

## The Survival of Faith in Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and "Matryona's House"

**Wawan Eko Yulianto**

Universitas Ma Chung, INDONESIA  
 e-mail: wawan.eko@machung.ac.id

### ABSTRACT

Faith is a vital element in the works of Nobel laureate Alexander Solzhenitsyn, a Russian writer who experienced the notorious Gulag and difficulties in a strongly atheistic country. However, faith is never a simplistic topic for Solzhenitsyn, especially writing in a time when religion was officially shoved aside from the public discourse. In the light of a set of views on religion inferred from Terry Eagleton's essay, this paper aims to explain the anomalous religiosity as seen in the narrators of Solzhenitsyn's novel *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and short story "Matryona's House." According to the Eagleton's model, there are three stages of religiosity, namely, 1) omission of religion's otherworldly and pure ritualistic elements, 2) acceptance of mentally-empowering potentials of religion, and 3) internalization of the humanistic values of religion. The analysis concludes with a notion that *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and "Matryona's House" represent an evolution of faith that has gone through a period of challenge. On a sidenote, the analysis also confirms the dialogic nature of Solzhenitsyn's works, in which one topic is presented through contradictory voices.

Keywords: Faith, ritualistic elements, mental empowerment, humanistic values, Russian literature.

### INTRODUCTION

Asked about the meaning of faith in his life in an interview with Christian Neef and Matthias Schepp from *Der Spiegel*, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn answers that for him "faith is the foundation and support of one's life" (Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Neef, & Schepp, 2007). A notion of the importance of faith in Solzhenitsyn's work can also be inferred from his interview with Joseph Pearce, the author of *Solzhenitsyn: A Soul in Exile*. In the interview, Solzhenitsyn confirms that after the literary side, the spiritual aspect, along with the political aspect, are above the political sides (Pearce & Alexander, n.d.). Daniel J. Mahoney (via Anderson, 2015), the writer of a recent book *The Other Solzhenitsyn*. However, when we read two of Solzhenitsyn's earliest works, i.e. *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (henceforth *One Day*) and "Matryona's House," we will see that what he means by "spirituality" or "faith" appears to be more complex than what is commonly known in the society.

In *One Day*, faith has a relatively minor presence along with the many themes and events narrated throughout the novella. However, the novel closes with a discussion of Ivan Denisovich and Alyosha on faith which, one will find, towers in its significance

among everything else presented in the novella because the dialog wraps up the day's experience or gives meaning to the menial things that Shukhov has gone through that day. In "Matryona's House," faith as an important idea enters the narrative around the second third of the story; the first third of the story contains Ignatich's narration of how he has come to settle in Tal'ново and his narration to provide the general introduction to Matryona. Even after this first discussion of faith, the story presents the theme of faith sporadically. When the story closes with the narrator's seeing Matryona as the righteous person without whom no city or village can stand, the reader will begin again to understand many things that Matryona does as the manifestation of her religiosity. As Kathleen Parthé argues regarding this part, the use of this proverb to close the story results in a strong didactic tone. However, the presentation of faith in the story is far from simplistic. In would argue that in *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* and "Matryona's House," faith has to survive contestations and leave a number of its element before gaining an elevated position.

This paper aims to unravel the three gradual perceptions of faith from the perspective of the narrators in both stories; the three gradual perceptions represent the contestation, consideration and

acceptance of faith. In *One Day*, although the story is narrated from a third person point of view, the narrator is not an omniscient narrator or a storyteller; we might even be able to identify him with Ivan Denisovich Shukhov, the title protagonist. *One Day*'s narrator shows the similarity with, for example, James Joyce's narrator in *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, who, despite his third person voice, presents only Stephen Dedalus's thoughts and perception. With regards to *One Day*, the narrator is Ivan Denisovich Shukhov's spokesperson, who narrates the story in an eloquent manner as opposed to Shukhov who comes from a peasant background, who is not educated and tends to speak very little. He is a typical practical person who prefers walking than talking. As for the narrator in "Matryona's House," or Ignatich, he is an outsider in Tal'novo who does not share with the locals their habits, traditions and perception of the world. For one, he is a person with university education and secular upbringing. Besides, he is a former prisoner in Stalin's gulag. He sees the religiosity of Tal'novo's people with some sense of detachment. The survival of religion through contestation is of course not a new thing. Solzhenitsyn is not the only author whose faith goes through a transformation before it eventually gains recognition.

In an essay entitled "The Scum of the Earth" in *Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, Terry Eagleton proposes how one might experience faith. The essay, which includes a short autobiographical account, shows a clear instance of how one's perception of religion has to go through a set of gradual changes which include contestation, consideration and appreciation. It might look reckless to find a common ground between works by an author famous for his vehement enmity to communism and an essay by an intellectual renowned as one of the most important Marxist literary critics. However, in addition to the clear gradual perceptions of religion which one can easily take as a model, it is also in my aim to show how this process is not a unique case with Solzhenitsyn, but it is common among writers, especially those who do not wish to take the easy road to pass simplistic judgement to religion as useless or vital in one's life. In other words, the process towards the appreciation of religion can be similar even between two persons with totally different philosophical positions.

Before embarking on the analysis of Solzhenitsyn's stories, it is important to note the following points. Firstly, while Eagleton's work is an essay, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *One Day* and "Matryona's House" are prose fictions, or, to be exact, long short stories or novellas. In this essay, the idea inferred from

Eagleton's essay will be checked against the perceptions of the narrators of Solzhenitsyn story in the novel and short story with regards to religion. Secondly, the religions discussed in the three works are also different. In *One Day*, the discussion will center on the religiosity of Alyoshka, a Baptist. Meanwhile, "Matryona's House" presents Matryona who is an adherent of the Russian Orthodox Church—which, in Alyoshka's opinion, "has turned its back on Gospels" (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, 2000, p. 98). Solzhenitsyn, who was a Marxist to begin with, began to doubt Stalin, and eventually Lenin and Karl Marx themselves and started to embrace Christianity during his imprisonment in "sharashka, the special camp for prisoners with scientific knowledge" (Alexander Solzhenitsyn et al., 2007, p. 7). In his interview with Pearce, which opens this paper, Solzhenitsyn sees religion as the direction of Russian people's "elevation" following the back-breaking experience with the coercive communism. For Solzhenitsyn, however, religion that has such recuperative potential is not in the forms that "perhaps existed centuries ago." To be able "to combat modern materialistic mores ... to fight nihilism and egotism, religion must also develop, must be flexible in its forms, and it must have a correlation with the cultural forms in the epoch" (Pearce & Alexander, n.d.). This statement implies Solzhenitsyn's admission that there is around him, i.e. in Russia, forms of religion that have remained the same since long ago. Many forms of religion have remained the same for centuries, partly because a lot of religious people consider any innovations or changes in religious practices and basic tenets heretical. It is not difficult to find people who practice certain rituals initiated by a saint many centuries ago. Conversely, a religion that can elevate a person is one whose form is flexible but, although at this point left unsaid, whose commitment towards humanity is unwavering.

As for Terry Eagleton, according to his essay, he comes from an observing Irish Catholic family and, in terms of his views of religion, had gone through a number of transformations before he eventually arrived at his current view. "Scum of the Earth" shows Eagleton's three different views of religion. The first position is related with experience as a child growing up in an Irish Roman Catholic family. In retrospect, his Catholic upbringing did not seem to have any relevance to human existence. In a witty expression that he fervently uses in his lectures and recent works, Eagleton (Eagleton, 2014, p. 4) says "Since the religious doctrine I was taught seemed to me as I approached student age to illuminate human existence about as profoundly as the croaking of a frog, it seemed natural when I arrived at university to

discard this whole way of talking in the name of something rather more relevant and humane.” In other words, he dispels the practice of religion the way people around him did it during his childhood. As soon as he embraces socialism, after a brief moment with existentialism, he has nothing else to do with religion. Only later does he find, after his encounter with the Dominican clergy, that the whole doctrine of Christianity, especially those related to the life and death of Jesus, has much relevance with human existence. Thus, come his second and third views of religion.

The second view can be interpreted as the discovery of empowering values of religion, which is demonstrated by Eagleton’s appreciation of the meaning of Jesus’s self-denial and suffering. In Eagleton’s narrative, Jesus’s self-denial and suffering are acts of sacrifice that must be seen as a steadfastness in defending a view as opposed to an act of surrendering to a bigger power. Steadfastness in the face of mortal threats is a show of force, an exhibition of unflinching stance. Eagleton (Eagleton, 2014, p. 27) interprets this further as “a readiness to abandon our dished-up world,” which will enable us to “live in the hope of a more authentic existence in the future.” At this point, religiosity is more like an affirmation of life in the face of harsh condition, without any real action.

Lastly, the third view that Eagleton espouses in “Scum of the Earth” includes the manifestation of love as a significant Christian doctrine. Eagleton leaves without much explanation the doctrine of love, which is at the center of Christianity and, in his opinion, has made Christianity attract so many people. It appears that Eagleton considers this subject is already clear because love here is more than just erotic love. He also states that “political love” is the basis of Socialism. We can infer that love here encompasses all acts that are pleasing to others and make life easier for others. With this actual manifestation of faith, it is perfectly appropriate that further into the essay Eagleton (Eagleton, 2014, p. 37) says that faith “is not primarily a belief that something or someone exists, but a commitment and allegiance—faith *in* something which might make a difference to the frightful situation you find yourself in, as is the face, say, with faith in feminism or anticolonialism.” This kind of religiosity is the one that saves a human from the trap of “heartless” modern life which makes a human “soulless.” This is the moment when he finds that religious doctrine “[has] some sort of bearing on human existence” (Eagleton, 2014, p. 4). There is something of utmost value in religion to Eagleton.

In short, Terry Eagleton’s three gradually-evolving views of religion can be summarized into 1) perception of religion as having alienating elements, 2) identification of the peacemaking potential of religion, and 3) acceptance of the constructive potentials of religiosity. As a whole, it is also possible to see these three gradually-evolving views as stages of how faith survives in one’s experience of faith. These three gradually-evolving views, I argue in this article, are observable in the two earlier Solzhenitsyn’s stories, i.e. *One Day* and “Matryona’s House.” In the following discussion, in addition to Eagleton’s demonstration of the three views of religion and religiosity, I will also refer to several critical works on *One Day* and “Matryona’s House” to shed light on the discussion.

### THE THREE STAGES OF RELIGIOUS SURVIVAL

To begin with, it is important to note that the three different attitudes towards faith that Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s narrators show in *One Day* and “Matryona’s House” are not well-distributed in the stories. The two stories do not always spend equal space to discuss them. As we shall see later, with regards to the narrators’ perceptions on religion as alienating rituals, for example, “Matryona’s House” has more to say about this subject than “Matryona’s House” does. As we combine them, nevertheless, the two works present a deeper understanding of the presence of the three stages of understanding, which is why in the first place I decided to take the two works together instead of only one to discuss the subject.

#### Perception of the Alienating Feature of Religion

The first attitude that Solzhenitsyn’s narrators have is highlighting religious practice as otherworldly and irrelevant. In this regard, *One Day*’s narrator shows his first negative view when he narrates:

There’s a young fellow at the table over there crossing himself before he dips his spoon in. One of Bendera’s lot, must be. And a new boy at that. The older ones give it up when they’ve been inside a bit.

The Russians don’t even remember which hand you cross yourself with. (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, 2000, p. 8)

The reader will find that this is his first contact with religion in the story, and it takes place early on. Earlier, the narrator only says in passing that one of Shukhov’s neighbors is Alyoshka the Baptist. This time, we have a better view, if still not clear, of how the narrator sees the religious person in the camp, i.e.

as someone who is not yet fully a member of the society. As far as nationality goes, the person is Ukrainian. In addition to his being Ukrainian, there are at least two things that indicate his being an outsider. The first one is when the narrator says, "And a new boy at that," which entails that once he lives longer in the camp he will leave his ritualistic religious practice. The narrator ends up his discussing about the crossing by saying in a mocking tone that the Russians no longer remember which hand to cross themselves with, which in passing highlights the fact that Russia, the big nation in that part of the world, has fallen to such a low degree of spirituality.

While Shukhov and everybody in the prison have come there during the Stalin era, the portrait of their lack of religiosity goes back to the beginning of the revolution. The narrator's way of seeing the Ukrainian's religiosity and that of his own people—or Shukhov's people—points this out. That he sees Russian people as losing their religiosity—of course by no means we can take "Russians" as he says it as representing literally all Russians—hints at the considerable "success" of the Soviet leaders in separating Russian people from their religions. In "Religion and Secularization in the Soviet Union: The Role of Antireligious Cartoon" David E. Powell (1977) states that the Communist Party was always ambitious to cleanse the Russian land from the influence of the church through various attempts. Powell explicates how, as opposed to the materialist doctrine that the change of socio-economic condition in the socialist state will shape the consciousness of the people, Marxist leaders of the Soviet Union, who followed the Leninist strain of Marxism, believed that if such change was too far from seeing its first light, then the government had to take steps to make sure people's consciousness takes the expected shape. Therefore, as Philip Walters (in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, 2000) discusses in an encompassing introduction, the Soviet leaders had to make policies whose final end was to make Russian people more secular. The program started as early as 1917 by dispossessing churches and clergymen of their material properties as well as their social rights, including electing and being elected into any governmental position (Walter in Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, 2000, p. 6). As the years marched on, the program only increased with various techniques, both soft ways (through propaganda and the use of cartoon, for example) and hard ways (such as through terrors). Religion was banned from school curriculum, which led to development of Russian generation who lacked religious values or was only able to learn about religion with limited facilities. Shukhov, whom we can assume to be as old as Solzhenitsyn was during his prison camp years, must

have grown up during these years and seen for himself how the post-revolution generation of Russian people, including those who lived in the rural areas.

Meanwhile, in "Matryona's House" our narrator sneers at the way Matryona and the villagers of Tal'ново observed their religious rituals. In his narration about the only moment Matryona holds a party at her cottage, a christening party it is, Ignatich describes how Matryona is very sad because somebody has stolen her holy water, for which she has had to walk three miles to get a priest's blessing. Right after this, Ignatich intrudes the narrative by saying that "this did not mean that Matryona was really a fervent believer. If anything, she was a pagan and, above all, superstitious" (Solzhenitsyn, 2015, p. 23). Then, he continues narrating quite longer, as follow:

For as long as I lodged with her, I never once saw her say her prayers or cross herself. Yet. She always asked for God's blessing before doing anything and she invariably said "God bless you" to me whenever I set off for school in the morning. Perhaps she did say her prayers, but not ostentatiously, being embarrassed by my presence or afraid of disturbing me. There were ikons in her cottage. On ordinary days they were unlit, but on the eve of feast days and on the feast days themselves Matryona would light the ikon lamp. (Solzhenitsyn, 2015, p. 23)

Despite his mostly non-judgmental, or even almost detached, tone in narrating the story, the flow of this narrative suggests to us how Ignatich sees Matryona's spiritual stance. It is not clear at this point how Ignatich views Matryona's religiosity. He seems to refrain from passing judgment. Instead of commenting on Matryona's religiosity, he cuts his own story by saying that Matryona is not a fervent believer. Juxtaposing Matryona's religious attitude with her superstitious attitude seems to be interesting here. It brings to our mind that despite its apparent differing orientation, such religiousness and superstitiousness are not as far as one thinks it is. We can start to grope for Ignatich's position here as he tells the reader about Matryona's other aspect of religiosity, the non-expressive one. He never sees Matryona praying in person. However, he assumes that Matryona does "say her prayers, but not ostentatiously, [because she is] embarrassed by [his] presence" (Solzhenitsyn, 2015, p. 23). Here, he stops his comment on Matryona's religiosity by showing how Matryona, despite her religiousness, still (although probably, since Ignatich himself is not sure) prefers to respect others by not praying if it might

disturb them. In other words, Matryona is the kind of person who thinks that God can wait to hear my loud prayers and for now let us not make others disturbed.

Ignatich's attitude towards the purely ritual aspect of religion cannot fail to give an impression that he points those practices only to show that they do not have, in Eagleton's words, "bearing on human existence." Commenting on how the villagers during the ritual of speaking to the deceased, Ignatich says: "I detected in their mourning an element of cold calculation, of an ancient, established procedure" (Solzhenitsyn, 2015, p. 44). Being an outsider who, as we can assume, does not share the same spirituality and thus can be critical towards the villagers, Ignatich does not sympathize with it. Ignatich's negative attitude towards the "cold calculation" and "ancient, established procedure," implying the emptiness of this practice and its lack of relevance with today's life, becomes clearer as he narrates further how the mourners even put some "politics" into the empty action. They say their expressions of grief that also include accusation and apology from respectively Matryona's blood sister and her in-laws.

The reader can see the same preoccupation with the physical action of a ritual without depth during the wake ritual the night after Matryona's burial. Ignatich narrates:

"Before eating the final dish of *kisel'*, we stood up and sang "In Eternal Memory." They explained to me that traditionally this had to be sung before the *kisel'*. Then more vodka, after which the talk became louder still and no longer concerned with Matryona" (Solzhenitsyn, 2015, p. 48).

As Terry Eagleton comments on his childhood religious upbringing, as narrated in his memoir *The Gatekeeper*, religion for the Catholics as he knew as a young man, "was not something to get all sloppy and personal about; it was more like launching a ship than falling in love, a set of public rites to be precisely executed" (2003, p. 32).

Everything related to rituals must be calculated and a slight difference matters a lot. In the case of the wake in "Matryona's House," the mourners were not all too concerned about the slight change in the ritual, but still they consider that something—that is why she tells Ignatich about it, implying that if they do not do it at least others know that they do not do it in the traditional order on purpose. However, once the villagers who were supposed to be there for the wake of Matryona's death drink more vodka, they start to talk "louder still and no longer concerned with

Matryona." The equally important aspect of this depiction is the fact that Ignatich brings up again Matryona, which suggests that these people, who have been very concerned about the procession eventually forgets the actual reason of their presence in that place. Their ritual was nothing but surface, physical action whose spiritual meaning, assuming all religious practices have a meaning or another to those who practice them earnestly, that they do not understand. Here, we can see that despite, as I quoted earlier in this article, Solzhenitsyn considering religion as the foundation of his life and occupying the utmost importance in his writings, he does not fail to be critical to the practice of religion that do not give any meaning to human existence on earth. This nuanced attitude towards religiosity is probably one of the manifestations of Solzhenitsyn's challenge to the principle socialist realism, which was the mainstream aesthetic during the publication of *One Day* and "Matryona's House"—about this, we will discuss a little bit in the following section.

#### **Identification of Religion as a Peacemaking Power**

The second shade of view towards religiosity in the eyes of Solzhenitsyn's narrators is religion as a source of strength for men in the most difficult condition of life. In several places throughout *One Day* and "Matryona's House," our narrators pass positively sounding comments on the mental attitude of the religious characters in the stories they narrate respectively. The most prominent comment that the narrators pass in this regard is about the smile that the religious characters always have on their faces. In *One Day*, when Shukhov and his gang approach the site where they are supposed to work, the narrator relates:

Alyoshka, standing next to Shukhov, gazed at the sum and smile spread from his eyes to his lips. Alyoshka's cheeks were hollow, he lived on his bare ration and never made anything on the side—what had he got to be happy about? He and the other Baptists spent their Sundays whispering to each other. Life in the camp was like water off a duck's back to them. They'd been lumbered with twenty-five years apiece just for being Baptists. Fancy thinking that would cure them!

It is quite difficult to imagine how a person can be happy in such a rough living condition. Alyoshka, however, does not seem to be bothered by this condition, as if prison camp life is just "water off a duck's back." The narrator here, although perhaps unconsciously, correlates Alyoshka's and the other Baptists' happiness with their being religious people.

In her article entitled "Solzhenitsyn's Revolutionary Rhetoric," Luellen Lucid points out Solzhenitsyn's rhetoric in *One Day* as opposing socialist realism. If socialist realism tends to present writer-hero who intends to educate hero through the ideology that he/she presents so as to make the reader have the spirit that is in accordance with the so-called "Party line," Solzhenitsyn reverses this doctrine of socialist realism. Instead of presenting to the reader story imbued with socialist ideological principles that will elevate him/her into a better person from the Party's perspective, Solzhenitsyn presents "a wide-ranging spectrum of political position and philosophical positions, including the 'Party line' itself" (Lucid, 1977, p. 501). These various political positions, then, might not be in line with Solzhenitsyn's political position. Indeed, as opposed to the "illuminating" spirit of socialist realism, Solzhenitsyn's works demand their readers to synthesize the colliding positions among the characters. *One Day's* narrator position with regards to Alyoshka's happiness becomes clearer. Despite his inability to get extra food in his camp life, Alyoshka shows more happiness, one thing that even Shukhov himself—again, I am here conflating Shukhov's and the narrator' mindsets—cannot always enjoy. Approaching the end of the novel, Shukhov will discuss Alyoshka's perception of the life in the camp and accept Alyoshka's view with regards to the acceptance of suffering as something that makes him live the day by day life of the prison camp in peace.

In "Matryona's House," Ignatich also notices the eternal smile in Matryona's face despite her difficult life. When her brother-in-law has just torn down part of the house where she lives, Matryona does not look depressed the way a person whose house has just been taken from him/her would. Instead, she takes delight in finding her loom and asks Ignatich to take her pictures working at the hand loom. Ignatich says, to comment on Matryona's happy complexion, "People who are at ease with their consciences always look happy" (Solzhenitsyn, 2015, p. 35). Ignatich by now has acknowledged Matryona's acceptance of life through her enthusiasm to help others and willingness to let go of her belongings whenever somebody else wants them. Like Alyoshka, Matryona is a type of person who accepts her condition no matter how hard it is if that is where the fate takes him. However, the message that lingers in Alyoshka's attitude in *One Day* becomes stronger. Despite her acceptance of her situation, Matryona actually also aims to make her life better. Returning to Eagleton's interpretation of the sacrifice of Jesus. Eagleton says that Jesus loves happiness, but if to live he has to conform to what he principally does not agree with, which leads to a life unworthy of living, he will sacrifice his life in order to

hold on to what he believes (2014, p. 26). One of the attempts has been visiting the local Soviet to get the pension for her husband. However, when she does not get it, she leaves the effort altogether and does something else that gives her delight. In Ignatich's words, "Instead of bowing to the office desks, she would lean over the bushes in the forest" (Solzhenitsyn, 2015, p. 15).

Matryona challenges the difficult life because of a missing breadwinner and the state who has for a long time not given her rights by being steadfast. Matryona's acceptance of her dark life by resorting to religion and feeling content with her condition is again another subversion against the socialist realism that the communist party expected Russian authors to practice. Edgar H. Lehrman records that Matryona's happiness with her dark condition and her eventual death made literary critics in Russia consider the work "lacking hope" (1964, p. 145). It seems like the literary critics, who were in alignment with the Party although by this time they were no longer Stalinists, had not realized by now that Solzhenitsyn was intentionally challenging the aesthetics of socialist realism and made the tradition of nineteenth century Russian literature as his model. In addition to this, Terry Eagleton's interpretation of Christian theology is an interesting comparison to Matryona's case here. As touched upon earlier, self-denial, the vital theme in Christianity, is by no means an end in itself. It is but a means to reach a state known as "Kingdom of God." Self-dispossession is not an escape from the harsh condition in the world, but an active act of avoiding subjugation by others, such as state (Eagleton, 2014, pp. 22–25).

The narrators in *One Day* and "Matryona's House" shows a high degree of respect towards the characters who find peace in the worldly life thanks to religion. In *One Day*, the reader sees Alyoshka uses Jesus as his model for suffering in the gulag. For him, imprisonment is not something to weep about; in fact, it is a perfect occasion for someone who wants to think about the soul. When Alyoshka says "What good is freedom to you? If you're free, your faith will soon be choked by thorns! Be glad you're in prison" (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, 2000, p. 96), he implies that imprisonment frees someone from the worldly affairs that one has to handle as a free man. Dispossession of worldly affairs, if one comes to think of it, means possession of spirituality. Unconsciously, Alyoshka's way of seeing his imprisonment is pleasing to Shukhov, for who as I have stated early on the narrator is but a spokesperson. Shukhov, although still unable to accept the significance of prayers for a person living in a prison camp without certainty as to

when they will be freed, eventually sees the validity of Alyoshka's way of accepting his imprisonment. Still, however, eventually he is the person who gives Alyoshka the biscuit, realizing that for him, who knows how to gain rewards by doing favors, getting an extra biscuit is not a big deal. Kohler sees Shukhov's giving Alyoshka the biscuit as signifying his imminent turn into spirituality. This is definitely a valid interpretation in itself. However, it is also important to notice that Shukhov gives the biscuit under the realization that Alyoshka, no matter how righteous he might be, will never enjoy a little enjoyment in the worldly life of the prison camp. This reservation on Shukhov's part seems to serve as a good segway to the last view of religiosity, in *One Day* and "Matryona's House," which is the most positive attitude towards religiosity.

### Acceptance of the Humanistic Values of Religion

The last view that Solzhenitsyn's narrators in the two stories show is the appreciation of the humanistic value of religion. At a certain point of the two stories, although sometimes they are not fully at the end of the story since religion is not the only theme in the two stories, the narrator of each story gives a nod to the religious actions and attitudes of the religious characters in their respective stories. The narrators will eventually come to a realization that this attitude comes out of their religiosity. Apparently, Solzhenitsyn has a unique way of showing the positive manifestation of religiosity, i.e. through actual work.

In *One Day*, Shukhov shows his appreciation of the impact of Alyoshka's religiosity on his work ethic. When Shukhov and his gang have to work very fast because the cold makes mortar harden easily and thus they have to transport the brick blocks as quickly as possible, the captain orders Alyoshka to work faster, which is followed by Alyoshka's faster work. The narrator then says "Anybody who felt like it could order Alyoshka about, he was so meek and mild" (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, 2000, p. 54). There is a patronising tone, which sees Alyoshka as a childlike character who would do whatever the adult tells him to do. A couple of lines down the same page, there is a tone of gratefulness from the narrator when he says "A meek fellow like that is a treasure to his gang" (Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, 2000, p. 54). The moment the reader gets to this part, there might be a lot of variables as to why Alyoshka works so diligently. Later, however, once the reader approaches the end of the novella, the reason why Alyoshka is very diligent becomes clear. As discussed in the previous section, Alyoshka accepts his condition religiously. For him, even the hardest tribulation that life has in store does not bother him. Working, no matter how hard it is, is

still bearable for him. For someone who no longer has possessiveness—who does not even wish to possess freedom, without which a lot of people cannot live—what is better than being of service for others, especially those who do not stand in his way as a religious person? For Alyoshka and the other Baptists, their enemy in this slice of the Stalinist Russia is the Soviet government who has purged them to Siberia for being Baptists.

This is consistent with Terry Eagleton's understanding of Jesus' self-sacrifice not as an end but as a means towards an end. Seen from this perspective, Alyoshka's internalization of the story of Jesus and his suffering, which gives meaning to Alyoshka's imprisonment, eventually leads him to help others. What is even more important in this part is that Alyoshka does everybody a favor, without expecting anything in return. Although he does not have much space in the dialog, it turns out that Alyoshka has become an important element in the prison camp, at least for "Gang 104," as someone who contributes in making the prison camp life bearable. This attitude turns out to have stemmed from his internalization of the Christian doctrine of sacrifice.

In *Matryona's House*, quite similarly, we can also find the manifestation of Matryona's religiosity in her righteousness and helpfulness. Instances of Matryona's helpfulness are so plentiful, scattered all over the story, that it will be a blunder if the word "helpful" is not found in any explication of her characterization. Here, I would like to limit my discussion on Matryona's helpfulness to the last help that she has given to anyone in the story. At the end of her life, Matryona has to let go of a portion of her cottage because his niece, to whom she has planned to give the portion in question after her death, wants to use the timber for making a new house. This is a difficult thing for Matryona, and it breaks her heart to see her house torn apart. Even then, however, she cannot fail to give her helping hand to the people who are tearing her house apart. For Ignatich, Matryona's helpfulness is quite futile, considering how relatively weak Matryona is to participate in such a heavy duty. If we see further, however, this incident only highlights Matryona's unwavering commitment to being helpful. Parthé, in her article entitled "The Righteous Brothers (And Sisters) of Contemporary Russian Literature," acknowledges Matryona's folk-religious roots and ties with the nineteenth century Russian literary heroines and states that only later does the narrator find out about Matryona's righteousness, after Matryona died in the accident. Parthé states that Ignatich has been "most impressed by her lifelong refusal to accumulate material goods and her habit of helping anyone who asked" (1993, p. 96). The

narrator even ends the story by citing an old Russian proverb that Matryona might be the righteous person that a town needs in order to survive. Matryona's steadfastness in maintaining her helpfulness, a value that has been diminishing in the encroaching materialism which, as the story suggests, has reached even to a remote area like Tal' novo, in which a person is considered strange when she does not accept rewards after doing a favor.

## CONCLUSION

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn has a unique way to present the subject of religiosity in his stories. Instead of presenting religion by pointing out the good morals, Solzhenitsyn presents religion seen from three perspectives. Solzhenitsyn shows how faith survives in his story through the omission of its otherworldly elements, affirmation of the mentally-empowering potential, and proposition of humanistic and social values. These three ways are by no means exhaustive in explaining Solzhenitsyn's texts. The dialogic or carnivalesque nature of Solzhenitsyn's works, as seen through its tendency to present the myriad ideological and political views, makes this attempt to explicate the three perceptions of religion in the two stories just one of the many interpretations that have been done and will be done. Regarding Luellen Lucid's argument that not only does Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's continue the tradition of great Russian literature from the nineteenth century, but also he launches a challenge against the mainstream socialist-realist aesthetics, I do hope that this attempt be interpreted as not only does Solzhenitsyn let a lot of subjects have a dialog in his works, but he also incites dialogs from various perspectives even for a single object, which in this case happens to be faith.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, B. C. (2015). Solzhenitsyn's permanence. *The New Criterion*, 33(6), 1–6.
- Eagleton, T. (2003). *The gatekeeper: A memoir*. Macmillan.
- Eagleton, T. (2014). *Reason, faith, & revolution: Reflections on the God debate*. Yale University Press.
- Lehrman, E. H. (1964). Soviet Russian prose fiction 1963. *World Literature Today*, 38(2), 145.
- Lucid, L. (1977). Solzhenitsyn's rhetorical revolution. *Twentieth Century Literature*, 23(4), 498–517.
- Parthé, K. (1993). The righteous brothers (and sisters) of contemporary Russian literature. *World Literature Today*, 67(1), 91–99.
- Pearce, J., & Alexander, S. (n.d.). An interview with Alexander Solzhenitsyn [Catholic Education Research Center]. Retrieved from <https://www.catholiceducation.org/en/culture/art/an-interview-with-alexander-solzhenitsyn.html>
- Powell, D. E. (1977). Religion and secularization in the Soviet Union: The role of antireligious cartoons. *Religion and modernization in the Soviet Union*, 136–201.
- Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr. (2000). *One day in the life of Ivan Denisovich with selected readings*. Glencoe/McGraw-Hill.
- Solzhenitsyn, Aleksandr. (2015). *Stories and prose poems*. Macmillan.
- Solzhenitsyn, Alexander, Neef, C., & Schepp, M. (2007, August 30). *Spiegel* Interview with Alexander Solzhenitsyn "I'm not Afraid of Death." Retrieved from <http://www.spiegel.de/international/world/spiegel-interview-with-alexander-solzhenitsyn-i-am-not-afraid-of-death-a-496211.html>.