ABSTRACT. Drawing on MacIntyre's encyclopaedia–genealogy–tradition typology of the humanities, the author describes Averintsev's project as bringing together the elements of encyclopaedia and tradition. The article identifies three forms of isolationism which are evident not only in 'post-atheistic' societies but more widely, and comments on Averintev's treatment of these.

KEY WORDS: communication, dictionary, encyclopaedia, genealogy, isolationism, Post-Atheism, Sophia, tradition

Averintsev's world stands as a refutation of the misanthropic generalization which the poet Joseph Brodsky attributed to a modern Ulysses speaking to his son: “Telemachus, when you travel for so long, all islands resemble one another.” Today a journey through the articles written by the late Academician Sergej Sergejevich Averintsev yields surprises not only on account of their variety, variety on a scale seldom encountered even in times more auspicious than the Soviet years. Quite apart from their own inherent qualities, these articles are striking due to the complete and utter absence of that all-pervasive atmosphere of terminally monotonous, featureless ‘prose’ characteristic of Party and state speeches, which set the tone for, and introduced, all dissertations and dictionaries belonging to that era, which marked all ‘scholarly apparatus.’ Hard as it may now be to believe, something as small as a single typographical error (the very telling substitution of one letter of the alphabet for another so that the word ‘patriotic’ replaced ‘patristic’!) is sufficient to call back to mind the specific nature
of censorship as it was applied in the 1960s, the time when Averintsev was writing his now classic work on Kiev’s Holy Sophia Cathedral. Written in those difficult decades, hundreds of Averintsev’s writings now reveal to us new horizons of the inexhaustibly rich world that he inhabited.

Offering the foundations of Christian culture within the form of an encyclopaedic dictionary amounts to an impressive alternative to the “lies placed in alphabetical order” for which Soviet encyclopaedias were notorious. Sergej Averintsev’s Dictionary imparts to the reader not only a universal body of knowledge from A to Z, but also the very energy of his personal choices and interpretation, beginning with the ‘narrow path’ pursued by Abraham, that eminent embodiment of Old Testament faith, and also taking in ‘Paganism’ and the ‘broad path’ of its numerous ‘post-atheistic’ manifestations. Articles which first appeared in Soviet publications such as the five-volume Philosophical Encyclopaedia, the seven-volume Short Literary Encyclopaedia, the two-volume Myths of Peoples of the World and the three-volume publication Christianity – which have elicited great praise from relevant subject specialists – are for the very first time collected in one place.

The synthesis achieved by Averintsev’s Dictionary reveals particular qualities of the various elements within it which had previously been obscured by being torn from their full and proper context and, also, by being isolated from one another by the thick fog of ideology present in the Soviet editions. Readers would experience a genuine shock when, in the empty waters of the Great Soviet Encyclopaedia, they suddenly encountered that great rock of an article which Averintsev’s entry on Logos represents or, indeed, his entry on Love. It’s a matter of unforgettable encounters: amid the gloom of half-truths and in an ocean of would-be knowledge, scattered here and there you find articles by this master-encyclopaedist, and they stand out clearly as high and hope-inducing islands of a particularly lofty kind, marked by very particular, crystal-clear thought. Now that we can take in these articles together, within the covers of a single volume, we have, in effect, a map which points us to Averintsev’s Archipelago.