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# THE IKON IN THE HOME

Stephen Graham, a Russian-speaking Englishman, wandered freely through Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, visiting large cities and remote country villages. His popular writings, now mostly out of print, were among the first detailed English accounts of provincial life in pre-revolutionary Russia. After 1917, when civil war forced his return to Europe, Graham himself became Orthodox. The following excerpt is from his book, *Undiscovered Russia*, published in 1912 by London's Bodley Head Press.

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**T**he Ikons in the churches, in the cathedrals, and in the monasteries and shrines are the symbols of the saints and of God. The Ikons in the homes are the symbols of the Ikons in the churches; they are the symbols to which authority has been delegated; they are the representatives of the original Ikons, as all crosses may be understood as representatives of the original Cross on Calvary. Every Russian home has its Ikons, and every Russian wears below his shirt his baptismal cross. The Ikon claims the home and the man for God; it indicates God's ownership, God's original right. It is in religion what the trademark is in commerce. So the Russian world-

“...is every way  
Bound by gold chains about the feet of God.”

The candle before the Ikon is man's finite life shining against the background of the Infinite.

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In every Russian room there is an Ikon, even in railway waiting-rooms, banyas, public houses, doss-houses, prison cells, and houses of ill-fame. It occupies what is known as the front corner of every room, that is, the corner towards the rising sun; it is not strictly proper to sit with one's back to it, and

indeed peasants' tables are often so arranged that it is impossible to sit with one's back to it; the table is jammed up into the Ikon corner so that it appears as if the Ikon themselves are sitting down to the meals. Before eating, one bows to the Ikon and crosses oneself three times and one repeats the ritual after the meal and then adds, "Thank you," addressing the master of the house.

If you sleep in a Russian home, the Ikon with its little lamp before it looks down upon you all night and guards you from evil. It teaches little children not to be afraid of the dark, and even nihilistic students come to regard the Ikon and its little night-lamp with tenderness, for they look back to so many occasions when they wakened on dark nights and felt frightened because of some dream, and then looked at the lamp and the Ikon and were quieted and fell asleep again.

In reverence to the Ikon you remove your hat upon entering a room — it is the sign that God is in the room amongst you and about you. The reverence accorded to it by the Russians is the reverence of one who asks himself no questions, and who accepts without doubt the emblems of religion set before him. Certainly the Ikon is a power, and it gives an atmosphere to its room. It owns the room, or rather it is a Presence in the room. It reminds, it restrains. Outside are the sun and moon and stars, the beautiful creation to remind; inside, the Ikon takes their place. The value of the Ikon to the Russian is inestimable; in innumerable ways it is of service to him in the consecration of time and place and deed. Is it his birthday; he burns an extra candle before it, and holds a prayer-meeting under its auspices.

Is his daughter to be married? He gives an Ikon to guard the future home. It is perhaps because its service is so often invoked that no thought of its necessity ever occurs; it is because all day long occasion is found to appeal to it that its power is so great.

The whole use of the thing flashed upon me one day when I was in Little Russia staying at the deacon's house. I was whistling a London tune, and a man said sternly to me, "Remember God." Someone pointed to the Ikon. I had been committing sacrilege, or invoking the devil, or something of the sort. Let me note in passing that the Russians, though the most musical people in the world, cannot whistle — it is probably because it has been counted irreligious.

I inquired what other restrictions on my behaviour there might be, and was answered that all the homes were as private ante-chambers of the village





church, that in passing from the church to the home one's reverence remains unaltered, and that all lived in the remembrance of the immanence and nearness of God. If it appeared that God was forgotten in a song, in angry words or actions, or in anything contrary to the law, the master of the house should in the name of the Ikon, reprove the forgetful person.

So the Ikon is the "God in the midst" with eyes for the highest and for the lowest things — it is a more live, religious symbol than the Roman Catholic crucifix or rosary, but withal it is something beyond these, something unique. It is so powerful that it suggests itself as the spirit of the room; take away the sacred picture, and you leave the dead body of what was once a living, breathing room. It might be asked "Is then the unconsecrated English room relatively dead?" Certainly, the Russian gets much by his Ikon that is wanting in a foreign room. Likewise by his hundred and seventeen holy days in the year he gains something similarly unique. In England to a week, are one holy-day and six week-days; the Russian calls his Sunday "Resurrection Day" and has probably two fast days in his week.



The peasant rejects the secular calendar, even in the arrangement of his agricultural year. He reckons the day before or after a festival or a fast: there is, moreover, scarcely a day in the year that has not its popular name. Ancient customs of bygone nature worship are also interwoven with Christian chronology, such as the welcoming of Spring in the second week after Easter, and the blessing of the beer in the middle of August. All children are named after one of the saints, and most of them receive in addition some earthly nickname.

Visitors to Russia, if they are observant, will see an unvarnished wooden cross set up wherever a house is in course of building. This also is an Ikon, and it will not be removed till the house is built and the priest comes and performs an opening service.

Then the ritual of the sign of the Cross is most potent in Russian life. It is prayer without words, the assigning of implicit faith. The only words the moujik adds are sentences of supplication or of praise, as "Oh Lord, have mercy!" or "Glory be to Thee, O Lord!" "Nothing is within our powers;

everything is beyond our powers,” says a character of Gogol. “Nothing is possible without aid from on high.”

Prayer concentrates the faculties. A man crosses himself and says, ‘Oh Lord have mercy,’ “then he rows on and reaches the shore.” [An acquaintance] told me a story of a peasant servant who had taken a place at Moscow, and his master kept two pet wolves. The servant was called by his mistress, and came suddenly upon these two wolves stretched in the passage like sleeping dogs. He was quite familiar with the physiognomy of wolves, and so was struck with terror. He had to pass them to get to his mistress’ room. He hesitated a moment, crossed himself, and then ran for it.

I have seen engine drivers come down the platform at railway stations to bow to the Ikons before proceeding on their way. Cab-drivers, even with fares, will stop before monasteries or churches, and cross themselves. Indeed it is not proper to pass a church without crossing oneself, and even in degenerate Moscow one is struck by the people crossing themselves in the electric trams as the latter shoot past the sacred places.

If a peasant yawns, he makes the sign of the cross over his mouth to prevent the devil getting in — which is in itself a little sermon on the dangers of boredom. The good old peasant-wife puts cross-sticks over all empty dishes or jars in her pantry, and these too are Ikons. And if her husband is out, and his plate of soup is left for him, she makes the sign of the cross over it before going to bed.

So by a thousand little gleams of ritual, we see how the Russian has interwoven Christian religion with life. He truly lives as “ever in his great Taskmaster’s eye,” only he would not call God a task-master. The Russian people are one in their unanimous loyalty to one idea and thereby they have become all-brothers. With far more justice can it be said of the Russian people than of the English, they are a church — unless commerce is our church.

In England are churches and houses; in Russia, churches and consecrated homes! And though God is everywhere, we feel He is absent from unconsecrated places ... the subtle error of distinguishing between the things of God and the things of man. The [English] giving of a tenth of our goods to God has led us to regard nine-tenths as our little own; the dedicating to God of the lives of priests has left the laity undedicated; the consecration of churches has placed our houses outside the church.

...Will not *all* things in time have to be consecrated, and our thoughts brought up to one level of holiness ... our days each be given its special holi-

ness; our homes, whether in slum or park, be consecrated ... as ante-chambers of the church? If so, the Ikon is much already gained: it consecrates the home ... it reminds the Russian that God is not locked up in the church, that He is even in his own parlour. In all finite and material things it reminds him of the Infinite and the Spiritual. †