

In My Humble Opinion

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Смирение: humility

Once upon a time — a few years ago — I decided that a look at the семь смертных грехов (seven deadly sins) would be culturally enlightening and personally edifying. After all, to get along in a culture, you have to know what's considered right and wrong. So I slogged through гордыня (pride), алчность (greed), похоть (lust), гнев (anger), зависть (envy), обжорство (gluttony) and уныние (despondency, sloth), discovering all the interesting words and ways to be a Bad Person in the view of Russian culture.

Russian culture also has strong ideas about being a Good Person. It's much harder, but there are more options. Russian has a long list of добродетели (virtues), a lovely word that was originally a calque from the Greek and meant "good deeds." The virtues can be grouped variously, sometimes in categories borrowed from Western religious and philosophical traditions, like the богословские добродетели (theological virtues) of вера (faith), надежда (hope) and любовь (love). There are also моральные (moral) or кардинальные добродетели (cardinal virtues) of мудрость (wisdom), справедливость (justice), мужество (courage) and умеренность (temperance).

Often certain virtues are listed as the opposites of particular sins — something like spiritual antidotes to bad behavior and qualities. At the top of the list are гордыня (pride), perhaps the worst of the sins, and its opposite — смирение (humility) — probably the greatest of the virtues.

To the modern ear, смирение and the verbs смирить (to humble, subdue) and смириться (to resign oneself to something) sound like they might have originally meant с миром (with peace). But language specialists insist that the root of the word was not мир (peace) but мера (measure). One armchair etymologist interprets the original meaning this way: Смирение — это знание своей меры, умение соразмерить и осознать свое место в мире (Humility — it's knowing your measure, the ability to compare and acknowledge your place in the world).

That might be a bit of folk etymology, but it's close to religious and philosophical definitions of смирение that dominated the Russian moral and cultural landscape for centuries.

Смирение is скромность духа (modesty of the spirit); сознание, что совершенство, к которому человек стремится, остается бесконечно далеким (the recognition that the ideal a person is striving toward remains infinitely far away); or раскрытие души для реальности (opening your soul to reality).

As far as I can grasp it, смирение is the ability to see the world and your place in it without ego and pride, but also without self-abasement. I think that's what Fyodor Dostoevsky was talking about when he wrote: Смирение — самая страшная сила, какая только может на свете быть! (Humility is the most awesome power that can exist on Earth!)

This lofty cultural value seems to have become one of the casualties of change over the last century in Russia. Today I don't think you'll find смирение on the list of the top-10 aspirations of ordinary Russian folks. In everyday speech, the word is often used more narrowly. Милиционер привёл в смирение разбушевавшихся хулиганов (The policeman got the unruly hooligans under control). The verb pair смирять/смирить is generally rather bookish but can occasionally be used in expressions like смирить дикого зверя (to subdue a wild beast).

Смириться has the sense of resigning oneself, giving up and giving in: Они смирились с неизбежным (They resigned themselves to the inevitable). Надо смириться с судьбой (You have to accept your fate).

Of course, language and culture change, and there's nothing you can do about it. But it's too bad. It would be nice if a few more people had old-style humility (смирение), and a few less people were forced to resign themselves (смириться) to an inevitable and often unenviable fate.

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