

Evil in Russian Thought and Literature (CFP)

**St. John's College, University of Cambridge
July 31–August 2, 2025**

Co-sponsored by Trinity College, University of Cambridge, and the Northwestern University Research Initiative in Russian Philosophy, Literature, and Religious Thought

Do we still need the concept of evil? War, atrocity, disease, and hatred are constant characteristics of human life, but different eras and cultures have offered widely different explanations for them. How a community accounts for the reality of such phenomena reveals a great deal about its beliefs and values.

Western thinking has been shaped by a Judeo-Christian inheritance that approaches “the problem of evil” as a theological dilemma, framing suffering in terms of sin and humanity’s relationship to the divine. This inherited religious framework for thinking about what is wrong with the world was challenged by the transformations wrought by the Enlightenment. Western thought since then has been characterized by a narrowing of focus. Kant altered the map by training our attention on moral rather than natural evil, reframing the issue as a task for anthropology and religion.

But there has been a broadening of focus as well. There are now multiple discourses, from medicine to social science, authorized to provide explanations for everything from war to crime to child abuse. Although they are sometimes in competition, these modern discourses seek to replace evil with other explanatory concepts, creating the impression that evil has been left behind as no longer valid or useful. But is this really the case? Have post-Enlightenment replacements for evil made the concept irrelevant? The twenty-first century has witnessed reconsideration of evil among some Western thinkers, with works such as *Evil: A History* (Oxford UP, 2019) outlining an “evil revivalism” in some circles.

This conference seeks to gather perspectives on how Russian thought and literature have engaged with the question of evil, specifically its continuing validity or obsolescence. We welcome papers that raise questions such as: What have Russian thought and literature contributed to our understanding of evil? How have Russian thinkers and artists reflected on the strengths and weaknesses of evil as an explanatory framework, and on the ideas and discourses that have arisen to challenge it? Are there distinctively Russian aspects to their reflections, and to what extent do these reflections on evil demonstrate engagement with other cultural traditions? What changes have Russian philosophy, religion, or literature undergone over time as they have grappled with the question of evil?

“Evil in Russian Thought and Literature” will take place at St. John’s College, University of Cambridge, from Thursday, July 31–Saturday, August 2, 2025.

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We invite paper proposals of 250–500 words by January 1, 2025.

Email your abstracts to:

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