

Fr. Rose

Dr. Rob Saler (video presentation)

It's a pleasure to be joining you virtually for this important conference. I want to focus my comments today on some philosophical and cultural speculations as to why Fr. Seraphim Fr. Seraphim has been so influential upon many of us in the U.S. (myself included) who have found our way into Orthodoxy, and specifically I want to think about Fr. Seraphim as a reader of cultural nihilism. I see this as a key aspect of his appeal and, in many respects, his sanctity. I'll say in advance that I have recently been doing a fair amount of scholarly work on Death to the World (I believe Fr. John Valadez is with us), so I'll take the liberty of using that movement as an example throughout.

While Fr. Seraphim is revered by U.S. and Russian Orthodox especially for his personal sanctity and his insistence on the "otherworldly" character of Orthodox faith, many of his most famous writings find him with his gaze fixed squarely on his own cultural milieu. I don't mean to discount his beautiful spiritual writings and his work on such figures as Augustine, but it is the case that, especially among North Americans, much of his influence as a writer comes from books (such as *Nihilism* and *Orthodoxy and the Religion of the Future*) focused on the dangers of the modern age. His body and heart were in his monastic cell and the liturgy; his mind was surveying the world outside.

In these works, Fr. Seraphim constructs a declension narrative of Western civilization as a gradual slide, first into moral relativism, then nihilism, then (in his view) a coming totalitarian age of a dawning New World Order (which is the secular preparation for, and instrument of, the spiritual Antichrist). Characteristic of Fr. Seraphim's historical method is to interweave diagnoses of human prelest (spiritual delusion), conspiracy, millennialist ambition, and spiritual

warfare into signature events of what he sees as the West's apostasy stemming from the East/West schism, the Renaissance, the Enlightenment, and so on. Having told that story, he focuses a similar mix of charges upon what he sees as deleterious currents of spirituality and culture in his own time, including the increasing popularity of "Eastern" religions in the West, the "charismatic revival" in churches, Christian acceptance of theories of evolution, and nascent transhumanist currents. What is crucial to understand about this catalogue of ills, from Fr. Seraphim's perspective, is that it is teleological and indeed relentlessly apocalyptic: each current of presumed self-improvement of humanity or "new" spiritual gesture is another step towards the coming reign of the Antichrist as seeded by nihilistic, posthuman theologies.

To quote Fr. Seraphim directly:

I will repeat something I said in the introductory lecture that the reason we are doing this is not just to have a view of what is true and what is false and throw out everything which is false and keep everything which is true, because everything I'm going to be talking about is false. But it will be extremely important for us to understand why it is false and how it went away from the truth. If we understand that, we have some idea of what goes on in the world today, and what is the intellectual structure against which we must fight. Although, while saying that everything I'm going to talk about is false, I mean it's false from the strictly Orthodox point of view. There, the whole, of course, is relative compared with what happens in the world today. All of these movements we talk about -- Thomas Aquinas to Medieval art, to European Renaissance art and so forth -- they all are very much more valuable than anything that has been happening in the world today. Nonetheless, there is a whole underlying worldview which produced these things, and we can see how it was departing from Orthodoxy. The history of the West from the Schism of Rome is a logical and coherent whole, and the views which govern mankind today are a direct result of the views held in the thirteenth century. And now that the Western philosophy dominates the entire world, there is no other philosophy except the Orthodox Christian philosophy which has

any strength to it, because all civilizations have been overwhelmed by the West, this means that what happened in the West in these last nine hundred years is the key to understanding what is happening in the whole world today.”

For Fr. Seraphim, history is moving in a direction, and that direction is towards redemption via cataclysm. As Orthodox Christians, we can be attentive to the fact that this cataclysm is ultimately eschatological and apocalyptic and therefore not without hope; Christ reigns in this world and the next. But the power of Rose’s analysis comes from directing the energy of this hope towards what Orthodox Christians need to attend to in the here and now.

Fr. Seraphim’s invocations of nihilism, with its attendant apocalyptic theologies concerning the antichrist, is by no means superficial or offhanded; indeed, chronicling the genealogy, trajectories, and projected telos of nihilism in the West was a signature preoccupation of his intellectual work even prior to his becoming a monk. A precocious devotee of Bay Area bohemianism and, in particular, that scene’s appropriation of Zen Buddhism (then a relatively new and exoticized arrival to the West) via his teacher, Alan Watts, Fr. Seraphim’s embrace of Orthodoxy was, in a manner that many converts such as Death to the World founder Justin Marler also exemplifies, both forward-looking and retrospective. While in his monastic (and eventually priestly) vocation and life he would dive deeply into the vast world of Eastern Orthodox spirituality (with more saints, writings, liturgies, ascetic traditions, and ecclesial particularities than anyone can hope to engage, much less master, in a lifetime), much of his writing as a monk prior to his death in 1982 was focused on what he took to be the nihilistic (and thus, by extension), demonic core of the cultural/subcultural milieu he had left behind.

Speaking of Watts, we should note too that the young Eugene Rose’s experiences with Watt’s ultimate decadence and lack of philosophical seriousness preconditioned the later Fr.

Seraphim to be particularly mindful of the dangers of “gurus.” We can appreciate that, I believe, even as we as Orthodox are careful to make sure that our piety towards such holy figures as Fr. Seraphim takes on the proper liturgical character of honoring saints rather than elevating celebrity gurus! This is the danger that attends popularity especially in an internet age, and in my layman’s opinion it will take the church’s ongoing wisdom in the next few years, decades, and centuries to safeguard this distinction should Fr. Seraphim’s canonization process continue.

Fr. Seraphim’s method in analyzing what he took to be nihilism’s undergirding of much Western culture, philosophy, religion, and politics was consistently genealogical and historical; in his major work on the subject (written just before founding the monastery), *Nihilism: The Root of the Revolution of the Modern Age*, he traces the chronological development of explicitly nihilistic philosophy through its intensification via classic liberalism, then rationalism, vitalism, and finally the destructive impulses that he saw operative both in nascent postmodernism and totalitarianism. Throughout Fr. Seraphim’s work, as has largely been the case with such movements as Death to the World, the three trajectories of nihilism (as philosophy), totalitarianism as expounded particularly in Leninist/Stalinist Marxism (as politics), and apocalyptic stirrings of the ascendancy of the Antichrist (as theology) are intertwined and mutually reinforcing. As he commenced the work of founding and overseeing St. Herman’s, he continued and expanded this tripartite historical analysis in such works as *Orthodoxy and the Religion of the Future* (1975), which applied this analysis particularly to so-called New Age religious movements as well as “ecumenism,” and even more so in his sweeping review of Western intellectual history post-schism in his highly influential “Orthodox Survival Course” (variations of which are still being taught, by modern thinkers such as Fr. Peter Heers).

Unsurprisingly, but to a degree and in a manner worthy of comment, is the centrality of Friedrich Nietzsche to both Fr. Seraphim's account of nihilism as well as that of, again, Death to the World and other contemporary Orthodox outreach movements. In particular, Nietzsche's famous image in *The Gay Science* of the so-called "madman in the marketplace" is evocative both of the theological backdrop to Fr. Seraphim's contention (channeling Dostoevsky) that "if there is no God, then all is permitted," and to the particular overtones of rebellion that Death to the World would later amplify, not least by quoting the passage early and often:

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the marketplace, and cried incessantly: "I seek God! I seek God!"---As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked much laughter. Has he got lost? asked one. Did he lose his way like a child? asked another. Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? emigrated?---Thus they yelled and laughed.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. We have killed him---you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Are we not plunging continually? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? ... God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.

"How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it? There has never been a greater deed; and whoever is born after us---for the sake of this deed he will belong to a higher history than all history hitherto."

Here the madman fell silent and looked again at his listeners; and they, too, were silent and stared at him in astonishment. At last he threw his lantern on the ground, and it broke into pieces and went out. "I have come too early," he said then; "my time is not yet. This tremendous event is still on its way, still wandering; it has not yet reached the ears of men. Lightning and thunder require time; the light of the stars requires time; deeds, though done, still require time to be seen and heard. This deed is still more distant from them than most distant stars---and yet they have done it themselves."¹

¹ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), 181-2.

As a number of scholars have pointed out,² the theological conflict described in Nietzsche's parable here is not first and foremost between Christian/theistic believers and atheists; rather, the conflict is between, on the one hand, what Nietzsche saw as his era's refined, bourgeois unbelievers who cling to the anemic vestiges of liberal society and its values even after the metaphysical verities that ostensibly inspired and supported them have been evacuated and, on the other hand, the prophet who understands that this evacuation, this "death of God," has rendered all these morals vacuous and untenable. To rebel against God is, ultimately, spiritual death, but perhaps even more pernicious in our time is the slow, tragic attenuation – the slow, awful spiritual rigor mortis – of uncaring secularism, distraction, and delusions of progress in modernity.

The main thing that I want to suggest, foreshadowing Death to the World's tag line, for Fr. Seraphim what is at stake in Nietzsche is the nature of true rebellion. Fr. Seraphim could, and did, grudgingly acknowledge the superiority of Nietzsche's passionate philosophical atheism to cultured bourgeois unbelief (or even nominal "belief that carries no passion or commitment). Fr. Seraphim had spent much of his young adulthood in a similar intense atheistic state. As with Nietzsche, even young Eugene Rose's rebellions against religion were God-haunted. For Fr. Seraphim and for much of the movement(s) he has inspired, if the choice is between the passion of Nietzsche and the lukewarmness of bourgeoisie belief (or even unbelief), then Fr. Seraphim resonates more with Nietzsche, even as he sees him too as the key figure of the philosophical and cultural nihilism that leads to disaster. In other words, even though Nietzsche is in some ways the prophet of nihilism for Fr. Seraphim, Fr. Seraphim was beginning to diagnose something perhaps even more tragic in our own day: not God-haunted rebellion, but distracted, lazy,

² Cf. for instance Merold Westphal, *Suspicion and Faith: The Religious Uses of Modern Atheism* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1993).

secularist apathy that foreshadows a very different sort of collapse, one that fails to see gathering forces of darkness that are far less distracted than many of us are when it comes to spiritual struggle.

This, I think, names one of the key aspects of Fr. Seraphim's appeal to truth seekers in the here and now: no compromises. Radical nihilism or radical belief are the only two honorable (and ultimately viable) alternatives. Both in his philosophy and in his person, Fr. Seraphim provides a template for the sort of restless, rebellious seeker who finds in Orthodoxy the only safe harbor against nihilism.