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## Vassily Nalimov: Modern Russian High Priest

Rustum Roy

*Materials Research Laboratory Pennsylvania State University*

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RUSTUM ROY

MATERIALS RESEARCH LABORATORY

PENNSYLVANIA STATE UNIVERSITY

UNIVERSITY PARK, PENNSYLVANIA, USA

It was through Gene Garfield of the ISI Press, Vassily's publisher in the United States, that I first heard of a set of extraordinary books by this very distinguished Russian mathematician. Gene and I have long shared an "evaluative" and slightly philosophical attitude toward the American science community in which we "live, move, and have our being." So when he told me of this remarkable Russian who shared some of the same weltanschauung, I dived eagerly into Nalimov's *Faces of Science* (1981) and found there the work of a kindred spirit. The line drawings by Zlatkovsky which were used to illustrate the book picked up, visually, so many of the very same themes that I had championed in U.S. science policy circles for years that I actually obtained Nalimov's permission to use them in my major science policy book, *Lost at the Frontier* (1985), written with Deborah Shapley.

This introduction to his thought proved to me that Nalimov had clearly put "science in its (proper) place" in the context of human affairs. Here was a *scientist* who had transcended science into citizenship—citizenship of a new world community. As I learned more of his life and background and work, what staggered me was the position he held in the Mathematical Institute of one of the greatest mathematical centers of the world, in the Intrafaculty Laboratory of Statistical Methods at Moscow State University led by Kolmogorov. I was very familiar with Soviet science, since I had been chairman for some years of the U.S. National Academy's Committee on the U.S.-USSR Inter-National Academies Exchange Program. I was frequently in Moscow and knew the Soviet bureaucracy anomaly. It boggled my mind that any Soviet scientist would be allowed to conduct sensory-deprivation experiments on artists and to analyze the images they created in terms of Nalimov's *Realms of the Unconscious* (1982). Certainly no department of mathematics in the West would have tolerated such deviant behavior!

I also felt a rather special bond with Vassily because he was the only other "high-powered" scientist I knew who was intimately knowledgeable about the Bible and Western theology—and who was willing and able to write openly about theology. He was "at home" in Western thought, including the theological and psychological jargon of the post-WWII period. How, I often wondered, had he managed to keep up not only with Western science but even Western theology and psychology? Moreover, the overlap of our ideas went much further. In 1979, I had delivered the Hibbert Lectures in London in the centenary year of that well-known series. They appeared under the title *Experimenting with Truth*, which I sent to him. Among the major "insights" presented in that book were:

1. The impending End of Science (the abstract, not-connected-to-purpose kind) and the asymptotes being approached by all major human technological exploitations of nature.
2. That the most obvious major insight from human experience which had not been incorporated into religion—nor indeed into establishment science—was the role of Chance.
3. The concept that science is related to theology as a tiny part is to the whole; that science can only study and illuminate the detail of the big canvas painted by religion.

Vassily immediately confirmed that he agreed with the first point. Imagine then my excitement when I found in *Realms of the Unconscious* Vassily's treatment of exactly the same theme of the Role of Chance. How supported I—a rank amateur in statistics—felt that one of the leading statisticians of the world had come to such very similar conclusions. Vassily makes the case that “science” has never faced up to the obvious human consequences of the observable, universally experienced phenomenon of “chance.” For most of the last three centuries, it was relegated to the fuzzy world of unsolved problems, which is “due to ignorance.” It was all merely a matter of time until any anomaly would be explained, and cause and effect would triumph. Of course that world is much less cocky now. Chaos is in. Einstein was wrong in his quip, “The Lord God does not play dice.” She/he not only *plays* dice, she/he has provided Chance and given it an efficacious role for human freedom precisely by providing an unending, universal stream of chance events at the level of human experience. These absolutely inevitable events—over large samples—provide the special openings for “newness,” for “creativity,” for loving faithfulness to “God” in the lives of individual humans.

A final theme or embodiment of Vassily's life was his “ecumenism.” He not only internally and intrinsically encompassed science and religion, but also Eastern Orthodoxy and Western Christianity. And his shamanic roots and his drawing on Eastern religions made him a forerunner of the macro-ecumenism which is aborning around us, of which he was, in reality, a High Priest.

My wife and I had the honor and pleasure of having Vassily and Jeanna Drogalina-Nalimov visit Penn State and our home and give various lectures in our Science, Technology, and Society program, and I was also able to see this idyllic couple in Moscow. A specially memorable occasion was when Professor Robert Colodny of the University of Pittsburgh, the major editor of Nalimov's books in English, and his wife, drove from Pittsburgh to meet with the Nalimovs and the Roys at Penn State's Materials Research Laboratory. The fact is that the world lost one of the most incredible holistic scientist-theologians when Vassily Vassilievich Nalimov died in 1997.