaturi XIX veka*, ed. by D. N. Ovsyaniko-Kulikovskii, five vols., Moscow, 1910, vol. two, p. 1.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

accepted.<sup>6</sup> From an old aristocratic family,<sup>7</sup> he was born in Moscow in 1793, and died there in 1856.<sup>8</sup> An army officer who served in the war against Napoleon,<sup>9</sup> he retired and travelled to western Europe for reasons of health in 1823, returning in 1826, the hypochondria and nervousness which sent him abroad apparently not having been cured.<sup>10</sup>

Chaadaev was an omnivorous reader, and his views reflect the currents of thought in Restoration France and of German philosophy in its golden age. They reflect as well the typical romantic-mystical attitudes of the gentry class of the Alexandrian era, as Professor Florovsky has stressed.<sup>11</sup> Like so many of the Russian aristocrats of the early nineteenth century, Chaadaev was associated briefly with the masonic movement, and the aspirations of alleviating the human condition common to many intellectuals in that order were part of his background.<sup>12</sup> Without adhering to any consistent religious doctrine,<sup>13</sup> his writings are concerned with religious questions; indeed he saw himself as a religious prophet, showing the road to Russia's intellectuals and ultimately to all humanity.

His bow to the public was the unhappy "First Philosophical Letter," which appeared in the Moscow journal *The Telescope* in September, 1836, as a Russian translation (somewhat edited) of a letter composed in French in 1829.<sup>14</sup> A bitter attack on Russia's history, it provoked a general indignation.<sup>15</sup> The chief of the security police drew the article to the attention of the Emperor Nicholas, who suspended the journal permanently. The editor, Nadezhdin, was sent to northern Russia, while Boldyrev, the aged dean of Moscow University who had acted as censor, was discharged from his censoring and his university work, deprived of his pension and died in poverty. Chaadaev was declared officially insane, and for a year was confined at his home where he was visited by a physician acting on the government's orders.<sup>16</sup>

The letter which provoked the storm was a published answer to a lady who had consulted Chaadaev about religious matters. He began his answer by remarking on

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<sup>6</sup> See Herzen, *op. cit.*, pp. 380-382.

<sup>7</sup> Martin Winkler, *Peter Jakovlevic Caadaev*, Berlin, 1927, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Eugene A. Moskoff, *The Russian Philosopher Chaadayeve*, New York, 1937 p. 3.

<sup>9</sup> Winkler, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>11</sup> Georgii Florvskii, *Puti Russkavo Bogosloviya*, Paris, 1937, p. 247.

<sup>12</sup> In 1816 he became a member of the Masonic lodge, The United Friends. Winkler, *op. cit.*, p. 27.

<sup>13</sup> Florovskii, *op. cit.*, p. 248.

<sup>14</sup> M. Gershenzon (ed.) *Sochineniya i Pisma P. Y. Chaadaeva*, two vols., Moscow, 1913, vol. two, p. 3.

<sup>15</sup> Alexandre Koyré, *Etudes sur l'Histoire de la Pensée Philosophique en Russie* Paris, 1950, p. 27.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, Moskoff, *op. cit.*, p. 69.

the anxiety in the lady's mind concerning this most fundamental of all questions. Her concern, he pointed out, was the consequence of the present condition of things, which had bothered us all.<sup>17</sup> The solution which he offered to her and to society as a whole was a religious answer, and involved the realisation of unity in the one Christian church. All moral ideas, he felt, were merged "into one thought, into one feeling" and that was the gradual formation in society of a "spiritual unity, or a church, which must bring about the kingdom of truth among people." Any other kind of teaching, he held, vitiated Christ's wish that all should be one.<sup>18</sup>

That by the unity of the church he meant a specific organization is shown in his further remarks that "the best means to conserve religious sentiment is to conform to all the usages prescribed by the church," since "nothing so strengthens the mind in its beliefs as a rigorous fulfilment of all practices to which it obliges us." Moreover, he adds, "the great part of the rites of the Christian religion have been established by the Highest Intellect (la plus haute raison: *samim Berchovnym Umom*) for everyone who can penetrate into the truths which they express."<sup>19</sup>

Here follows an interesting change from the French to the Russian versions, which critics have overlooked but which illustrates the strong masonic or even gnostic element in Chaadaev. Having asserted the desirability of adhering to church ritual, in the Russian version he warns against anyone being presumptuous enough to think that because of his religious and intellectual development he is superior to associating with the common herd in church services:

Woe to the person who, seized by the tempting phantasies or his vanity, of the pseudo-wisdom of his calculation and because of his higher enlightenment presumes that he is freed from the general law!<sup>20</sup>

The French original, however, is much kinder to the gnostic. After appealing to the advantages of following the rites of religion, Chaadaev qualifies his argument:

There is only one exception to this rule, which is perfectly general otherwise; it is when one finds in his beliefs an order superior to that which the masses profess, – which raises the soul to the very source from which flow all our certitudes, but which moreover does not contradict popular beliefs, but on the contrary supports them; then, and only then, is it permitted to neglect the exterior observances in order to be better able to give oneself to more important works. But woe to the person who, seized by the tempting phantasies of his vanity ...<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Gershenzon, *op. cit.*, vol. two, p. 4.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.5.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, vol one, p. 76.

Having set forth the significance of the role of the church in the life of the individual, he turned to what was for him always a more popular theme – the role of religion in civilisation itself, and, how this related to the situation in Russia. Convinced of the great advantages which the Christian religion had given western Europe, he believed that it was in Russia's separateness from the path of latin Christian development that she was so backward. His picture of Russia is dark:

It is one of the most wretched peculiarities of our social development, that truths, long ago well known in other countries, even among the common people, are only now being opened up among us. And this is because we have never gone along with other people; we do not belong to any of the great families of humanity, neither to the West, nor to the East, having no traditions from the one or the other. We exist as it were outside of time, and the universal development of the human race has not touched us.<sup>22</sup>

Everything in Russia is in movement, "we are as strangers in the land." Nothing is constant or permanent. "All moves by, everything flows on, leaving no trace either externally or on one's innermost being."<sup>23</sup>

This rootlessness Chaadaev traced to the origins of Russian history, which he thought to be in unhealthy contrast to that of the West. The barbarian stage in western European history was a creative period, which prepared men to receive the lofty ideas of Christianity. There was nothing like that for us, he said. In the beginning we had wild barbarism, followed by crude superstition, and then the cruel humiliation of the rule of the conqueror. The traces of this Mongolian period remain in our frame of life even up to the present day. "And this is the bitter history of our youth."<sup>24</sup>

A people really live, he insisted, only when they have received powerful impressions from their predecessors and when they come into contact with other peoples.<sup>25</sup> We see here Chaadaev's basic position – an insistence on the importance of tradition, and on the unity of mankind. As he explains: "in this way, each man feels his association with the whole of humanity."<sup>26</sup> Enchanted both with transcendental German philosophy and with the arguments of Catholic traditionalists, he was horrified with Russia's isolation. Russia has had no intellectual history, since there has been no logical development of ideas, one idea merely erasing an older idea. "We grow, but we do not ripen. We go forward, but in some kind of side direction, leading to no object."<sup>27</sup> And it was in the realm of ideas, of the intellect, that Russia failed. Everywhere, he pointed out, the masses

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. two, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

of people do not think, but operate under the influence of the minority of intellectuals. But where, he asked, are Russian intellectuals?<sup>28</sup>

The deficiency of intellectual development in Russia led to serious moral inadequacies. It was not so much that Russia lacked scholarship, science or literature, but moral ideas essential for social life, ideas of duty, of law, of right, of order, were absent, yet they constituted the very atmosphere of the West.<sup>29</sup>

It was the absence of true Christianity in Russia that accounted for this unhappy condition. The Christian religion was more, he declared, than a moral system. It was a “divine force, eternally acting on all the expenses of the earth – a force whose visible activity must serve to give us constant lessons.” Christianity by its very nature has an influence on everything, on all the institutions of the contemporary order.<sup>30</sup>

By Christianity, he had Roman Catholicism in mind and although he was to change his opinion later, his attitude to Russian Orthodoxy in this letter was in the highest degree scornful. It was true, he said, that Russia had a form of Christianity and a form of civilisation. But “are not the Abyssinians Christian? Hasn’t Japan developed a civilisation? Yes, but do you think that the Christianity of the Abyssinians or the civilisation of the Japanese could create that order which consists of the final goal of mankind? Do you really think that these wretched deviations from divine and human truth could lead to a heaven on earth?”<sup>31</sup>

Religion played such a decisive role, because man’s affairs depended on the role of the intelligence. “All history of a new society is completed in the area of thought (mnenie),” he declared. “Material gain (vygodie) always follows thought, but never precedes it. All the successes of the West were in essence moral successes. They sought truth, but found well being.”<sup>32</sup> Referring then to the history of the rise of Christianity in the West, he maintained that the end of the glorious age of martyrdoms and of the development of early Christian theology did not mean the end of the glories of Christian civilisation when the barbarians swept over Europe. In spite of the barbarian destruction of the Roman Empire, the movement of history was tied to the strength of the new ideas, associated with religion. The Middle Ages saw a development of religious feeling, along with the strengthening of the Christian church all over Europe. Finally “the philosophical and literary development of the intelligence and the formation of morals under the influence of religion finish that history, which has exactly the same right to be called holy, as does even the history of the ancient chosen people.”<sup>33</sup>

Chaadaev was always conscious of the criticisms of the Age of the Enlightenment against the Catholic Church, and frequently cited Voltaire. He admitted that among the Christian people there had been much “fanaticism and

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, p.11.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 16.

superstition.” “Let superficial philosophers point out the lack of toleration, wars of religion, burnings at the stake, we can only envy people who in this collision of opinions, in this bloody struggle over truth, created a whole world of ideas, which we cannot even imagine, let alone appreciate with soul and body.”

Let me repeat again, in Europe not everything was intelligent, virtuous, religious; but in Europe everything was penetrated by a mysterious strength, which ruled independently for a whole series of centuries; in it can be seen all the consequences of that endless tying together of ideas and events, which have formed present society.<sup>34</sup>

Such an emphasis on the part religion and philosophy played in man’s history was typical of both French and German thinking in the nineteenth century, and consequently was predominant among intellectuals in Russia itself, formed as they were chiefly by western teachings. The first philosophical letter challenged official Russian opinion, but it did so in terminology which the Russian nobility understood. And the closing of *The Telescope* in 1836 did not end Chaadaev’s influence. A Russian nobleman who had become a Catholic, the Rev. I. S. Gagarin, S.J., published a collection of Chaadaev’s writings in 1862. A further collection, in two volumes, was published in Russia in 1913, and in 1935 a Soviet scholar published additional writings, which were reprinted by a German Jesuit in 1954.<sup>35</sup>

These additional sources give us a much clearer picture of Chaadaev’s intellectual development, and throw light on the intellectual climate of his period. In one of his earliest letters, written to his brother in 1820, he appears as a western type of liberal revolutionary, the same kind of mentality as that of the participants in the Decembrist uprising of 1825. He rejoices at the success of the revolution in Spain. Did not this suggest the advantages of revolution? Did not this bear on matters closer at home? But, he added, he himself was no demagogue, since one who scorned the world, did not dream of correcting it.<sup>36</sup>

Yet Chaadaev did dream of “correcting” the world, but he did so under the influence of religious thinkers, such as Novalis, de Bonald, de Maistre, Ballanche, Lamennais and Chateaubriand, who had all asserted that the answer to Europe’s disorder was a return to the harmony of the Middle Ages, when the Catholic Church held the allegiance of everyone.<sup>37</sup> For Chaadaev the appeal of the Catholic Church was much more fundamental than social or political; fascinated with religious questions, he absorbed the popular mystical literature of the day. This can be seen not only in his philosophical letters, but also in his “memorials of spiritual knowledge” (Mem. sur Geistkunde) penned in German in 1824. Chaadaev wrote

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> Heinrich Falk, S.J., *Das Weltbild Peter J. Tschaadaiews nach seinen acht “Philosophischen Briefen,”* Munich, 1954.

<sup>36</sup> Gerschenzon, *op. cit.*, vol. one, pp. 2-3.

<sup>37</sup> The intellectual background of Chaadaev has been treated at length in Charles Quénet, *Tschaadaev et les Lettres Philosophiques*, Paris, 1931.

mostly in French, but he also wrote extensively in Russian, and occasionally in German. In his letters he used both French and Russian, but preferred French to express more complicated notions. Here he used German because at the time he was reading such mystical writers as Jung-Stilling, and found the terminology fitted his frame of thought.<sup>38</sup>

Here are some of his jottings:

The immeasurable aether in the space of our world system, is the element of the spirit, in which everything lives and moves. That dark area around our earth up to the middle point of the earth is the same thing as the night, the home of the fallen angels and of such souls of men who have died unconverted ...<sup>39</sup>

The souls of true Christians, who have here applied themselves to the way of the holy, in the true faith in Jesus Christ and in His saving Grace, and who with complete resignation have died to all things earthly, are taken by the angels as though they have awakened from the slumber of death, and without a momentary hesitation are taken upwards into the pure region of Light, where they will enjoy blessedness.<sup>40</sup>

This strong religious note is never absent from Chaadaev's writings, as the first philosophical letter demonstrated. He followed the first philosophical letter with seven others. In the second letter, he returned again to the theme of history and to the importance of the foundation of the Christian church. He wished to establish that he did not see the effect of Christianity in any narrow sense. Christian teaching, since it was a revelation of the Holy Spirit, did not mean a dead uniformity of opinion or of culture; there were values in the differences in nationalities and in thought.<sup>41</sup> True progress, however, required Christianity. It is only with Christianity that mankind experiences progress, that man can realise the depth of the teachings of philosophers ancient and modern. Let no one regret the passing of the ancient world as a retrograde movement in history; the barbarians had destroyed great civilisations that were exhausted and had outlived their time.<sup>42</sup> He viewed the fall of civilisations with the same philosophy as St. Augustine; despotism and immorality had brought about their ruin, and God in His Providence would preserve whatever good they had accomplished.<sup>43</sup>

The Christian Middle Ages, as Novalis had pointed out, was an ideal period when, for centuries, society was a true federal system, to be dissolved only by the Reformation. Before this "deplorable event," the people of Europe considered themselves as forming a single social body, geographically divided into different states, but having a single moral point of view. There was only one body of public law, and that was the decrees of the church. Wars were regarded only as civil wars.

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<sup>38</sup> Winkler, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>39</sup> Gershenzon, *op. cit.*, vol one, p. 39.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 102-103.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 108-109.

“The history of the Middle Ages is, speaking literally, the history of a single people, of the Christian people. At the bottom of everything was the movement of moral thought; purely political events were on a secondary level.” The serious wars were wars over opinion. Voltaire was wrong in seeing this as criminal of the Christian people, because, on the contrary, it showed an awareness on the part of medieval Christians of the supremacy of thought. “It is clear that the reign of thought can be established nowhere other than in the world.” The disorder of contemporary Europe was owing to the schism of Protestantism which in breaking the unity of thought, had broken also the unity of society.<sup>44</sup>

But the Protestant Reformation has not ended mankind’s development, only interrupted it temporarily. Basically Europe was still Christian and the Christian foundation of Europe would bring about a renewal of energy and Europe would experience another youth and growth. “Thanks be to God, the Reformation has not destroyed everything; thanks be to God, society has already been edified for eternity.”<sup>45</sup>

If his attack on Protestantism with a concomitant praise of the Middle Ages seemed strange, it was because Protestant historians had distorted the truth, Chaadaev maintained. Protestant writers did not understand the effect of Christian influences on society, they did not appreciate the progress of thought in the Middle Ages. They presented a distorted picture of the papacy, and they had misjudged medieval culture by creating a myth of a “renaissance,” which really never existed, since medieval man had not lost the heritage of the ancient world. Fortunately, however, “a less partial philosophy in our days is rectifying this picture.”<sup>46</sup> The Protestant attack on Catholic Christianity made absurd Christ’s promise that He would always be with the church, and was unrealistic. The assertion that the Catholic church had degenerated from the primitive Christian church meant nothing. Naturally as the church embraced the civilised world it should be infected by more worldliness than when the Christian church consisted of a small band of apostles in the midst of pagans.<sup>47</sup>

Not the faults of Christians, but the splendour of the Church’s history should receive our attention:

She has replaced the disunity of paganism with order; she has again re-established the great individual morals, and ended the isolation of souls and spirits, which isolation the Saviour had come to destroy. She has hastened the movement of the human spirit, and has also brought about an awareness in the consciousness of intelligent beings of the fruitful and sublime idea of universality!<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 107.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 116.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 117.

The characteristic of all schisms in the Christian world is to break this “mysterious unity,” which composes “all the divine thought of Christianity and all its power.” This is why the Catholic Church has never associated with the separated communions. Unhappy would be the day for the church and for Christianity if the fact of disunity is ever recognised by legitimate authority.<sup>49</sup> Chaadaev saw the possibility of ending the divisions in the church only when the schismatic churches had decided to recognise “in a spirit of penitence and of humility” that they had separated themselves from the mother church, and had consequently disturbed the unity desired by Christ.<sup>50</sup>

This involved an acceptance of the papacy; since the papacy “comes essentially from the spirit of Christianity, it is the visible sign of unity.”<sup>51</sup> The papacy always fulfils its purpose, because it “*centralises* Christian thoughts, attracts one to another, calls to itself all those who have repudiated unity, the supreme principle of their faith, and always by the heavenly character of its calling with which it is filled, is placed majestically outside of material interests.”<sup>52</sup>

Similar themes recur in the other philosophical letters. For example in the third philosophical letter he returns to the inferiority of ancient thought in comparison with Christian. Greek art, he said, had inverted the natural order by making man divine, and Greek literature had introduced to the imagination the faults of sensuality and of lying. Men such as Plato and Pythagoras struggled against these pernicious tendencies, but even they shared the same spirit. It was only after Christianity that the advantages of the better aspects of their thought could be realised.<sup>53</sup>

At the same time that he was penning his appealing pictures of Christian unity, Chaadaev discussed moral and religious problems of a more individual nature. The standard edition of his works contains a number of short selections, which demonstrate his rather gloomy kind of moralising. In one place he remarks that it is impossible to be both prudent and happy. What is needed to be happy, he asks. “Does not one have to be satisfied with himself and with everyone else? Tell me, besides a fool, who can be like this?”<sup>54</sup>

One can be happy only if one gives up passions, turbulence and self love, and learns to live for others:

in living for others, you live for yourself: here is the only happiness that is possible, there is no other. Virtue, immeasurable love to your neighbour, that is what decorates the life of a truly sensible man.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 119.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 123-125.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

Since the principle of unity dominates all his thinking, he viewed the problem of personal morality together with that of the nature of the universe as a whole, in a neo-platonic sense. The moral idea can have no other principle behind it than the eternal principle of reality. The ideas of perfection, of beauty, harmony, virtue, love are only variants of the idea of eternal preservation, while the concepts of imperfection, formlessness, vice, disagreement and hatred are variations of the idea of annihilation. Man's reason is always somewhere between the thoughts of life and death, and it is this which governs the direction of his activity.<sup>56</sup> The eternal spirit of life which he identified with goodness and virtue, was realised in Christianity, and concerned man's life. Christian immortality, he remarked, is life without death. It is not at all what is usually said: life after death.<sup>57</sup>

While Chaadaev never lost his religious preoccupations, his thought in the 1830's was modified in regards to the Catholic Church. While he never ceased to admire much in the historical picture of the church, he never became a Catholic and he altered greatly his negative attitude toward Russia and Russian orthodoxy. Letters to friends in the thirties show the direction of his interests. In 1831 he explained to the great Russian poet, Pushkin, that in the time of disorder and peril, he looked to Europe's past, when in the age of faith Europe was at peace, united, and good works prevailed.<sup>58</sup> In the following year he told the influential German idealist philosopher of religion, Schelling, of his own interests in religious philosophy. "The study of your works has opened a new world to me," he confessed.<sup>59</sup> He welcomed news that Schelling was now lecturing on a "philosophy of revelation" for he had always believed that a religious philosophy would develop from his system. "I cannot tell you how happy I am," Chaadaev wrote, "that the most profound thinker of our times should arrive at this grand idea of the fusion of philosophy with religion. From the first moment when I commenced to philosophise, the idea was presented to me as the beacon and the end of all my intellectual labour. All the interests of my existence, all the curiosity of my mind has been absorbed by this unique idea."<sup>60</sup>

Schelling had exercised considerable influence on the new circle of slavophilic thought, then being formed in Russia, and it is interesting that it was at this time that Chaadaev began to view Russian prospects in a light which resembled in many respects that of those Russian patriots. Whether disillusioned about western Europe as the result of the 1830 revolutions, or whether because he was captivated by young slavophilic friends,<sup>61</sup> he now saw the West as a decadent society and believed the future of mankind was in the development of the Russian character. In 1835 he wrote to a friend that he believed Russia had been called to a great

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, vol two, p. 24.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. one, pp. 163-165.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 168.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> See Koyré, *op. cit.*, p. 42 and p. 94.

intellectual task. There would come the day, when Russia would give the solution to all the questions which troubled Europe.

Placed outside of the rapid movement which has carried the spirit of men there, she can consider with calmness and with perfect impartiality everything which agitates men's souls, and to her it has been given, I think, the task to pronounce one day the word on the human enigma.<sup>62</sup>

In the same year he told Schelling that “the Russian intelligence is the intelligence impersonal *par excellence*.” Because of the distance which Russia was from Europe, she could the better appreciate what was going on there. “We are the public, over there are the actors, and we are to judge the play.”<sup>63</sup> Russia, he told another correspondent that same year, was too great a country to be motivated by selfish egoism, and could afford to be generous.

Russia, if it understands its mission, should take the initiative in all generous ideas because she has not the attachments, the passions, the ideas, the interests of Europe. ...Russia is too powerful to mix in the politics of nations, her business is not worldly politics, it is the politics of mankind. ...Providence has made us too great to be egoists, it has placed us outside the interests of nationalities, and has charged us with the interests of humanity. All our ideas of life, in science, in the arts should be taken from there and returned there; there is our future, there is our progress; we possess an immense spontaneity, without intimate connections with the past of the world, without absolute rapport with the present.<sup>64</sup>

By no means had Chaadaev turned against the West, nor had he overlooked Russian vices. One of the philosophical letters uncovered by Soviet scholars reveals Chaadaev's bitter opposition to serfdom,<sup>65</sup> together with recognition that while western Christianity had alleviated this condition, the same could not be said for Russian Orthodoxy.<sup>66</sup> An 1835 letter to a friend indicates he still has great admiration for Catholicism, but it is for Catholicism as a social principle, somewhat after the manner of Saint-Simon. The principle of Catholicism, he observes, is a “principle of action, a social principle.” This is the character which is found in Catholicism in all epochs right up to modern times. Only it has understood that the kingdom of God is not only an idea, but “even more, as is right, because only it is in possession of the sacred traditions, of that doctrine of the elect which, in all times, has given meaning to the world.”<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>62</sup> Chaadaev to A. I. Turgeniev, 1 May, 1835, Gershenzon, *op. cit.*, vol. one, pp. 181-182.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 184.

<sup>64</sup> Chaadaev to A. I. Turgeniev, nd. 1835, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

<sup>65</sup> Falk, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>67</sup> Chaadaev to A. I. Turgeniev, nd. 1835, Gershenzon, *op. cit.*, vol. one, p. 189.

His continued defense of Catholicism had quite naturally caused his friends to suspect he was considering becoming a Roman Catholic. But Chaadaev made clear that he did not accept the full teaching of the church. "My religion is not precisely that of the theologians, and you will tell me perhaps that it is neither that of the people," he remarked to a friend.<sup>68</sup> His religion, he explained, is essentially one of spirit, and not of language. It is a religion of things, and not of forms. It is a religion of that which is, and not that which appears. It is a religion which was being anticipated by all ardent hearts, and which would become one day the final cult of all humanity. If such a religion did exist in fact today, he would embrace it, but in its absence, he was forced to embrace the communion of Fénelon, of Pascal, of Leibnitz and of Bacon.<sup>69</sup>

A few months after these letters, his first philosophical letter appeared. We have seen that by 1836 he had actually changed many of the opinions held when in 1829 he wrote the original manuscript, and he felt obliged to apologise for many of its expressions. He excused himself by maintaining that the letter should not be regarded as a *profession de foi*, but as "only the expression of bitter feelings, long ago exhausted." He admitted that he gave too much value to Catholicism, "but I think now that it has not always been true to its mission." Moreover he did not undervalue the worthiness of elements in Russia, even though Russia did have a deficiency of those elements.<sup>70</sup>

A more detailed exposition of his position Chaadaev gave in his *Apology of a Madman*, a work found among the Chaadaev manuscripts and attributed to the year 1837. He does not regret his stinging attacks against Russia's past, since he feels that true patriotism demands a rigid expression of the truth, but at the same time evils in Russia's past and present do not by any means signify that Russia will have an unhappy future. The movement of the divine spirit in history was not offering opportunity to Russia. "The true history of a people will commence only when it seizes the idea which has been given to it," he warned. "This is the moment which I am invoking in favour of my country... this is the task which I would have you see."<sup>71</sup>

Returning to the idea he had explained earlier to friends, that Russia as a "clean slate" could avoid the evils which had beset the western world, he explained that:

since we have come after others, it is our duty to be better than others, we should not fall into their faults, their errors, their superstitions. ...I have the intimate conviction that we are called upon to resolve most of the problems of the social

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<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> Chaadaev to Count S. G. Stroganov, 8 November, 1836, Gershenzon, *op. cit.*, vol. one, p. 195.

<sup>71</sup> *Apologie d'un fou*, Gershenzon, *op. cit.*, vol. one, p. 225.

order, to realize most of the ideas of the older societies, to pronounce on most of the grave questions which preoccupy mankind.<sup>72</sup>

“The past,” he pointed out, “is no longer in our power, but the future belongs to us.”<sup>73</sup> Since Russia had avoided the fatal pressure of historical movement, since it had avoided the abyss into which the centuries had plunged other people, the Russians had the immense advantage of obeying only the voice of enlightened reason.<sup>74</sup>

If Russia itself had such a glorious future, Chaadaev had to give the Orthodox Church a more just appreciation. He speaks of its humble and at times heroic role in the Russian past, and suggests that whatever there was in the Russian past which was fine, it was the activity of the fathers of the Russian Church.<sup>75</sup> In a letter to a friend in 1837 he turned further away from the Catholic church, picturing it as a kind of “political Christianity,” which had a part to play in forming society at the beginning of the Middle Ages, but which had outlived its age. “Now Christianity can be nothing other than the loftiest ideas of the times, which will include the ideas of all times past and future times, and consequently will act on the citizenry only intermediately, through the power of thought, not by material means.”<sup>76</sup>

Precisely what this means is by no means clear. Chaadaev never established a coherent religious or philosophical system, although as late as 1839 we find him still regretting the schism between religion and science which had occurred in the eighteenth century,<sup>77</sup> and in 1841 he took a keen interest in the rising Anglo-Catholic movement in England, although he could not agree with the Anglican opposition to the cult of the Virgin and the saints, and could not see how the Church of England established by law could be that church established by the apostles.<sup>78</sup> He took a keen and sympathetic interest in the religious thought of the slavophiles,<sup>79</sup> but no writings survive to show definitely his own position.

If Chaadaev established no philosophical or religious school, his searching criticism of Russia’s position in world history influenced the most profound thinking on the part of Russian intellectuals. Although he reflected so much of the current philosophy of western Europe, particularly that of the writers of the romantic reaction, it would be unjust to dismiss him as a mere imitator. For good or evil, such creative western thinkers as Saint-Simon and Comte also reflected the

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<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 230-231.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 232.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>76</sup> Chaadaev to A. I. Turgeniev, nd 1837, Gershenzon, *op. cit.*, vol. one, pp. 214-215.

<sup>77</sup> Chaadaev to Princess S. Meshcherskaya nd 1839, Gershenzon, *op. cit.*, vol. one, p. 237.

<sup>78</sup> Same to same December 1841, *ibid.* pp. 240-242.

<sup>79</sup> Chaadaev to Count Circourt, 15 January 1845, Gershenzon, *op. cit.*, vol. one, p. 254.

philosophy of the religious reaction. Just as the interpretation and twists which Saint-Simon and Comte gave to the de Maistre school affected the whole course of human thought, so too did Chaadaev's interpretation change basically the current of thought in Russia.

Chaadaev may be considered not only an important protagonist of the value of religious and idealistic thought, but as one of the contributors to that spirit of enquiry and dissatisfaction among Russian thinkers which would lead in the 1860's to the rise of revolutionary circles. In his opposition to serfdom, his challenge to contemporary Russian morality and in the lofty idealism which pervades all his thinking he left a rich heritage to Russian cultural and intellectual life. His skilful writings have evoked great admiration from Russian critics who recognise in Chaadaev a writer of immense learning and of deep conviction; he is a mirror of all of the best reflection and knowledge of the early nineteenth century, and at the same time a significant formative influence on the development of the Russian intelligentsia.