

On the occasion of the Margaret Broadbent exhibition

“Celebration of Living Light”, 18 May, 2019, Australia

How do we treat the phenomenon of the twentieth and now twenty first centuries, which can be noted with such concern: the universal centers of religious symbols have lost their power or have disappeared altogether? For centuries, symbols, rituals and religious dogmas of the East and the West have concentrated the psychic energy of individuals and nations, and religious traditions have been evidence of life intentions and actions. They were sources of the strength of various civilizations, like spring underwater streams feeding the soil. Our age seems to have lost touch with the meaning of life — with the core of life. We have uncovered the resources of our consciousness and did it in the best way to keep under control all the paradoxes and contradictions of the spirit. The spiritual dimension is still familiar to us, but we have lost contact with our roads to it and with the symbolic life that sustains and nourishes spirituality.

Where are we now? What happened to all the energy that no longer goes to the centers of religious forms? We can say that it flows back into the human psyche, carrying with it disastrous effects. Deprived of her intrinsic religious experiences, the human psyche takes on negative forms. For each individual this lack of appropriateness of energy can lead to neurosis or psychosis; in public life it can lead to various types of genocide, mass destruction, the creation of Gulags. It may be the cause of the emergence of those ideologies whose potential benefit is based on the fear of their followers, on their fearful submission. Fearing to be dragged into something, we build barriers from rigid rules, shield ourselves from negative psychic energy, create religious, political, and sexual principles and find ourselves trapped in immutable rules. But what happens next? Our life is high and dry. It is far from the life-giving juice of direct religious experiences. It is surrounded by the routine of daily boredom, devoid of joy and meaning. Living in such a society, we feel the pain of deadly fatigue and we are unable to find effective measures to cure it from the constant increase in crime, environmental disasters and mental illness. These adversities can be explained by the lack of a reliable relationship with the psychic reality that religion provides us through the power of its symbolic systems.

There is, however, a positive effect in this return of psychic energy to human existence. A new discipline is emerging which represents a new common path to understanding and explanation of the fact that the nature of our acceptance of God has fundamentally changed. Our individual psyche, which is part of the collective psyche, has now become an intermediary (means) with which we can perceive the Divine. We, Christians nowadays can see our mission and our goal to help the others to reconnect with the true content of religious symbols, revealing their equivalents in our own mental experience.

Is this sense, the exhibition we are presented with is one of the way to do this. It combines an intentional mixture of icon images of the Saviour, Mother of God and of the saints, side by side with the pictures of common life of the persons whose mental and spiritual experiences penetrate each other and add to each other. I find this method of representing simultaneously the heavenly world of the saints on the icons, the architecture of churches and cathedrals in the

photos, and the earthly images of the ISMAPNG Sisters of Mercy in Russia, smiling, singing, looking at something wonderful, as a true way to reconnect their religious lives in the Order by revealing their equivalents in their mental expression.

I love this exhibition, organized by Margaret Broadbent, also because she opens the method of representing things, which is very near to my heart, as to a person who once in 1990 decided to start the institute of higher education for secular people interested in religion in the midst of a very human situation when there were empty shops, lack of food, lines to buy bread in Russia. The idea was to reconnect the deep inner religiosity of Russian people with the life in Russia after dictatorship and tyranny of the communist regime, after the Gulag concentration camps and 70 years of antireligious propaganda. This institution was called St.Petersburg School of Religion and Philosophy (SRPh).

Being a scientist I was always driven by the idea to connect my scientific work with the sense of what it means to be authentically human. I sought to bring together what I can call my intellectual baptism with the spiritual baptism. I was baptized without knowing that until rather late. My parents were too afraid to tell me about it. Under the Communist regime baptism was politically dangerous. They themselves could be punished for that, and they were afraid that my life will be also spoiled.

While religion was not officially abolished during the Communist rule, it was severely restricted. Religious resources and information were scarce, books were banned, and the Bible was deemed incompatible with Marxism. Very few people – only the very ones who have nothing left to loose – attended the few churches remained open in ST.Petersburg. Only 3 theological seminaries in whole Russia left to operate under the watchful eye of the KGB ensured that what was taught was in line with the Soviet rules, standards and ‘ethics’.

Despite this stifling environment I remained inquisitive. My exposure to ancient music, icons, and other visual arts in Russian museums sent me in search of what absent and oppressed in my country and culture. This search led me to the decision to find like-minded people who also wanted to bring together their faith and professional lives, to cultivate rich inner life, and to help others to do the same. Along with this group of explorers my late husband, Alexei Chernyakov and I envisioned a “laboratory of mind and consciousness” which, over the years evolved into St.Petersburg School of Religion and Philosophy (SRPh), and I have served as the founder and the rector of this institute for twenty five years starting from 1990 till 2015.

Together with this group of high professionals I created a non-state, non-church educational institution of higher learning in humanities, where the students besides other disciplines studied the Bible, church history, Orthodox theology and the writings of the Holy Fathers, and history of church architecture and iconography. After several years of struggle with the state and the administration of the Russian Orthodox Church, which was not very favorable at first to us, we got the recognition, got accreditation and performed the ways and methods to re-introduce in Russia religious education.

Now after nearly twenty five years the state recognized the desire of the Russian Orthodox Church to be involved in such a delicate sphere as education and adopted the law permitting to teach theology at the state educational institutions.

I am glad to be part of this long and lasting process of the recognition of the necessity of religious education in my country. Our mission of the institute now, at this period of time, is passed to the Russian Orthodox Church and I am keen to see how it will be developed now on the state level.

My institution is continuing its work in the sphere of research doing programs, performing projects, organizing conferences, publications and social work on the local and international levels. It has been renamed and is now called the ' Center for Science, Religion and Philosophy Programs'.

Besides institutional history I wish to mention also a personal story which connects me with Margaret and ISMAPNG. Together with Margaret Broadbent starting from this crucial meeting in 2005, when she, Pauline Pervan, Marie Davis and Alice Vaughan, all Australians came to study icon painting at my Institute in ST. Petersburg. We became a source of inspiration for each other. Together we accomplished several important events organized in Russia and in Australia. One of the SRPh' programs which is called "Visions of Beauty" became our joint project with ISMAPNG, also because of Margaret's energy and spirit. Twenty eight sisters have already visited Russia. As you have seen the present exhibition, which we are celebrating today, is also a part of our spiritual cooperation with Margaret, though, we are belonging to different religious traditions. All this demonstrates that the psychic energy of individuals and of religious traditions still can hold the evidence of life intentions and actions. And we may thank God that the **Celebration of Living Light** is going on.

Dr. Natalia Pecherskaya, President

Center for Science, Religion and Philosophy Programs (SRPh)