

'Religion in Platonov's *Chevengur*'

Summary of paper for the University of Surrey conference on Religion in Russian Culture

Chevengur is about a search for something called 'communism', 'socialism', 'the new world', 'the end of time'. If one divides the book into three parts, then Part I (set pre-1917) is threaded through with yearnings for this new world or new life, Part II (in War Communism and NEP) is the story of a wandering search for 'communism' - which may have sprung up spontaneously somewhere in the countryside, and Part III (1920s) is an account of how 'communism' has been established in the isolated steppe town of Chevengur.

What has this to do with religion? Some commentators claim Platonov as Christian or proto-Christian. But I see him as a thinker who thought his way up to the very border of the religious, the transcendental, the otherworldly, but never crossed that border. I agree with Evgenii Iablokov, who quotes as one of the epigraphs to his book on *Chevengur* (*Na beregu neba*) these words from Platonov's play *Sharmanka*: "О Господи, Господи, хоть бы ты был, что ли!" ['Oh Lord, Lord, if only you existed!'] In *Chevengur* there are many signs of such a wish; this is one reason for discussing it in a conference on religion. Another is that there are innumerable references in it to Christianity and to contemporary sectarian beliefs – some fleeting, some more substantial. I shall describe the general pattern of these and shall examine some of them more closely, especially the episode about the 'Second Coming', the piece about the church bells which are rung as Dvanov enters the town, several of the apparent echoes of the New Testament, and some aspects of the depiction of the main hero, Alexander Dvanov, which suggest a partial parallel with the life of Jesus.

Some guidance towards answering the question as to why the passionate communist Platonov included in his novel so much reference to the Bible may be contained in a jotting he made in his diary in 1930: "Социализм пришел серо и скучно, как Христос" ['Socialism came greyly and dully, like Christ.'].

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