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Solzhenitsyn Prophet of Freedom

By William G. Johnsson

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn is more than a voice of protest exiled from his homeland. He is a prophet of freedom in our day. While his writings are directed with special force toward his native Russia, like a true prophet he speaks to all men in all lands. Those of us in the West who value individual liberty do well to listen to what he says.

Among Solzhenitsyn's works that have appeared in English, four are fictionalized portrayals of his own bitter experience of eight years in Stalin's labor camps and three years of subsequent exile. They are his first novel, *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, published in 1962 upon the approval of Khrushchev himself; *The First Circle*; *Cancer Ward*; and his play *The Love Girl and the Innocent*.¹ His latest work, *The Gulag Archipelago*,² is a massive, documented account of the network of labor camps set up by Lenin and Stalin. The release of this book has aroused unusual attention around the world.

All these writings burn with an intensity of feeling and a passion for freedom born of personal sufferings. They reflect Solzhenitsyn's own relentless quest to solve the riddle of Russian society. In *The First Circle* that quest is ascribed to the leading character, Gleb Nerzhin (like Solzhenitsyn, a mathematician who is sent to a prison camp), as follows:

Throughout his youth Gleb Nerzhin had heard the furious clangor of the silent tocsin, and he had vowed that he would get at the truth and make sense of all this. Strolling in the Moscow streets at night, when it would have been more normal to have been thinking about girls, Gleb dreamed of the day when it would all be clear to him and when perhaps he might see what it was like behind those high walls where all the victims, to a man, had slandered themselves before going to their death. Did the answer to the riddle lie behind those walls? At that time he knew neither the name of the main prison nor that our wishes always come true provided they are strong enough.

Years later his wish was granted, although it was neither easy nor pleasant. He had been arrested and brought to that very prison, where he had met a few survivors of the great purges; they were not surprised at how much he had pieced together but were able to add a hundred times more.

His wish had been granted, but it had meant the sacrifice of his career, his freedom, his family life. . . . Once the mind is possessed by a single great passion, everything else is ruthlessly excluded—there is no room for it.³

Address to Every Man

Solzhenitsyn's concerns outstrip the bounds of his

own country, however. Some probably will seize upon his works, especially *Gulag*, as material for attacking the U.S.S.R., but the author's purpose is broader than this. In fact, Solzhenitsyn ultimately addresses *every* man in his writings:

So let the reader who expects this book to be a political exposé slam its covers shut right now.

If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?

During the life of any heart this line keeps changing place; sometimes it is squeezed one way by exuberant evil and sometimes it shifts to allow enough space for good to flourish. One and the same human being is, at various ages, under various circumstances, a totally different human being. At times he is close to being a devil, at times to sainthood. But his name doesn't change, and to that name we ascribe the whole lot, good and evil.⁴

Thus we may discern a philosophy of freedom in Solzhenitsyn's writings. It is nowhere set out in systematic fashion, but it is nonetheless the underlying presupposition of the total effort. It is a philosophy of freedom with at least four pillars: the value of freedom, the nature of freedom, the corrosive effects of suspicion, and the moral basis of freedom. The first two planks are primarily individual in their slant; the last two are concerned with societal freedom. Let us look at each in turn.

The Value of Freedom

The *value* of human freedom is self-evident throughout Solzhenitsyn's works. Liberty is the birth-right of every man, but it is only appreciated in its full richness when it is taken away.

It is perhaps *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* that most forcibly scores the point. The book is very short, but its crisp, detailed chronicle of a single day in a prison camp in northern Kazakhstan is shattering in its impact. The prisoners do not live, they exist—and even that is a struggle. In a society where even toilet timings are regimented, the most elemental expressions of human freedom are seen in new perspective.

One of Solzhenitsyn's characters particularly illustrates the fundamental worth of human liberty. In *Cancer Ward* Solzhenitsyn speaks through the



For one day he had been a free man, and yet in a town of free men he was alone.

ungainly, scar-faced Kostoglotov. After years in prison camp and subsequent exile, he has developed a malignant tumor. He is a pathetic and yet noble figure. The final chapters of the book represent one of the most moving pieces of writing in modern literature. They describe Kostoglotov's first day of freedom upon his release from the hospital. He has won a double reprieve—first from the camps, then from cancer. Like a man in dream he wanders through the streets, gazing at sights he has not seen in many years. Every scene, every common activity, is etched upon his mind in brilliant colors. He buys food from a wayside vendor and relishes its taste. He comes upon his crowning discovery—an apricot tree newly burst out in blossom. He goes to a department store, stares in amazement at the crowds jostling for bargains, and stands bewildered as he sees himself in a full-length mirror. The hours rush on. At last his day of freedom is gone, and he boards the train for his return to the virgin lands. For one day he had been a free man, and yet in a town of free men he was alone. The long years of confinement had branded his soul: while he experienced every moment of freedom with glaring intensity, he was unable to share it with those of his fellows who had not known the loss of freedom.

In *Gulag*, Solzhenitsyn himself speaks directly about the life lived in the consciousness of freedom:

What about the main thing in life, all its riddles? If you want, I'll spell it out for you right now. Do not pursue what is illusory—property and position: all that is gained at the expense of your nerves decade after decade, and is confiscated in one fell night. Live with a steady superiority over life—don't be afraid of misfortune, and do not yearn after happiness; it is, after all, all the same: the bitter doesn't last forever, and the sweet never fills the cup to overflowing. It is enough if you don't freeze in the cold and if thirst and hunger don't claw at your insides. If your back isn't broken, if your feet can walk, if both arms can bend, if both eyes see, and if both ears hear, then whom should you envy? And why? Our envy of others devours us most of all. Rub your eyes and purify your heart—and prize above all else in the world those who love you and who wish you well. Do not hurt them or scold them, and never part from any of them in anger; after all, you simply do not know: it might be your last act before your arrest, and that will be how you are imprinted in their memory!⁵

Solzhenitsyn is telling us that freedom, which seems so cheap when we have it that we do not even notice it, is a precious possession. Only when it is taken from us will we see its true worth.

The Roots of Freedom

Yet Solzhenitsyn's philosophy of freedom is even more penetrating than this. While it teaches us the danger of taking for granted little things like the blue sky and fresh air or a letter from a loved one, and while he obviously stands by the proposition that these things *belong* to us, so that those who would take them away from us are evil, he shows that freedom in its essence is a deeper matter. True freedom has its roots in the human spirit—in the invincible will of man. He who is free in his own soul cannot be corrupted and broken, even by the labor camps, exile, or prison. Indeed, it may be that only in the loss of "external" freedom will a person be led to that reflection that brings to basic, inner liberty.

This was Solzhenitsyn's own route to freedom. His arrest on the east Prussian front in 1945 was the turning point of his life. After the initial shock of the collapse of his little world, he came to look upon prison as a blessing:

And in the end I would become wiser here. I would come to understand many things here, Heaven! I would correct my mistakes yet, O Heaven, not for *them* but for you, Heaven! I had come to understand those mistakes here, and I would correct them!⁶

So at last he could even write of his experience in jail as "gulping down the elixir of life and enjoying myself!"⁷

Solzhenitsyn is remarkably sympathetic in his treatment of characters. His years of suffering do not seem to have left him with a grudge against the rulers of Russian society. He is able to put himself into the life and reasoning of the Party official or camp guard, to show how each figure, whether high or low, is simply acting according to the dictates of the society. (Against only one person, it seems, does Solzhenitsyn harbor feelings of hatred—Joseph Stalin.) Yet, amid all these characters, who simply do their duty as the Party or the system dictates, are those few who are different. They are the ones who put conscience above comfort, who kick against the system at the expense of personal advancement, release from prison camp, or even life itself. They are the ones who have entered "the heavenly kingdom of the liberated spirit,"⁸ who can say: "From today on, my body is useless and alien to me. Only my spirit and my conscience remain precious

“When Tolstoy wished to be in prison, his reasoning was that of a truly perceptive person in a healthy state of mind.”

and important to me.”⁹

An outstanding example is Gleb Nerzhin, of *The First Circle*. It is Nerzhin's prison experience that has led to his finding himself. Cut off from wife, home, and the world of men, his life, as it were, narrowing down to the small circle of what is basic and elemental in human living, he has developed a clear perception of fundamental values. He says:

After my five years on this treadmill I've reached that higher state where bad begins to appear as good. And it's my own view, arrived at by myself, that people don't know what they are striving for. They exhaust themselves in the senseless pursuit of material things and die without realizing their spiritual wealth. When Tolstoy wished to be in prison, his reasoning was that of a truly perceptive person in a healthy state of mind.¹⁰

When he is offered the chance of working on a new project that will bring him early release from the prison, against all reason he refuses because of conscience:

What was the point of living out the whole of your life? Did one live just for the sake of living, just for the sake of one's bodily comfort? Comfort, indeed! What was the point of living if comfort was all that mattered?

His reason bade him say, "Yes, I'll do as you wish," but his heart said: "Get thee behind me, Satan."¹¹

Cancer Ward's Kostoglotov likewise is unbowed by his years of prison exile. The more he is pushed around, the more free his mind becomes. Since he has been cut off from society, his mind is liberated to criticize that society. No matter what the authorities may do to him, he becomes more and more independent—he cannot be broken. *The Love Girl and the Innocent* refers to Rodion Nemov, recently an officer on the front line and now production chief in a prison camp. Because he will not stoop to the debased mores of the prison camp society, he loses his position of authority and the woman he loves, and ends up as a worker in the prison foundry—where he is seriously injured. Likewise, Granya Zybina refuses to conform in the moral wasteland. To the offer of an easy job she replies:

What sort of a person cheats a drudge out of his bread ration even by a gramme? I made my decision—I am not going to live like other people do in the camps.¹²

Before long she is transferred to a worse camp.

If freedom in its essential nature is individual and internal, in its societal manifestations it faces a mighty antagonist—suspicion. The atmosphere of suspicion corrodes and corrupts human society at all levels.

Cancer of the Spirit

The title *Cancer Ward* is double-edged. Before very long the reader is aware of another, more malignant, type of tumor—a cancer of the spirit.

In Solzhenitsyn's view, the moral cancer has its roots in suspicion. He is unsparing in his opposition to the principle of spying on one's fellow citizens, no matter whether it is done by the agents of the state or stool pigeons in a prison camp. He is outraged at the possibility of one's being brought to trial merely on the grounds of suspicion of intent.

These ideas come to gripping expression in his vivid personal description of Joseph Stalin and his methods of administration found in four consecutive chapters of *The First Circle*. Shut away from the world of men and its possible assassins, Stalin lived and worked in a virtual fortress. He trusted no one. Men were to be used for his purposes and then thrust aside. Whoever appeared to be rising too fast was to be cut off without mercy. When Stalin became suspicious, he knew only one solution—extinction:

However, even though he could read Abakumov like a book, he did not trust the man. Distrust of people was the dominating characteristic of Joseph Djughashvili; it was his only philosophy of life. He had not trusted his own mother; neither had he trusted God, before whom as a young man he had bowed down in His temple. He had not trusted his fellow Party members, especially those with the gift of eloquence. He had not trusted his comrades in exile. He did not trust the peasants to sow their grain and harvest the wheat unless he forced them to do it and watched over them. He did not trust the workers to work unless he laid down their production targets. He did not trust the intellectuals to help the cause rather than to harm it. He did not trust the soldiers and the generals to fight without penal battalions and field security squads. He had never trusted his relatives, his wives or his mistresses. He had not even trusted his children. And how right he had been.

In all his long, suspicion-ridden life he had only trusted one man. That man had shown the whole world that he knew his own mind, knew whom to hate; and he had always known when to turn round and offer the hand of friendship to those who had been his enemies.

This man, whom Stalin had trusted, was Adolf Hitler. . . .

That trust had very nearly cost him his own life. All the more reason never again to trust anyone.¹³



For Solzhenitsyn, the only worthwhile society is one that sees the dignity and worth of every man qua man—and this is provided only on a moral basis.

If suspicion, then, is to be rejected in a free society, what positive base for such a society can be suggested? Certainly not an ideological one, teaches Solzhenitsyn. Ideology—whether Marxist or capitalistic—merely determines the shape of the repression and where the line between oppressed and oppressors will be drawn:

Ideology—that is what gives evildoing its long-sought justification and gives the evildoer the necessary steadfastness and determination. That is the social theory which helps to make his acts seem good instead of bad in his own and others' eyes, so that he won't hear reproaches and curses but will receive praise and honors. That was how the agents of the Inquisition fortified their wills: by invoking Christianity; the conquerors of foreign lands, by extolling the grandeur of their Motherland; the colonizers, by civilization; the Nazis, by race; and the Jacobins (early and late), by equality, brotherhood, and the happiness of future generations.¹⁴

Moral Basis of Freedom

For Solzhenitsyn, the only worthwhile society is one that sees the dignity and worth of every man qua man—and this is provided only on a moral basis. Shulubin of *Cancer Ward* describes it:

We have to show the world a society in which all relationships, fundamental principles and laws flow directly from ethics, and from them *alone*. Ethical demands must determine all considerations: how to bring up children, what to train them for, to what end the work of grownups should be directed, and how their leisure should be occupied. As for scientific research, it should only be conducted where it doesn't damage the researchers themselves. The same should apply to foreign policy. Whenever the question of frontiers arises, we should think not of how much richer this or that course of action will make us, or how it will raise our prestige. We should consider one criterion only: . . . is it ethical?¹⁵

We note two features of such a society. They have to do with the place of law and the place of religion.

First, a free society does not imply a total absence of restraint. Solzhenitsyn is no advocate of anarchy, just as he does not promote libertinism on the individual level:

Yes, of course, freedom is moral, but only if it keeps within certain bounds, beyond which it degenerates into complacency and licentiousness. Order is not immoral, if it means a calm and stable system. But order too has its limits, beyond which it degenerates into illegality and tyranny.¹⁶

Second, Solzhenitsyn's thought turns back to religion as the arbiter of moral values. He seems to say: A purely materialistic philosophy of life is morally

bankrupt; we must look elsewhere. Power in the hands of any individual necessarily corrupts unless he has an internal ethical compass:

Power is a poison well known for thousands of years. If only no one were ever to acquire material power over others! But to the human being who has faith in some force that holds dominion over all of us, and who is therefore conscious of his own limitations, power is not necessarily fatal. For those, however, who are unaware of any higher sphere, it is deadly poison. For them there is no antidote.¹⁷

Solzhenitsyn's writings reveal a deeply religious view of life. Over and over, his characters muse about death and the glimmer of hope that something may survive it. Even Stalin himself in his last years, Solzhenitsyn claims, had doubts about the all-sufficiency of the materialistic view of life.¹⁸ In *Cancer Ward* the patients discuss the question: What do men live by? Indeed, the entire book holds up a mirror to Russian society (yes, *all* human society) to reflect the bases of action. But Solzhenitsyn is more than merely a reporter. He clearly holds to the answer given by Leo Tolstoy: Men live by love of their fellows:

"What nonsense!" Rusanov spat the words out with a hiss. "It's time someone changed the record. What a moral! It stinks to high heaven, it's quite alien to us. What does it say there that men live by?"

Yefrem stopped telling the story and moved his swollen eyes across to the bald pate opposite. He was furious that the bald man had almost guessed the answer. It said in the book that people live not by worrying only about their own problems but by love of others. And the pip-squeak had said it was by the interests of society.

Somehow they both tied up.

"What do they live by?" He could not say it aloud somehow. It seemed almost indecent. "It says here, by love."

"Love? . . . No, that's nothing to do with our sort of morality."¹⁹

As we review these four pillars in Solzhenitsyn's philosophy of freedom, two conclusions emerge.

It is obvious, first of all, that Solzhenitsyn has much to say that we in the West should learn. In my view it will be missing the point if we look upon his words primarily as a means of pointing the finger at another society. Rather, we should turn the searchlight of honest introspection upon our own individual philosophies of life and also upon our society at large. Do we, in fact, *value* our freedom? Are we in truth free in ourselves as Solzhenitsyn found his free-



The Bible also sets out a high view of man. It exalts man as a being of spirit, not merely as a biological and economic factor.

dom? Is the moral cancer of suspicion abroad in our land? Are we attempting to cling to the ideal of a free society but neglecting its moral basis? Have we cast aside our religious foundation to drift in the waters of moral relativism?

Second, Solzhenitsyn's view of freedom is closely parallel to the Biblical pattern. The Bible also sets out a high view of man. It exalts man as a being of spirit, not merely as a biological and economic factor. It teaches that man, male and female, was made in the image of God. The Bible likewise shows that ultimately questions of human freedom and bondage are to be located in the mind of man:

Jesus then said to the Jews who had believed in him, "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free." They answered him, "We are descendants of Abraham, and have never been in bondage to any one. How is it that you say, 'You will be made free'?" Jesus answered them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. The slave does not continue in the house for ever; the son continues for ever. So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed."²⁰

Again, two key words of the Bible, especially in the New Testament, are faith and love—antitheses of suspicion:

There is no fear in love, but perfect love casteth out fear. For fear has to do with punishment, and he who fears is not perfected in love.²¹

The essence of the gospel of Jesus Christ is a loving, trusting relationship with the God who has manifested and demonstrated a profound concern for mankind. That is why Saint Paul can say, "Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin."²² Such a relationship leads to compassion, to love of our fellows:

We love, because he first loved us. If any one says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen. And this commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also.²³

Message to the West

Finally, the Bible and Solzhenitsyn agree that individually and socially, freedom must have a moral basis. Scripture plainly teaches that naturally no man is good, merciful, unselfish. We all seek our own ends: in one way or another we seek to build up our

own ego and to aid those of our own little circle. The whole Bible, in fact, is a story of a tragedy. It is the record of man's individual and social perversity, as he has gone his own way without a moral gyroscope. That gyroscope, according to Biblical philosophy, is provided only by religion.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn is not simply another writer. He is not churning out pulp products to make money. He is conscious of his own duty to his generation and he is aware that his work will continue to speak even beyond the grave. Thus, he is a voice of conscience to the Russian people. At the same time, because he has grasped so clearly the essential nature of human freedom, his words speak to all mankind. We neglect his message at our peril—or that of our children. Let him have the last word:

If . . . if . . . We didn't love freedom enough. And even more—we had no awareness of the real situation. We spent ourselves in one unrestrained outburst in 1917, and then we hurried to submit. We submitted *with pleasure*. . . . We purely and simply *deserved* everything that happened afterward.²⁴ □

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NOTES

¹ References in this paper are to the following editions: *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, trans. by Ralph Parker (Penguin Books, 1972); *The First Circle*, trans. by Michael Buybon (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1971); *Cancer Ward*, trans. by Nicholas Bethell & David Burg (Bantam Books, 1969); *The Love Girl and the Innocent*, trans. by Nicholas Bethell & David Burg (Bantam Books, 1971).

² *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: An Experiment in Literary Investigation*, trans. by Thomas P. Whitney (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

³ Pages 203, 204.

⁴ *The Gulag Archipelago*, p. 168.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 591, 592.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 212.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 601.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 546.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

¹⁰ *The First Circle*, p. 39.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 47, 48.

¹² *The Love Girl and the Innocent*, p. 99.

¹³ *The First Circle*, pp. 109, 110.

¹⁴ *The Gulag Archipelago*, p. 174.

¹⁵ *Cancer Ward*, p. 442.

¹⁶ The quotation is from Solzhenitsyn's open letter to the leaders of his country, released upon his exile, as reported in *Time* (Asia ed.), March 11, 1974, pp. 10, 11.

¹⁷ *The Gulag Archipelago*, p. 147.

¹⁸ *The First Circle*, pp. 117-120.

¹⁹ *Cancer Ward*, p. 104.

²⁰ John 8:31-36, R.S.V.

²¹ 1 John 4:18, R.S.V.

²² Romans 14:23, R.S.V.

²³ 1 John 4:19-21, R.S.V.

²⁴ *The Gulag Archipelago*, p. 13.