

The Case of *Father Arseny*: New Mythology in Russian Spiritual Literature

Sergey Bychkov
Translated by Vera Winn

“Father Arseny, former scholar of church art, became Prisoner No. 18736 in the brutal ‘special sector’ of the Soviet prison camp system. In the darkness of systematic degradation of body and soul, he shone with the light of Christ’s peace and compassion. . . . This narrative, compiled from accounts of Father Arseny’s spiritual children and others whom he brought to God, gives stirring glimpses of his life in prison camp and after his release.”

- Promotional introduction from the website of St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press.¹

The book *Father Arseny* has been widely published in numerous editions and has been especially popular around the world as an inspiration for new converts to Orthodox faith. In the 2000s it was translated into Greek and English. Its enthusiastic reception merits closer study, for an important reason that most of the book’s readers do not realize: the book is a fiction through and through.

- The Editors



In post-Soviet Russia, a small circle of Moscow churchgoers read *Father Arseny* and believed that the book was based on the stories of priests and laity who were prisoners of Stalinist camps. The book did not pretend to be biographical, especially since the narrow circle of its original readers knew the identity of the author, a physicist named Alexander Belyakov, who lived near Moscow. Belyakov was born in the early 1950s. In the mid-70s, he joined the Brotherhood of Saint John the Theologian, an underground Orthodox group led by Arkady Shatov (who is now Bishop Panteleimon) and myself. Together we visited Holy

Transfiguration Monastery near Riga, where we met Archimandrite Tavriion (Batozsky, 1898–1978), a Gulag survivor who greatly impressed Belyakov. In 1978, Belyakov asked me to introduce him to Fr. Alexander Men, knowing that I was one of his parishioners. After they met, I asked Father Alexander what was it that Belyakov really wanted. Being a deeply spiritual person and an expert on the human psyche, Father Alexander explained to me that Belyakov was obsessed with a kind of *idée fixe*. Several years later Belyakov started showing me chapters of a book he was writing about a “Father Arseny,” and I realized that his

¹ “Father Arseny 1893–1973: Priest, Prisoner, and Spiritual Father,” website of St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, <https://www.svpress.com/father-arseny-1893-1973-priest-prisoner-and-spiritual-father/>.

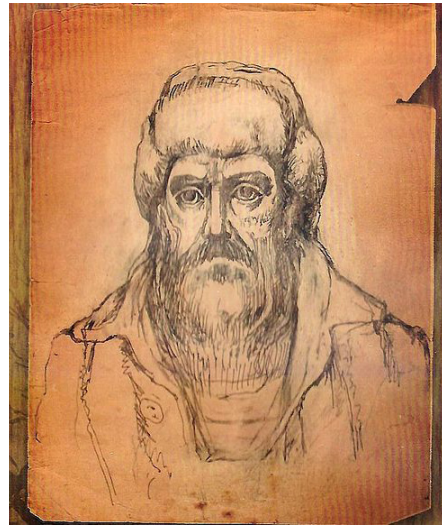
An apocryphal portrait of Father Arseny shown in a 2011 documentary, in which Father Arseny was described as a literary character combining features and stories of many priests imprisoned in Gulag. According to a nun interviewed in the documentary, the portrait was revealed to an unnamed artist in prayer and was inspired by the likeness of Tsar Nicholas I.

idea had finally become flesh. He sincerely believed that this book would play a special role not only in Russia, but also worldwide.

Drafts of the book circulated in *samizdat* beginning in the mid-70s. In the early 90s, the magazine *Наука и религия* (*Science and Religion*) published excerpts from *Father Arseny*. Soon after this, the whole book was published. Following this first official publication, more authors joined the project and continued to expand the book under pen names such as Kira Bakhmat and N. T. Lebedev. Beginning in the late 90s, there were multiple publications about secret church life in the USSR. The co-authors of *Father Arseny* based many of their stories on these publications, but often they did it quite poorly because their knowledge of the “catacomb communities” was limited.

These publications fit into Belyakov’s general hopes for the book. He sincerely believed that this “conciliar” text about an Orthodox ascetic would quickly help to change the spiritual atmosphere of Russia. He believed it would inspire Russians, showing them the true way to a revival of Orthodox Russia. Accordingly, in the early 1990s, Belyakov introduced the 90-year-old priest and elder Vladimir Bykov to Father Vladimir Vorobyov, rector of Saint Tikhon’s Orthodox University in Moscow. Apparently, Father Bykov handed the expanded manuscript of *Father Arseny* over to Vorobyov. Rights to the manuscript were appropriated by Saint Tikhon’s University and Vorobyev, who prepared and edited the fourth and fifth editions.

In a preface to the fourth Russian edition, Vorobyev states that Father Arseny Streltsoff was a real person and



that famous Christian ascetics and martyrs such as Archbishop Athanasius (Sakharov) and D. E. Melikhov knew Father Arseny personally.² Yet Vorobyev’s university also published a volume on the life of Athanasius, including an index of all names mentioned in the archbishop’s letters and other documents, and “Arseny Streltsoff” is not among them. Moreover, the *Journal of the Moscow Patriarchate* regularly published obituaries of deceased clergymen. But neither in 1975 (the year Father Arseny died, according to Belyakov and Father Vorobyov) nor at any time later did the *Journal* publish an obituary for a “priest Arseny Streltsoff.” Streltsoff And although the book claims that Father Arseny was arrested several times, there is no information about it in the Central Archives of the Federal Security Service. Likewise, no documentation can be found about an art historian named Piotr Andreyevitch Streltsoff—ostensibly Father Arseny’s name before he became a monk—even though the book describes him as an outstanding connoisseur, a scholar of Russian architecture, and the author of numerous published articles on the subject. The book does not refer to a

² Отец Арсений, ed. Vladimir Vorobyev, fourth edition (Moscow: Православный Свято-Тихоновский Богословский институт, 2000), 6.

single document, such as letters to or from Father Arseny's spiritual children. Neither the narrator nor Vorobeyev cites any verifiable evidence of the existence of this "holy father." That fact alone should raise suspicions that *Father Arseny* is a fabrication. However, let us further consider the book's description of the labor camps.

The narrator states that he met Father Arseny in the 1930s, in one of Stalin's concentration camps. The memoirs of actual prisoners of the camps, such as Olga Adamova-Sliozberg, Yevgenia Ginzburg, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, and Varlam Shalamov, scrupulously record their experiences without any inaccuracies, even in the smallest details. Yet the author of *Father Arseny* appears unfamiliar with the structure, regulations, and everyday routine of the Gulag. Consider the opening of the book: "The wind carried clouds of icy snow that broke to form a shard-like precipitation. . . . Towers with searchlights and guards could be seen on the horizon. Stretches of barbed wire created protective rows between which the icy glow of the menacing lights could be seen. Between the first and last rows of barbed wire police dogs roamed lazily."² In this poetic description of a labor camp, the narrator prudently omits its location. If it is Kolyma, as the narrative later suggests, then there would not have been "stretches of barbed wire." Such wasteful use of wires would hardly have been approved by the authorities. And if the winter weather was so brutal, then why did "dogs wander lazily"? Unlike people, dogs were valued in concentration camps. They were used to escort prisoners to the work sites. Dogs also helped in the search for fugitives. The picture painted by the author resembles a Nazi concentration camp more than a Soviet one. The same could be said about

the soldiers with machine guns on the towers: they are straight out of a Nazi camp. This substitution is understandable because in the 70s, when the Father Arseny story was being created, it was easy to find detailed descriptions of Nazi concentration camps, whereas Soviet censorship did not allow the Gulag to be discussed.

In the book, the guards begin the day not with a roll call of prisoners, but with checking the security of the window bars and inspecting the barracks—as if they were afraid that half-dead prisoners might dig an underground passage in order to escape! The narrator also describes bonfires that ostensibly burned day and night outside the camp, to warm the ground so deceased prisoners could be buried. How thoughtful of the camp authorities. But as Varlam Shalamov writes in his *Kolyma Tales*, in the winter the bodies were simply piled up and in the summer they were covered with dirt.⁴ And contrary to the narrator's statement, a temperature of minus 27° Celsius was not out of the ordinary for Kolyma. In fact, prisoners were sometimes forced to work at 40° and even 50° below zero.

Contrary to the book, neither axes nor saws were banned in the labor camps, and firewood did not have to be split with the help of a wooden wedge and log. In his novel *In The First Circle*, Solzhenitsyn describes convicts using saws and axes to cut wood.⁵ And no, aspirin in the camps was not "the primary medication."⁶ It was a luxury. Even basic medical supplies were not available in the pre-war Stalinist concentration camps. Similarly, the description of Father Arseny sharing his ration of cod with other prisoners sounds like mockery to those who know that camp prisoners subsisted on low-grade bread and hot "soup" with no nutritive content.

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³ *Father Arseny 1893–1973: Priest, Prisoner, Spiritual Father*, trans. Vera Bouteneff (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1998), 5.

⁴ Varlam Shalamov, *Kolyma Tales*, trans. John Glad (New York: W. W. Norton, 1980), 178.

⁵ Aleksandr I. Solzhenitsyn, *In the First Circle*, trans. Harry T. Willetts (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 171–9.

⁶ *Father Arseny*, 10.

Father Arseny's speech often sounds strange, as when he cries: "Hey, dear friend [ба́тенька]. Why would you want to fight? You fought as much as you could and where did your ideology get you?"⁷ Ба́тенька was one of Lenin's characteristic expressions. A priest or an intellectual could repeat it only mockingly, and certainly not in conversation with a hero of the Civil War, a former high-ranking Soviet official.

A symbolic tombstone of Father Arseny in Rostov Veliky, erected in 2001 on the pretext that Father Arseny had been once buried in the cemetery but his grave had been lost.

The book is full of similar mistakes and inconsistencies. If *Father Arseny* is historical fiction, it should be evaluated by the standards of this genre. Yet it is glaringly apparent that the writer did not use appropriate sources such as *The Gulag Handbook*, an invaluable reference book written by Jacques Rossi, who experienced all the "delights" of a Stalinist camp. There is also a seven-volume collection of documents, *История сталинского ГУЛАГа (The History of Stalin's Gulag)*, published in 2004. One might argue that the author of *Father Arseny* wrote the book during the Soviet years, when these fundamental works did not yet exist. But today, when the book is republished, why not correct all the absurdities and inconsistencies?

All these flaws pale in comparison with the narrator's overriding desire to prove that the book is about a real historical person. Since the 1990s, first the author and then the publishers have sought evidence to substantiate Father Arseny's existence. Finally, the 2000 edition of the book stated that Moscow priests Vsevolod Spiller, Alexander Tolgsky, Sergiy Orlov and perhaps Seraphim Golubtsov knew Father Arseny personally.⁸ This statement was not supported by any documents. Spiller's and Tolgsky's archives were preserved—indeed,



most of them had already been published—and there was no mention of a priest Arseny Streltsoff. Moreover, this roster of priests listed side by side seems inherently bizarre: the antisemite Sergiy Orlov, the ascetic and confessor Alexander Tolgsky, the KGB snitch Seraphim Golubtsov, and the proponent of church freedom Vsevolod Spiller.

Soon after, Vorobyov began raising money to build a memorial to Father Arseny. It was recently erected near Rostov Veliky. The inscription reads: "In memory of the venerable elder hieromonk Arseny (1894–1975)." Father Arseny's real grave was allegedly lost. How could it be that the grave of such an outstanding confessor disappeared from the face of the Earth? Even in the brutal 1930s and 40s, the graves of Orthodox ascetics were venerated and carefully guarded by grateful spiritual children. If the book was indeed based on the memoirs of Father Arseny's spiritual children, how could they allow the destruction of his grave, and if it had been destroyed, why they did not restore it or at least record its location?

⁷ *Father Arseny*, 14.

⁸ *Отец Арсений*, ed. Vladimir Vorobyev, fourth edition (Moscow: Православный Свято-Тихоновский Богословский институт, 2000), 6.



The above arguments seem sufficient to show that *Father Arseny* is a modern fiction. More important, however, is that its content often contradicts the spirit of both Scripture and Orthodox tradition. The question raised by the book's popularity is why so many Orthodox Christians prefer reading apocryphal stories to studying Scripture. The secret of its success is that it describes an Orthodox community completely disconnected from the official Orthodox hierarchy and from contemporary life, and based instead on the secret rules of the prewar "catacomb church." The life of this community is presented as a stylized image of nineteenth-century Russian Orthodox life. This is why traditionalists became so fond of this book. For them, *Father Arseny* was an example of traditional Orthodoxy in contrast to a reality that was constantly changing, and not always for the better. For the book's admirers, it is irrelevant whether Father Arseny is a real person or a fictional character.

Historically, the life of the Russian Church was based on a monastic template. Monastic life in ancient Russia was considered the highest form of Christianity. It attracted those who sincerely wanted to reach the kingdom of God as quickly as possible, cutting off all worldly temptation once and for all. The writings of ascetics have always been the highest authorities in spiritual life, especially in all matters related to prayer. For many of today's faithful, this ascetic extreme still represents the essential ideal of the Russian Orthodox Church.

Protopresbyter John Meyendorff, one of the eminent church historians and theologians of the twentieth century, observes: "The monastic way of life

faced temptations and dangers. The hermit who fled into the desert and who lived there for years without the sacraments, the monastery as a community isolated from the rest of the Church—did they in fact separate themselves from the whole Christian body? Were they not dividing the people of God? Were they not substituting an individualistic piety for that communal spirituality that is the very essence of Christianity? Were not the ascetic feats of the desert fathers mere human techniques for acquiring grace, that made grace itself no longer a free gift of God? It is clear that all these deviations have appeared in the history of monasticism, but it is no less clear that after some hesitations the Church created institutions and defined doctrines which were able to cope with the temptations."⁹

Meyendorff writes that Evagrius Ponticus, an ascetic who practiced in the Egyptian desert during the fourth century, introduced gnostic elements into the doctrine of prayer developed by the desert fathers. A native of Pontia (Asia Minor) and a disciple of the great Cappadocians, Saint Basil the Great and Saint Gregory the Theologian, Evagrius was also a student of Origen of Alexandria, whose theological teachings were declared heretical by the Second Council of Constantinople in 553. Nevertheless, followers of Evagrius carefully preserved his teaching on prayer, and included it in the *Philokalia* under the pen name Nilus of Sinai. In his treatise *On Prayer*, Evagrius rarely refers to the Holy Scriptures and never mentions Jesus Christ.

In the seventh century, the doctrine of prayer was further developed by a hermit who lived in the monastery of Saint Catherine near Sinai, Saint John Climacus. His famous

⁹ John Meyendorff, *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality* (Crestwood: SVS Press, 1974), 18.

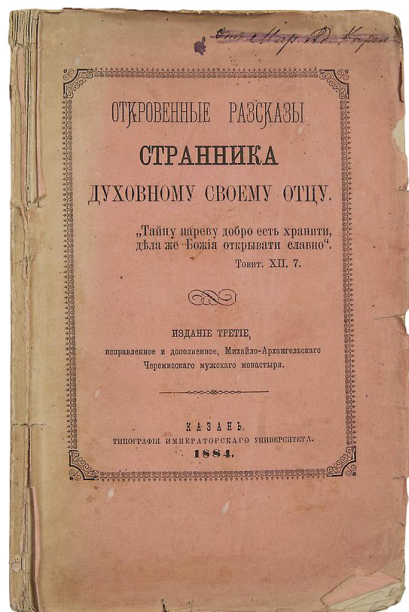
treatise *The Ladder of the Divine Ascent* was popular in ancient Russia. It is worth noting that before and after the Mongol Era, Russian Orthodoxy's exposure to patristic writings was mostly limited to homilies and ascetic literature such as *The Ladder* and *The Philokalia*.

In the nineteenth century, a number of apocryphal spiritual writings appeared in Russia. Perhaps the most famous is *The Way of a Pilgrim: Candid Tales of a Wanderer to His Spiritual Father*. The manuscript of this book was allegedly discovered in the archives of Optina Pustyn monastery, but the elder Macarius of Optina warned that one should be careful about its authenticity. *The Way of a Pilgrim* was edited by Bishop Theophan (Govorov), who was canonized in 1988. Bishop Ignatius (Brianchaninov), who was personally acquainted with the book's actual author—Hieromonk Arseny Troepolsky—believed that the text should be treated with extreme caution.

Troepolsky's preface to Russian editions of the book resembles the framing of *Father Arseny* in both style and spirit:

The Pilgrim's stories are the accurate descriptions of events sent by Providence to this pious man so that he could learn useful lessons. Every sane person should agree that the practical study of life is more accurate and convincing than abstract theories, and should therefore conclude that the events described by this pilgrim were as enlightening for him as they are instructive and useful for those who read about them with an open heart. Having only this in mind, the recorder of these "Tales" tried his best to keep the original words of the Pilgrim as much as possible, without any embellishment, in order to show more clearly the enlightening power of the grace of Jesus Christ. However, it is important to mention that this is not a fabrication or a moral fiction.

Nineteenth-century
Russian edition of
The Way of a Pilgrim.



¹⁰ Arseny Troepolsky, preface to some Russian editions of *Father Arseny*, quoted in A. M. Pentkovsky, "Кто написал «Откровенные рассказы странника»,» *Журнал Московской Патриархии* 1 (2010): 57.

The Pilgrim was a real person and he narrated his adventures in good conscience. The recorder of his stories met him several times in the 1800s and 1820s. Many pious people also met him and heard his stories, supported by reliable facts. The Pilgrim was of average height, his temperament was sanguine, his body was lean from a temperate and harsh life, and he had beautiful expressive eyes and a small, neatly kept blond beard. He was loving and humble towards everyone. Fifteen years after the narrator last met him, in the Levensky district of the Oryol province, he encountered a kind elder who turned out to be the uncle of the Pilgrim, and said that the Pilgrim had died in piety in his homeland.¹⁰

This introduction resembles the premise of *Father Arseny*. Yet unlike the author of that book, Father Troepolsky focuses on the wanderer's teaching rather than his personality (though Troepolsky still insists on his historical reality). This book had a decisive influence on the author of *Father Arseny*. It introduced the author to the Jesus prayer. Living in the Soviet Union, Belyakov sought to confront atheism with a portrait of genuine spirituality.

There are many other similarities between these two fictional characters of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, despite the differing conditions in which they are said to have lived. First of all, they exist away from the Church. They live on their own as if there were no Christ and the Church had never been established. The Pilgrim preaches about salvation outside the Church. This perspective can be explained, but not justified. The crisis of church life in nineteenth-century Russia is no secret among contemporary historians. Bishops Brianchaninov and Govorov, who were outstanding preachers, left their episcopacies and retreated to the cloister in order to teach their contemporaries the principles of the Christian life.

More generally, both Father Arseny and the Pilgrim exist outside real life and its problems. Not being a church historian, the author of *Father Arseny* had no idea about the heated disputes of the late 1920s, 30s, and 40s concerning the pro-government path chosen for the Church by Metropolitan Sergius (Stragorodsky), later Patriarch of Moscow. Even though Moscow clergy faithfully served the Patriarchate, in their hearts they felt the historical falsehood of "Sergianism." The gap between the episcopate on the one hand and the priests and laity on the other was too great. They lived in dif-

ferent worlds. The clergy and laity tended to blame the episcopate for distorting the authenticity of the Orthodoxy and following the "spirit of the times," indulging in luxuries. The Moscow clergy, whose opinion mattered to their provincial colleagues, actively promoted *Father Arseny*. In doing so, the clergy were implicitly telling their superiors, who were still following Metropolitan Sergius by demonstrating their loyalty to the government, that they only pretended to be obedient to the episcopate, while in fact they were as free as the "catacomb church" that survived the Bolshevik persecution.

We must briefly touch on the spiritual roots of both the *Pilgrim* and *Father Arseny*. It is important to pay tribute to Troepolsky, who knew patristic literature well and who stayed in various monasteries of Russia. Nevertheless, many of his ideas are based not in the gospel tradition, but in the ideas of non-Christian religions—primarily Buddhism and, in part, Sufism, as Meyendorff demonstrates in his book on Gregory Palamas. Troepolsky did not conceal these roots; it is enough to read his commentary on the eighteenth century hagiographical text *Житие старца Василиска Туринского* (*Life of the elder Vasilisk of Turinsk*). After Troepolsky read the life story of this elder, he experienced a spiritual transformation. The author, Vasilisk's disciple Zosima Verkhovskiy, describes the sweet, blissful states his teacher experienced as a result of practicing the Jesus Prayer. For both Verkhovskiy and the author of *Father Arseny*, the Jesus Prayer is like a magic wand, able to solve all problems. And not only for the one who masters it but also for others who are loyal to the magic wand's owner. The problems disappear and only the sweet sensations, so lucidly

described by Basilisk and Troepolsky, remain. But what about the feeling of being abandoned by God? And the Gethsemane suffering of Christ and his followers? And Golgotha? And the mission of the Church? Somehow both Zosima and the writer of *Father Arseny* forgot that, while ascetics lived in the desert and for years performed ascetic feats in order to attain dispassion and wisdom, they were prepared to leave the desert when the Church needed them.

Every spiritual text ought to be evaluated by a special theological commission to determine whether it accords with holy Scripture or belongs to the false teachings about which Jesus warned in the Gospel. Decisions about such writings have to be made by the church in council. But this requires competent local councils whose judgment is accepted by all Orthodox Christians. I believe the popularity of apocrypha such as *Fa-*

ther Arseny demonstrates a kind of spiritual illness on the part of readers who take them seriously.

The religious philosopher Georgy Fedotov once warned: "There has never been a concept in Russia about the biblical canon which strictly distinguishes between the Holy Scriptures and the works of the holy fathers. All religious writings, if they were not clearly heretical, were called sacred and divine. The Russian people had a special passion for apocrypha, because of their fairy tale, imagination-inspiring content."¹¹ Twenty-eight years after the downfall of Communism, the biographies of Russian new martyrs have not been collected and published. The stories of their experiences might help us to evaluate the spiritual state of the Russian Orthodox Church and twenty-first century Russian society soberly. Spiritual sobriety lies at the core of the virtue that was so appreciated by Christ, whose name is Humility. ✱

¹¹ George Fedotov, *Русская религиозность*, vol. 1 (Moscow: Мартис Sam & Sam, 2001), 51–2.



Sergei Bychkov is a historian, poet, journalist, and publisher. He is the editor of the complete works of Georgy Fedotov and the author of many other books and articles on the history of the Russian Church.