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## Russian Perspectives on Prayer and Silence

by Philip Boobbyer, School of History, University of Kent

First in the global environmental crisis, and now in the events surrounding the spread of Covid-19, there is an important, if obvious message--what happens in one corner of the world affects people in another. There are challenges facing the whole of humanity which we best address when we work together. Humanity is interconnected. It is easy to say this in theory. But in reality it is not always easy to open our hearts to people from other countries and cultures, let alone to our immediate neighbours. How can we become people who have room in their hearts for the whole world?

Many religious figures have talked about the spiritual unity of humanity – this notwithstanding the obvious injustices and conflicts in the world. The idea, originating in the Jewish scriptures, that people are made in God's image is an example of this. In most religious traditions, people are invited to pray about their personal needs. But they are also called to bring before God all of humanity, indeed the whole created order. This seems particularly relevant at a time when the world looks so fragile. In the middle of the 20th century, a number of Russian thinkers talked about prayer in this broader sense, as part of trying to formulate a spiritual response to a world going through revolution and war.

The philosopher S. L. Frank (1877–1950), who lived in exile after the Bolshevik revolution, was one of these. He believed that all external human activity is a fruit of what happens inside ourselves. In this context, he suggested that prayer, far from being an irrelevant solitary activity, is the 'primary productive work' on which everything else depends. Prayer feeds the forces of goodness within us – it is what we might now term a 'capacity-building' activity. It also illuminates our lives with a sense of meaning. Moreover, as we go deeper within ourselves, we establish an invisible connection with other human beings; and as we pray, forces of healing are released into their lives. Inwardly, there is space in our hearts for the whole world – he called the soul a 'peculiar kind of infinity'.

Similar perspectives can be found in the thinking of the spiritual teacher Staretz Silouan (1866–1938), a Russian Orthodox monk who spent most of his adult life on Mount Athos. Silouan taught that prayer draws the mind into the innermost depths of the heart, and in doing so brings about personal integration. In the presence of the Holy Spirit, people learn to see, embrace and love the whole of creation. Silouan went as far as to say that the activity of prayer in some mysterious way holds the world together. 'A monk is a man who prays for the whole world', he said. He also stressed that a true love for the world requires us to love our enemies.

Theologian and teacher, Pavel Evdokimov (1901–1970) was another who emphasised the influence of prayer on events, All human action is ultimately dependent on the work of intercession, he said. He also suggested that 'the more one approaches the centre [i.e. God], the nearer the paths are to one another'.

There are dangers in explaining spirituality solely in terms of how it can help us influence the world. Sceptics might suggest that prayer approached from this perspective could be motivated by an exaggerated desire to remain in control of events, and may even amount to a kind of magic. But for people like Frank, Siluan and Evdokimov, prayer is not the fruit of superstition, nor is it best understood as a way of acquiring power over the world around us. Rather there is in it an element of letting go. Faith here is understood not as a possession to be attained, but a gift to be received. Such insights can be found in many faith traditions.

In the Book of Kings, when the prophet Elijah is seeking spiritual inspiration, he finds a response not in the wind, the earthquake or the fire – symbols of what can be immediately felt or seen – but in the 'still small voice'. In alluding to this, Frank wrote that it is difficult to detect this voice in the noise and bustle of life, for it is heard as a 'whisper in the stillness'. Similarly, Evdokimov talked of how God communicates with us in an unobtrusive way – his voice exerts a pressure that is 'infinitely delicate and never irresistible'.

Where there is time in the weeks ahead, perhaps we ought to set aside space for silence. Times of interior stillness can make possible a deeper level of self-knowledge, as well as a greater appreciation of others. Love for the world can grow in this setting. Initiatives emerging out of silence may in the long-run prove more fruitful than a hurried activism. There is need for a politics informed by contemplation.

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