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Prayer Motifs and National Consciousness in Changing Conditions of Reception: As Exemplified by the Works of Ivan Shmelev and Boris Zaitsev

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Abstract: This article presents the role of selected motifs of prayer depicted in the works of first-wave Russian emigrants in the creation of a certain type of national mythology. The starting point of the considerations is a reflection on the status of emigrant literature at the time of its creation, during the period of political changes in the Soviet bloc, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and today. From the beginning, émigré literature has served as a certain treasury of images and symbols, which are treated as necessary elements for maintaining the national identity of emigrants. The article presents selected motifs from the works of Ivan Shmelev's *The Year of the Lord* and *Pilgrimage*, and Boris Zaitsev's *Saint Sergius of Radonezh*, showing prayer as an element of ritual, as a collective request, and as an act of deep contact with God. The analysis of the selected examples shows that regardless of the literary form, narrative perspective, or the way the subject was presented, the writers showed prayer motifs in a patriotic context, while mythologizing pre-revolutionary Russia and bringing the idea of "Holy Rus" to life. In the years following the collapse of the Soviet Union, there has been an increased interest in emigrant literature, and the ideas contained therein have proven to be very important for the formation of the new national consciousness of Russians. Today, due to another political change in Russia and its political isolation, émigré literature is of renewed importance in Russian circles. The writers whose works are discussed in this study are regarded as the main Orthodox writers of the twentieth century, and the image of praying Russia is again the basis for building a new national identity. The study concludes with the observation that the value of emigrant literature should be studied in the context of the time of its creation.

Keywords: prayer; Holy Rus; Russian émigré literature; national identity

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1. Introduction

The first decades of the last century were a time of beginning for many important currents in the history of Russian thought and culture, and a time of many key events for the further functioning of the state. This was the time of such varied phenomena as decadence, symbolism, futurism, new religious philosophy, Bolshevism, revolution, civil war, and emigration. That is to say, this time also reflected on Russian identity and mentality, which, although being quite resilient to change, became the object of strong influences, and, today, viewing that process in a hundred-year perspective, we can say that it shaped the cultural, political, and social distinctiveness of modern Russia.

The fiction and philosophical works of that period are still a living source of reference and frequently cited in Russian scholarly discourse as evidence of two opposing features of Russian culture: on the one hand, individuality and continuity of its tradition and, on the other, its openness to new European influences.

Émigré literature became an invaluable source of texts of patriotic and religious significance for Russia at the dawn of the formation of a new national consciousness and national ideology after the collapse of the Soviet Union. This was a reaction to the great worldview crisis caused by the discrediting of communist theories contrasted with the

reality of the building and functioning of a socialist country. In some sense, it was a repetition of the situation of the 1920s, when the works of Russian émigrés, who left the country voluntarily or forcibly, were a source of complementary, alternative consciousness for their compatriots and a proof that not all Russian culture had succumbed to the new ideology—understood as a communist madness. This feature of émigré literature became even more pronounced at the end of the twentieth century, when the works representing it finally reached readers in their motherland. In this article, I intend to focus specifically on certain historical aspects of émigré creativity, its relevance to contemporaries, and the subsequent implications of its texts among readers. This line of research is quite rare, despite the fact that the literature of Russian émigrés itself has been studied extensively, and one can even say that today it is accepted as part of the Russian classics. The question of classics of emigrant literature deserves separate research and will be mentioned here only briefly, to the extent that is necessary for the present considerations. It is worth noting, however, that certain features of émigré literature were not only relevant at the time of its creation but also corresponded to social demand much later, after being re-read in the homeland and integrated into the common current of Russian literature.

Starting from the characteristics of émigré literature as a whole, I intend to present here, on the example of the motif of prayer, how émigré literature was directed at shaping individual and collective national consciousness. The motifs of prayer will not mean referring to a specific genre of religious works or specific texts of Orthodox literature but various ways of contact with God. I will present some selected examples of these motifs from the works of first-wave emigrant writers well known in Russia today: Ivan Shmelev and Boris Zaitsev. They are widely recognized as Orthodox authors, and I will try to show different meanings for prayer motifs. Guided by the results of research from the current of cognitive poetics and reader-response theories (Stockwell 2006, pp. 3–8; Kędra-Kardela and Kowalczyk 2021, pp. 334–36), in my analysis I will try to evaluate them in terms of their value in the formation of national consciousness at different historical times; namely, at the time of the creation of the works, at the time they reached readers and researchers in the eastern part of Europe, and at the present time at the beginning of the second decade of the 20th century, during this period of Russia's radical end to dialogue with Europe and political isolation.

2. Literature and the Process of Discovering Russian Identity in Exile

It can be said that each of the three emigration waves identified in Russian literary studies for the period from the October Revolution to the collapse of the Soviet Union had its own peculiarities. The third wave emphasized anti-totalitarian, citizenly discourse and freedom; the second operated primarily with the poetic word to express the contrast between human fate and world history; and the first was clearly oriented toward forming a certain mythology of the homeland, creating a sentimental image of Russia driven by emotions associated with forced separation from native traditions and monarchist rituals. Religious motifs illustrating the spirituality of medieval Russia and the richness of Orthodox traditions, as well as the closeness of religious worship and patriotic ideas, became extremely popular in this work.

This literature focused on the construction of a specific émigré identity, in which the real homeland is replaced by a religious–political idea. Identity is one of the most popular concepts in 20th century humanities and in contemporary reflection on society and politics (Franklin and Widdis 2004). Researchers note the rather recent appearance of this concept in scientific discourse. However, the term introduced into the field of humanities by Erik H. Erikson (Erikson 1980, p. 109) has a much longer history, but with other names. Identity in the current study is understood in a special way as self-knowledge about one's roots and cultural affiliation, "as the permanent properties characteristic of an object, person or group, making it possible to recognize their identification, comparison and distinction (Jeżowski 2013, p. 946)." Identity is related to belonging to a certain group and being able to define oneself in relation to other groups. It should be added that identity can

have a religious dimension, when it is not only about the individual's membership in a religious group but also that religiosity determines the individual's relationship to many other groups.

Researchers rightly emphasize that considerations of identity are among the problems that have manifested themselves very strongly in situations of social unrest, revolution, and war, as they become very relevant when the continuity of a group's existence is threatened. Undoubtedly, such a situation was true for some sectors of Russian society in the early 20th century, who faced revolution and civil war and felt that their existence was threatened.

It must be admitted that among the emigrants there were many representatives of the intelligentsia who, even before leaving Russia, were interested in questions of religiosity and new paths of spiritual development in Russia. And while these considerations had previously been close to modernist considerations, the experience of the first serious social movements had already brought thinkers and writers increasingly closer to Orthodox thought and to Orthodox tradition. After all, even before emigration (in 1917), a volume entitled *Out of the depth* (Askoldov and Berdyaev 1990) by Sergei Askoldov, Nikolai Berdyaev, Sergei Bulgakov, and Petr Struve, among others, was prepared. Its authors believed in the spiritual dimension of the Bolshevik upheaval and emphasized the idea of the purifying role of suffering and the religious rebirth of Russia.

Religious interpretations of the ultimate consequences of the October coup were even more popular in the time of emigration, to recall, for example, those formulated in publications of the Eurasianism genre or the individual reflections of Georgy Fedotov, who in an article entitled "Why are we here" (Fedotov 1935) stressed that emigration must not be treated by Russians as a sad accident but as an opportunity to fight for the truth.

This was also the general attitude of literature written in exile. It aimed to maintain a strong bond with the country of birth and develop a distinct Russian national consciousness. Thus, as in the case of any literature in exile, Russian literature produces an idealized image of the homeland, which becomes the basis for collective memory and which is created partly consciously as a literary depository, a narrative treasury of the most important values, among which a very important place is assigned to religion, treated as a deep faith (i.e., spirituality), as a set of beliefs guiding daily life (doctrine), and as an external cult and a community. Three further examples mentioned on the motif of prayer in literature correspond to these first three ways of manifesting religion, assuming that they are all communal activities.

3. Russian Prayer—Prayer as an Element of Ritual

The largest number of images that refer to prayer conceived in a wide variety of ways can be found in Ivan Shmelev's novels *Pilgrimage* (1931) and *The Year of the Lord* (1934). These works, distinguished by a specific child protagonist and being a kind of children's memoir replete with longing for the abandoned homeland, brought the author fame in exile. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Shmelev began to be regarded as the leading Russian Orthodox writer of the 20th century. In fact, the two novels mentioned above are filled with almost reporter-like descriptions of folk religious rituals and services, showing the richness of Orthodox traditions. The events take place in the merchant district of Moscow and in the space between Moscow and The Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius during a pilgrimage to the shrine of St. Sergius of Radonezh. The way the events are presented makes the duology an example of children's literature (Andruszko and Horczak 2019, p. 131), while at the same time the seriousness of the initial situation and the events outside the plot, which are easily recognizable by an adult audience in exile, also make them a set of novels for adults expressively depicting nostalgia, grief, and longing for lost Russia.

When depicting religious rituals of the Orthodox Church, Shmelev always meticulously notes the decor of the temple, the order of the priest's actions, and cites entire verses of Orthodox chants and texts of prayers. The precision of the message is emphasized by the graphic notation of the mentioned passages, in which the melody of the chants is included:

Душе мо-я. . .. ду-ше-е мо-я-аа,

Возстани, что спи-иши,

Ко-нец при-бли-жа. . .а-ется. . ..[1]

In *The Year of the Lord*, the entire order of life not only of the hero's immediate family and the merchant district of Moscow but also of the rest of Russia is dictated by the liturgical year, the Orthodox holidays, and the folk and Orthodox traditions associated with them. According to the concept of Orthodoxy as an agrarian religion, Church holidays are closely linked to the calendar of household and farm work. Of course, works showing the connection between the cycle of agricultural life and the liturgical cycle also exist in other works and in other literature, but what distinguishes the way this situation is presented in Shmelev's work is the primacy of religious optics (Lyubomudrov 2003, p. 228). However, it should be emphasized that this does not mean a deep experience of faith but merely a perspective of view. Among the assessments of Shmelev's work, there are many opinions that the rituals he describes are superficial in nature and that the religious worship portrayed in this way is not a manifestation of faith but of a traditional way of life, defined by Fedor Stepun as "bytovoye ispovednichestvo" (religion of everyday life) (Stepun 1968, p. 128). For readers, this was meant to be a critical assessment, lowering the value of the work in terms of its religious message. However, the prayers depicted, even if they are part of a ritual devoid of deep spiritual content, are the most essential element of the world depicted and reflect the basis of the characters' worldview, the basis for the judgments of reality they express, and the basic criterion for their choices of behavior. The superficial approach is also justified, of course, by the child in the position of narrator and protagonist. The descriptions of prayers themselves, according to the conventions of childish perception, are indeed characterized by superficiality and lack of references to deep symbolism (Sidor 2009, pp. 39, 45). Children's narration of Rus religiosity is often directed at arousing laughter in the viewer, caused by the difference between the religious meaning of events, which is well known to adult characters or adult readers, and how these events are interpreted by the child protagonist. Such a situation occurs, for example, when the adults discuss the picture of a prostitute lying and praying at the entrance to the temple. The writer introduces a certain comic effect when the emotions of the child protagonist are contrasted with the way the adults camouflage information about the nature of the woman's sins (Shmelev 1998, p. 504).

Nevertheless, this effect does not blur the essence of the events depicted in the work, as Shmelev's Russia is full of images and signs that, even when not fully understood at a certain point in life, reveal their meaning later. In this way, a child narrator can convey an even greater range of meanings than an adult narrator would. The choice of a child protagonist, as already stated, opens the viewer to another realm of meanings: those hidden beyond the plot. A child's naive memories can be taken as an invitation to individual recollection and reflection, and Ivan Ilyin's critical sketches on Shmelev's books, or Balmont's poems inspired by them, show that this is how this children's duology was read in exile[2] (Zakharova 2015, p. 94). The Russia left behind by the emigrants even became the embodiment of "Holy Rus" (Sidor 2015b, pp. 38, 44). The concept that was the basis of Russian imperialism, as seen in the light of Shmelev's duology, is the reality of pre-revolutionary life. Thus, through a nostalgia for the lost homeland that is quite natural for emigrants, the historical, real, pre-revolutionary Russia is mythologized and even sacralized. What is more, by evoking the theory that provided the argumentation for the idea of the All-Russia Empire, the idea of its power was also revived and was presented to readers in an unambiguously positive way.

4. Collective Petitions and the Daily Life of the People

The current of collective prayers expressing requests to God through the mediation of saints or the Virgin Mary appears in many emigrant works (Sidor 2009, pp. 82–83, 100). The communal nature of such prayers not only means that they are addressed by many people at the same time but also that they concern matters of importance to the community. Thus, Orthodoxy permeates every moment of the life of the Russian people of the late 20th century not only as a set of rituals, as mentioned earlier, but also as a way of understanding everyday life, building social and religious bonds, and helping to understand the world. Such cases are encountered, for example, in *The Year of the Lord*, where prayers are even cosmic, as in the description of the procession with icons of the Virgin Mary and St. Nicholas, during which the people sing common prayers:

> . . .Пресвятая Богоро-дице. . .спаси на-ас. . ..
>
> [. . .] и вот уже Она восходит по ступеням, и лик Ее обращен к народу, и вся Она блистает; розово озаренная ранним весенним солнцем.
>
> . . .Спа-си от бед. . . рабы твоя, Богородице. . ..[3]

In Shmelev's narrative, the descriptions are dominated by an external perspective, which is due to the peculiarities of the child's perception, whose experience is based on complicity and the literal treatment of spiritual reality. However, this perspective paradoxically perfectly expresses the richness and depth of the traditions presented. For the emigrants, these descriptions have become a nostalgic memory of religious practices performed in the homeland and the deep faith of the Russian people. In this way, the children's recollections of the externals of worship and documenting the process of integration into the practice of adult faith are meant to evoke personal memories of the readers and appeal to their sense of identity.

It can be said that the way the narrative is conducted builds a special vision of Orthodox Russia, where every smallest element of life is subordinated to faith and lived in the spirit of faith. The book, written in simple language in the narrative and presenting uncomplicated images, creates a universal image of Russia that is recognizable to every Russian. This image is, of course, highly idealized and mythologized, but it corresponds to the social demand of emigrants, sublimating their memories and longings.

In fact, in order to create a sense of nostalgic togetherness and evoke associative images of collective prayers, Shmelev sometimes does not present the texts of the prayers at all or even focus on the element of prayerful concentration. There is an interesting example of the celebration of the Feast of the Protection of the Mother of God, known as Pokrov, described in *The Year of the Lord*. The entire long narrative–dialogue passus expresses, in essence, a cosmic image of the Mother of God, who cares for people. This is an expansion of the iconographic image, the Mother of God who wraps the Earth with her mantle, taking care of the welfare of all creatures and their successful survival of winter. This chapter is like an explication of this imagery and the characters' belief that all are constantly under the tender care of the Mother of God. In turn, the only prayers that appear in this passage are uttered quietly by Gorkin in the presence of servants who are preparing pickles. The entire description of the holiday, however, is filled with a sense of communal prayerful concentration, in which the national consciousness and the conviction that such is the spiritual, religious, prayerful essence of real Russia is strongly emphasized[4].

Thus, one can already see that whether the descriptions of Orthodox traditions are limited to the external transmission of ritual only or take into account the deeper, doctrinal meaning of the rites, they can be read in the same key. They create a specific vision of Russia as a country in which prayer resounds at all times. Russia, as imagined by the expatriates, becomes a country where communal prayer is a regular part of life. As one can easily guess, the bond with such a country motivates Russians, not simply to pray but to pray specifically for their homeland. Russia is thus an environment of prayer and an object of prayer, and its success becomes a constant concern of believers. Religious identification thus implies acceptance of a particular idea of Russia, in which the freedom to pray is

almost the most important thing. This vision does not take into account many aspects of the existence of the real state, but these aspects are not seen as relevant from the perspective of emigrants who see in the lost homeland an almost mythical paradise.

5. The Depth of Orthodoxy and Russian National Mythology

Prayer motifs are of a slightly different nature in hagiographical texts, created quite often by writers of the Russian emigration. Among the saints readily mentioned in the emigration, for example, is Sergius of Radonezh, the founder and patron saint of the famous Lavra, which was, and still is, regarded as the heart of Russian Orthodoxy. Sergius is also exceptionally revered as the figure through whose intercession a very important Russian military victory took place, namely the Battle of Kulikovo. He appears in at least a few works in exile, but perhaps most prominently his character is depicted in Boris Zaitsev's short story *Saint Sergius of Radonezh* (1924). Saint Sergius is the same saint whose shrine was the destination of the pilgrimage depicted in *The Year of the Lord*. Here, however, the significance of the prayer plot is determined not by the characteristics of the narrator but of the protagonist. Indeed, Saint Sergius is meant to be a model of a man devoted to prayer. Zaitsev focuses on the life of St. Sergius showing the close connection of the type of holiness represented by Sergius with Russian religiosity in general. The Saint of Radonezh thus becomes a symbol of Russian religiosity. It is worth quoting here the author's commentary, included as an authorial introduction to his new biography of St. Sergius:

> Как святой, Сергий одинаково велик для всякого. Подвиг его всечеловечен. Но для русского в нем есть как раз и нас волнующее: глубокое созвучие народу, великая типичность—сочетание в одном рассеянных черт русских[5].

Zaitsev clearly emphasizes the relevance of the figure of the saint for Russians of the time because of the specific feeling that Sergius had for Russia. Zaitsev calls this consonance, and in this term he evokes the impression of a sonic harmony that is associated with a prayer spoken aloud by several people. While generally focusing on the saint's spiritual life, Zaitsev stresses that Russia has always played a major role in Sergius's activity. From the way the character is portrayed in the work, it is clear that Sergius, whom Zaitsev refers to with the word "молитвенник", i.e., a man who pursues his vocation in constant prayer, is very aware of the importance of country and statehood. The basis for this claim is, of course, the fact that Saint Sergius gave his blessing to Dmitry Donskoy before the battle with the Tatars. Zaitsev emphasizes that Sergius not only met with Dmitry but also, during the entire battle, he prayed together with his confreres and prophesied, and, when the battle was over, he said, identifying himself with the Russian troops, "We have won" (Zaytsev 2000, p. 60).

Taking into account the aforementioned fact that Sergius is depicted by Zaitsev as a "typical Russian saint", it can be said that he is also a model from which the characteristics of an ideal Russian Christian can be determined. Thus, prayer for the homeland, carried out in community with other believers, can be considered a manifestation of Russian holiness.

It is worth noting that the period in which Saint Sergius lived was an important time for Russian history for many reasons. First of all, because at that time the territories of the Russian principalities were under Tartar captivity, so the Christian religion was in a subordinate position to another faith. Moreover, it was a time of slow formation of a new state, which can be considered the beginnings of Tsarist Russia.

Reflecting the general trend in the development of Russian religious culture, as well as the tradition-based and religiously correlated policy direction of Tsarist Russia, Zaitsev links Sergius's action aimed at saving the Orthodox faith with issues of national identity. In doing so, he does not mention more contemporary and controversial issues, and does not refer to the idea popular among the people in Russian history that the Tsar had power equal to God (Sidor 2015a, pp. 65–66), but instead touches on those elements of the old, pre-revolutionary state idea that are deeply rooted in the people's practice of piety. The Trinity Lavra of St. Sergius, according to Pavel Florensky, who wrote about it in 1918, is also

"the realization and revelation of the Russian idea", which he describes as Aristotelian entelechy.

Prayer through the mediation of St. Sergius thus means invoking the question of national belonging at all times. The writer suggests that it is practically impossible to address Saint Sergius to the exclusion of the question of homeland.

This interpretation of the meaning of prayer addressed through the mediation of St. Sergius is confirmed by the conclusion of Zaitsev's piece, where the writer states:

> Он, разумеется, заступник наш. Через пятьсот лет, всматриваясь в его образ, чувствуешь: да, велика Россия. Да, святая сила ей дана. Да, рядом с силой, истиной мы можем жить.[6]

6. Religiosity, Identity, and Mission

Although both authors took up some religious themes in their early works, before the revolution, they represented a rather non-religious worldview. It was not until influenced by revolutionary events that they experienced a conversion to Orthodoxy, and their works featured motifs, images, or themes that depicted religion in a positive light. Influenced by tragic life events, Ivan Shmelev became closer to Orthodoxy even before he left the country, and Boris Zaitsev saw the importance of religion in human life, as he himself admitted, precisely thanks to emigration (Sidor 2009, p. 55).

All in all, the view was often expressed in exile that the Orthodox faith had always been the basis of all Russian literature. Ivan Shmelev's statement seems significant:

> Русская литература—а с нею Гоголевская Шинель, вышла из духовной сущности русского народа [...]. Русская культура—„запечатленная" печатью тысячелетий: крещением в православие.[7]

Religiosity is thus, according to this view, inscribed in Russian literature and culture, and even constitutes its very core. Undoubtedly, verbalized in this quote is the most natural and well-proven statement that the origins of Russian writing are connected to the adoption of Christianity. But the emphasis with which Shmelev expressed this conviction, characteristic, moreover, of this writer's style, shows that he treats Orthodoxy not only as historic but also above all as mystical and emotional. The modification of the saying attributed to Dostoevsky implies a strict, traditionalist treatment of Orthodoxy and is a rejection of an involved view of Russian culture. For Shmelev, who was a proponent of nationalist ideology in his early works, this is a radical change of opinion. But, indeed, it is a statement that rejects all options but the religious one, nullifies the artistic merits of the Narodniks and Occidentalists, and emphasizes only the Orthodox perspective in the study of Russian culture.

Such a direction of analyzing literature was practiced in exile by many very subtle literary critics, professional and amateur. Among the latter, we can mention very well-known philosophers who published essays in the émigré press on the works they had read. Such reflections in a religious key can quite often be found, for example, in the texts of Sergei A. Levitsky, Ivan Ilyin, Semen Frank, Konstantin Mochulski, or Fedor Stepun. Representative of these works is Ivan Ilyin's statement that that art in Russia was born as an act of prayer, and the most important thing in art is "its spiritual object", which is the result of the writer's unique sensitivity to the affairs of the world, to people, and above all to God (Il'in 1959, p. 19).

Ilyin himself wrote a number of works combining the scope of philosophy, religion, and literary studies, among which, particularly important for our consideration, is his collection of sketches *On Darkness and Enlightenment* (1945), which presents the works of Ivan Bunin, Alexei Remizov, and Ivan Shmelev. In this work he states:

> То, к чему русские привыкают в России, как к своему воздуху [...]—становится здесь живым и осязательным потоком образов, зарисованных сразу эпически и лирически. Это Россия. Это сама Россия. Это вековечный ритм ее молитвы и труда[8].

This analysis of Shmelev's works leads Ilyin to personify Russia, which here means territory, spirituality, everyday life, and the people of the country. According to this approach, prayer is a characteristic of the homeland, and this means that the motifs of prayer portrayed by the emigrants are not considered incidental or peripheral but form the essence of the spiritual climate. Thus, critics highly valued works that portrayed religious practices as crucial to building identity and national pride. Additionally, such work was partly due to the task that the émigrés set for themselves not only with regard to their readers but also with regard to their homeland. Hence, the notion of the mission of Russian emigration emerged in the reflections of emigrants, which over time became one of the sensitive issues in the diaspora community. Consideration of this issue turned into a lively discussion that involved almost the entire émigré community and resulted in many public speeches. Participants in these polemics invoked a variety of arguments, often in a solemn tone, recalling the connection between love of the homeland and love of God and arguing that preserving the memory of Russia is the duty of every Orthodox Russian. For example, the guests of a special evening dedicated to the mission of Russian emigration on 16 February 1924, held in Paris, spoke in this spirit. Among the speakers at that time were I. Bunin, Dmitri Merzhkovsky, Anton Kartashev, I. Shmelev, and Nikolai Kulman, who advocated the mystical significance of Russian emigration. Perhaps of the greatest resonance was the speech of I. Bunin, in which the writer compared the fate of Russia to events related to the death of Christ, often referring to biblical symbolism and metaphors.

Bunin also stressed that, for himself, a sense of national identity is closely linked to faith, and he emphatically stated that under no circumstances can he renounce what he believes in (Bunin 1982, p. 215). Although these words were received very skeptically by some cultural figures, including, for example, the editor of the newspaper *Poslednie Novosti*, Pavel Milyukov, the new Russian messianism still had a great many adherents, who on various occasions were reminded of the unique vocation incumbent on Russian emigrants.

It is in this context that prayer is treated here not only as personal contact with God but also as a sign and method of manifesting a collective identity. It also becomes a feature of Russia itself, the spiritual climate of a mythologized country that enables its people to have constant contact with God in rituals and festivals and through its representatives among the saints. It is also a convenient transmitter of state and even political ideas.

7. The Praying Emigrant Russia in the Modern Era

The study of this religiously oriented literature became a completely new and interesting direction of Slavic literary studies in Russia and the countries of the former Soviet bloc after the collapse of the Soviet Union. At that time, researchers of Russian literature were in a crisis situation, as the analysis of Soviet literature, until then supported by the state, suddenly became unwelcome and even compromised after the change in the political situation of the satellite countries of the former Soviet Union. The attractiveness of researching émigré literature was due, on the one hand, to the fact that it formed a whole corpus of texts completely unexplored and unknown in official literary discourse until then, and, on the other hand, to the fact that it represented the kind of values that had previously been ignored by the communists and which, in the years of transition, were regaining their position in the new post-socialist world. The works of émigrés with expressly religious themes, alien to communist ideology, thematizing the spiritual search, met social demand and became an excellent object of analysis.

Today, however, after some 30 years of studying this literature, many of its works are still unexplored, with their expressive messages no longer drawing researchers outside Russia. The research momentum has thus clearly diminished. At the same time, in Russia itself, it seems that this very message is once again gaining importance, due to the political situation and the tightening of relations between state ideology and Orthodox teaching. Images of Russia's prayers are therefore very important in the construction of the current Russian identity.

Ivan Shmelev has thus been recognized as an Orthodox writer, not least because of the novel *The Year of the Lord*, and, from time to time, proposals to include the reading of his works in the school curriculum resurface. These proposals, of course, do not take into account a deeper study of Shmelev's work, the writer's process in arriving at the Orthodox theme, or his specific personality, which are recognized by some scholars (Lyubomudrov 2010, p. 26). In addition to religious reflections, the writer's life was also filled with other fascinations, including an affection for Nazi soldiers, which he expressed in letters to his close friend Olga Bredius-Subbotina. Relevant passages selected from Shmelev's works have been recognized as shaping today's Russian Orthodox identity, while locating the writer among the classics. In 2023, in connection with the "year of Shmelev", a number of popularization and scientific initiatives were carried out to introduce today's Russians to the works of the author of *The Year of the Lord* (Fedchenkova 2007, pp. 96–102; Ordynskaya 2023). Specifically, the religious–national theme, which Ilyin called "the prayer of Russia", was emphasized. A rather interesting sociological tendency is emerging to make modern Russians realize that the metaphor of "Holy Rus", always existing as a theoretical idea, and an idea with a clear political tinge, refers to the actual historical pre-revolutionary Russia and should be resurrected. It is also not insignificant that Ivan Ilyin himself has become an oft-cited philosopher of the current national consciousness, for which the name Ruscism is sometimes used (Snyder 2022).

The works of Boris Zaitsev, who indeed described himself as primarily Orthodox, can also be considered an example of work that is important for identity building and sensitive to contemporary readings. Zaitsev's prose was permanently tied to a political message, even though after his conversion the writer was much closer to a spiritual–cultural understanding of Russia than a spiritual–political one. This is because the author of *Saint Sergius of Radonezh* recognized the spiritual potential of beauty and saw the possibility of contact with God through the mediation of different cultures. Undoubtedly, Russian culture and the Russian version of spirituality were personally closest to him, but he believed that they were not the only environment in which a Russian could develop spiritually. These thoughts resonate emphatically in such works as *The Tree of Life* (1953), *The Pilgrim* (1926), and *The Vendée Epilogue* (1951), where the writer accentuates the theme of the fate of the emigrant Christian who agrees to distance himself from his earthly homeland and constantly strives for eternal happiness in the eternal homeland.

8. Conclusions

In Russian émigré circles, under the influence of the practice of reading works of émigré writers depicting various aspects of the life of pre-revolutionary Russia in a spirit of nostalgia for the lost homeland, the idea of a perfect, religious Russia was formed, for which here we have used the metaphor of "the prayer of Russia" by I. Ilyin. First of all, the impetus for the creation of this idea was the homesickness of emigrants and their conviction that they should preserve the essence of the lost homeland for future generations. This essence, for them, was a religiosity that caused pre-revolutionary Russia to be identified with "Holy Rus". The mythical "Holy Rus", guaranteeing people uninterrupted contact with God, where prayers were sounded at all times, was thus reborn into extremely diverse material, in which literary motifs of prayer are sometimes not presented literally at all and are, in fact, only a starting point for reader interpretation.

In this way, literary images of Russia's prayers have proven to be sensitive to political changes and are now less and less explored in Slavic literary studies of countries from the former socialist bloc, which today must redefine their policies toward Russia after 2022. Undisputedly, emigrant works were not closed to other cultures and to readers representing other cultures. They also deserve to be studied because of their artistic value and unique language. However, Orthodoxy is inextricably linked to nationalism in the works in question and collective prayer is incorporated into the specific image of Russia, a link not only between the faithful and God but also a medium for conveying the idea of

nationalism, and should be understood in light of the circumstances in which the works in question appeared as emigrant works.

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Notes

1 My soul, my soul,
Rise up that you sleep,
The end is coming. . .. (Shmelev 1998, p. 28).

2 Ilyin wrote directly that this was the essence of Russia (Il'in 1959, p. 186).

3 . . .Most Holy Mother of God. . .. save us. . ..
[. . .] and already She is ascending the steps, and Her countenance is turned toward the people, and all of Her is radiant; pinkly illuminated by the early spring sun.
. . .Save Thy servants. . . Thy servants, Holy Mother. . . (Shmelev 1998, p. 77).

4 [. . .] и слышу и вижу быль, такую покойную, родную, омоленную душою русской, хранимую святым Покровом. [. . .] and I hear and see the story, so restful, native, prayed by the Russian soul, kept by the holy Pokrov (Shmelev 1998, p. 180).

5 As a saint, Sergius is equally great for everyone. His feat is universal. But for the Russian, there is something in him that excites us: a deep consonance with the people, a great typicality-a combination in one of the scattered features of the Russians (Zaytsev 2000, p. 24).

6 He is, of course, our intercessor. Five hundred years later, looking at his image, you feel: yes, Russia is great. Yes, it has been given holy power. Yes, next to the power, the truth, we can live (Zaytsev 2000, p. 69).

7 Russian literature- and with it Gogol's Overcoat, came out of the spiritual essence of the Russian people [. . .]. Russian culture–"sealed" by the seal of millennia: baptism into Orthodoxy (Shmelev 1999, p. 543).

8 What Russians get used to in Russia as their air [. . .]—becomes here a living and palpable stream of images, sketched at once epically and lyrically. This is Russia. This is Russia itself. This is the age-old rhythm of her prayer and labor (Il'in 1959, p. 174).

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