



Overcoming the Secular
Russian Religious Philosophy
and Post-Secularism

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Post-Secular Thinking in the Age of Reason: Gregory Skovoroda's Apology of Religion

The eighteenth century in Russia was a time of great changes and transformations caused by the reformation activities of Tsar Peter the Great. A nearly monoethnic and mono-religious state was rapidly transformed (by the will of a single man) into an empire.¹ "Having cut through," as he figuratively put it, "a window to Europe," Peter opened it wide enough to let something more than mere European influence in, but also the strongest wind, storms, and violent tempests of European culture. This was undoubtedly the wind of change which shaped not only the Russian state, but also Russian society in a specific way.

In Europe, the eighteenth century is known as the Enlightenment or *the Age of Reason*. It was a time which saw an intense struggle between the Old and the New. It was a time of social, political, and intellectual transformations for Europe, which could only be compared with the trials of the wandering of nations in late Antiquity or the dreadful and terrible tempest of the European Reformation. However, this time there was something utterly new, which clearly distinguished these perturbations from those of the past. It was a distinct challenge to the whole of European history and culture since neither had the barbarians of late Antiquity so ferociously denied the importance of Roman culture, nor had the "fathers" of the Reformation so abruptly and fervently rejected the "old religion" as was the case by representatives of the Enlightenment. Their major intention was to build a new world instead of the old one, and that the new one ought to be inevitably better, and more beautiful, and just, and perfect, than the old one had been.

¹ We could mention here a verse by Nikolai Iazykov, which was taken by Alexander Pushkin as an epigraph to his *The Blackamoor of Peter the Great*: "Russia, / 'Transformed by Peter's iron will..." See, e.g. Pushkin, *Complete Prose Fiction*, 11.

It seems almost the same as what Peter the Great felt in relation to Russia when he chose to reshape his old-fashioned state in a new, modern, European way.

One of the most renowned features of the European Enlightenment was its secularism, which at this time had become the major cause of attacks on the Church in particular—the most renowned is the Voltairian “*Écrasez l’infâme!*,” and religion in general (and, first of all, on the Christian Religion). The same, although with a slight difference, could be observed for Russia, where Peter himself, as well as those who inherited his throne, reshaped the political and social reality as it seemed best to them. Therefore, almost the same secular winds blew in Russia as they did in Europe. The Church, and religion itself experienced one of the most dramatic and challenging periods in their history; and the challenge had to be answered.

As the ancient Christian apology in the late Antiquity had first had to overcome the noxious influence of the ancient paganism (preserving its treasures) within the Church, and hereon only addressed its message to the non-Christian world, which could be considered an act of the post-pagan thinking. Thus in much the same manner the Christian apology of religion in the Age of Reason had to overcome the influences of the secular world which could be considered an act of the post-secular thinking. It is no less notable that these post-secular efforts were the first stirrings in the awakening of Russian (and Ukrainian) thought, which itself became a landmark signifying the dawn of future Russian (and Ukrainian) philosophy.

On the territories of the Russian Empire, one of the firsts, who could be called a post-secular thinker was Gregory Skovoroda (1722–1794).

Gregory, the son of Savva (Sabba), Skovoroda was born in Little Russia, Kiev government (province), Lubny district, in the village of Chernukhy, in 1722. He was educated at the Kyiv Mohyla Academy. For a while, he served as a chorister of the Royal Chapel in St. Petersburg, and later as a choirmaster in the Orthodox Church in the Russian mission in Tokay, Hungary. Upon his return to his homeland, he tried his hand at being a college professor and a private tutor, teaching poetics, Ancient Greek, and the Orthodox Catechesis, until he felt he had a vocation to pursue the life of a hermit. However, he did not retire to a monastery, but led the life of a peripatetic teacher, visiting his friends and writing his works that contained his vision of spiritual life and the rest of related issues.²

² The only trustworthy and detailed account of Gregory Skovoroda's life was composed in February 1795, not long after Skovoroda's death, by his beloved student, disciple, and the

Whatever changes Skovoroda's views would undergo during his lifetime, the focal point of his doctrine—which is the existential reality (wants and needs) of a human being—remained unchanged, as well as forming the kernel of his teaching and philosophical interests: Skovoroda mostly focused on moral and religious issues. Therefore, the central topics were of the same nature: e.g. the ways and means for overcoming existential fears—the strongest existential fear of Gregory Skovoroda himself, it seems, was the fear of death, the question about the possibility of and the ways to true human happiness, the meaning of religion and religious life.

Thus it seems it would not be very untrue to say here that the problem of human happiness is the key issue throughout Skovoroda's philosophy. Almost the same aspiration for human happiness can easily be found in the works of representatives of the European Enlightenment, wherefrom we can draw the conclusion that it was a general tendency of the time. However, whilst the majority of European thinkers were mostly focused on social and political issues (within the horizons of the earthly human life), Gregory Skovoroda rather felt the necessity, first, address the inner human life, meet the basic existential needs of a human being. It seems he considered the attempts to transform the life of society without having transformed the inner life of a person who is an acting member of the society and social life to be insufficient.

Therefore, one of the main tasks Gregory Skovoroda had to deal with was the apology of religion, which in his opinion is the only thing that is able to transform the inner self of a person in the right way. For Gregory Skovoroda, as for many representatives of the Christian tradition, the human being (microcosm)³ is a being set betwixt the material and the spiritual elements of life. Moreover, the human being is a complex compound of both, and human life is being consisted of these two elements, but the spiritual one is (rather) more fundamental, and therefore more important. Religion reveals the spiritual element which is necessarily present in the entire building of the being, and the disregarding of which would bring us to nothing good.

At first sight it may seem strange, but Gregory Skovoroda asserts almost the same denial of religion among those who declare themselves to be the members of the Christian Church as much as among those, who are strictly opposed to the Church and Christian religion from secular positions. Therefore, there are two parties in face of which the apology of religion is to be made: one within the Church, and another outside of it. Thus, the apology itself must be

closest friend Michael Kovalynsky. See Kovalynskiy, 1343–75. More about his life, see, e.g. Chernyshov, "Grigoriy Skovoroda," 205–43.

³ See, e.g. Skovoroda, *Povna akademichna zbirka tvoriv*, 248.

as though twofold: on the one hand, it must be directed against secularity, open atheism, and materialism, and on the other—against narrowing the Church perspective to the outward forms of cult and its historical practices. Gregory Skovoroda charges the first with *hypocrisy*, as the second—with *superstition*.

Skovoroda called himself “a lover of the Holy Bible.”⁴ Considering the Bible to be “the third, symbolical world,” along with “the big world—macrocosm” and “the little world—microcosm—a human being,” Skovoroda, tries to find there symbolic and enigmatic analogies that can be called the archetypes of everything that happens in both the big world as the macrocosm and a human being as the microcosm.⁵ However, he warns that the Bible is “the Book of Theology,” since it guides us solely towards the knowledge of God, leaving behind everything corruptible.”⁶

He calls contemporary materialists and atheists of the Enlightenment “*hypocrites*,” obviously referring to them all the rebukes and reproves which Jesus Christ addresses in the Bible to the ancient “hypocrites.” However, he calls his contemporary churchmen, who reduce the understanding of Christianity to the literal one, “*superstitious people*,” obviously, borrowing the name from both the pagan tradition of the late Antiquity (Cicero, Horace) and the contemporary criticism of religion made by intellectuals of the Enlightenment.

It is worth noticing that in his earlier works Gregory Skovoroda is mostly against those, who represent the secular party outside the Church, as in his latter ones (especially from 1775), he increasingly criticized those who called themselves Christians (and are often devout Church-goers), but rather shared a worldly superstition than a living and saving faith.

The *first part* and starting point of Skovoroda’s apology of religion, in the answer to materialistic and atheistic renunciation of the Enlightenment, a lively reality of human existential experience. Materialism and atheism come from an existential break from reality of being, lack of knowledge and wisdom in those who propagate them. For Skovoroda, they are intellectual and existential errors of the time. Knowing nothing about the true and living faith, critics of religion confuse religion and superstition.

The confusion of religion and superstition is a fundamental error itself, but besides it, almost all secular critics of religion share the same collection of the other *fundamental errors*. Skovoroda tries to discover the reason of their misinterpretation of religion, and their enmity towards it.

⁴ Ibid., 648.

⁵ Kovalyns'kyj, “Zhyzn' Grigorija Skovorody,” 1369–70.

⁶ Skovoroda, *Povna akademichna zbirka tvoriv*, 591.

The *first error* of the critics of religion is the false ontological belief that there is nothing in the world except for something that can be experienced by senses. The *hypocrites* behold only "the face" of things, but they are unable to penetrate into their nature, their sight slides on the surface, without observing the divine principles. Skovoroda says that they are like snakes that "creep upon the earth,"⁷ "eat the dust of corruptible flesh,"⁸ as only the faith is able to raise them up.⁹ They know nothing about the spiritual reality of being: it is wherefrom their materialism and atheism come.

The *second error* is that they are also very much misguided about the nature of true knowledge, believing that the progress in natural sciences could improve their position and bring happiness. As a result, striving for such sort of knowledge, they are utterly ignorant of "the highest science" that is the eternal wisdom of the "Christ's philosophy," which is the only thing that could make them truly happy.

The *third error* (coming from the first and second ones) is that they disregard the inner, spiritual life of human beings, believing them to be confined to their earthly lives and sensual existence. The *hypocrites* know nothing about the high destiny of human beings; therefore, they believe them to be like the rest of earthly animals.

The *fourth error* is that they believe human happiness consists rather of *having* (or experiencing) than of *being*, and therefore pay much more attention to collecting possessions and indulging themselves to debauches and carnal pleasures than to discovering a true calling (*srodnost'*), which would endow their lives with the inner sense and true meaning. Thus, they know nothing about true joys and spiritual delights, which can make them truly happy.

Thus, the main task of Skovoroda's apology of religion here is finding the effective means to correct the errors, showing the imperishable value of religion as such, underestimated by his contemporaries who advocate secular ideals.

Although, the reasons for such errors are manifold, but the major one—as Skovoroda puts it—is that *they do not know themselves*. The lack of self-knowledge makes any other knowledge as if the outer (material) world, so about God and the spiritual world either useless or impossible. Living in the outer world, they are unaware of who they truly are, as well as whom and what they are to be. Knowing nothing about their true callings, each of them goes the way, which seems to be good but eventually brings them to unhappiness.

⁷ Ibid., 237, 311, 344, 436, 460, 505, 563, 565, 570, 581, 648, 732–33, 787, 797, 954, 958.

⁸ Ibid., 330.

⁹ Ibid., 460.

Religion reveals and constantly witnesses, alongside the habitual sensual world, the existence of the other reality, where we know nothing of a *homo saecularis*. Moreover, the truth of which the religion is an undying witness to can easily be discovered by philosophy, using a logical method, with rational means. If they were only to give them trouble to calm themselves and to think a bit they would surely discover (with all certainty!) the truth even in the most usual things of the sensual world: the truth about existence of the spiritual world that religion teaches everyday, everywhere, always. Every clay pot,¹⁰ and every picture,¹¹ every house,¹² and every material building¹³ or thing¹⁴ preach the existence of the intelligible world alongside the sensual one; and that spiritual world, which contains many levels, is not to be confined to mere "forms." It is much more important to know about inner intentions or destinations of things, the purposes for which they have been created, and their ultimate end.¹⁵ The analysis of human nature gives the same evidence; moreover, it shows with all possible clarity that the sensual world is utterly dependent on the intelligible one as a tail on the head.¹⁶ The material human body is guided and governed by immaterial, by intelligible mind.¹⁷ Skovoroda believes that this discovery inevitably refutes completely the materialism and atheism, opening the way to faith and "Christ's philosophy."

The intellectuals of the European Enlightenment were very optimistic about the perspectives afforded by mathematics and natural sciences (Jean-Jacques Rousseau was the only exception). They believed that only progress in sciences could eventually bring humanity to happiness. Skovoroda states that this infatuation and enthusiasm for natural sciences can scarcely be fruitful and true, while the deepest existential needs and wants of human beings remain unsatisfied, being either ignored or neglected. The main purpose of sciences in the things and matters of the outer world, as the deepest existential cravings of human beings are for the things that are spiritual and divine. Following the steps of Apostle Paul,¹⁸ Gregory Skovoroda opposes to "the empty philosophy (according to the elements of this world)," the "Philosophy according to Christ." He also calls the latter "Christ's philosophy," "The Highest Science,"¹⁹ "The

¹⁰ Ibid., 243–44, 790.

¹¹ Ibid., 168, 562, 567, 686, 928.

¹² Ibid., 240, 242–43.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid., 242.

¹⁵ Ibid., 243.

¹⁶ Ibid., 244, 254, 309, 439, 503, 513, 650, 654, 878, 899–900, 906, 927, 1278.

¹⁷ Ibid., 214, 236–37, 239, 270–71.

¹⁸ Cf. Col 2:8.

¹⁹ Skovoroda, *Povna akademichna zbirka tvoriv*, 300.

Catholic Science,"²⁰ "The Universal Science,"²¹ pointing that any other sciences receive their meaning and become valuable only in relation to this "Highest Science." Skovoroda emphasizes that the rest of sciences deal with temporal things when this one with the things eternal. Those who believe there is a need only for worldly sciences, being ignorant of the Highest Science, Skovoroda calls "sirens,"²² "proud wises of the fat flesh,"²³ and "suckling wises."²⁴ Focusing on vanity, they become vain.²⁵ They promise happiness, but are unable to fulfill the promise, since it is not in their competence.²⁶ Skovoroda does not say that their knowledge is useless—he does not reject science²⁷—but he is rather trying to distinguish among the areas of competence of "the modern sciences" and "The Highest Science." His conclusion is that the borderline between these two kinds of knowledge is that the former concerned themselves with things of the outer world and the latter with the existential reality of human being.²⁸ The knowledge of modern science deals only with things of the material world, as the knowledge of the Highest Science, missing out everything temporal, focuses on the very foundations of being, dealing with the eternal things and God himself. It is utterly religious and immediately connected to religion, without which it would have lost itself.

The Highest Science is nothing but true wisdom, which eventually may bring true happiness. This wisdom is the perennial treasure of human knowledge about happy life. It depends neither on time nor on place, but is the Highest Science and the Highest Art of living, and living happily. Although, according to Skovoroda, it is most fully revealed in the Bible, but to a certain (and quite sufficient) extent it is revealed in the pagan world, both in ancient and modern times. Therefore, Skovoroda mostly teaches about perennial human wisdom, which has ever been present among people: it did not appear in the recent times of the modern progress.²⁹

The wisdom knows the things of which the modern sciences are unable to know anything. Its main discourse is about hidden, invisible, spiritual things of another world, which, however, is the firm foundation of the visible and ever-changing world. Skovoroda repeats insistently that the first step to know things

²⁰ Ibid., 562.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 390.

²³ Ibid., 457.

²⁴ Ibid., 560.

²⁵ Ibid., 391.

²⁶ Ibid., 561–62.

²⁷ Ibid., 514.

²⁸ Ibid., 163, 177, 513–14, 562.

²⁹ Ibid., 456, 513, 562, 575, 740.

rightly is to divide each thing in two, since everything is a compound of two different "natures:" visible and invisible, matter and mind, associations and thoughts, sensual and intelligible, temporal and eternal, flesh and spirit, creation and God. Secular knowledge permits us to know only a half, a part of all that, since only religion, with the means of faith, can make the knowledge complete.

Religion does not merely contemplate elements of the world, but reveals "the eternal plan" according to which the entire framework of the universe is built.³⁰ In a human being, religion discovers "two men in one,"³¹ the one of which is temporal and perishable and another is eternal. The eternal "true man"³² is nothing but the very God's image, imprinted on the animal nature of the "corruptible man."³³ Therefore, Skovoroda states that there is the other nature in the human being, alongside the biological or animal one, that enables the human being to become God, to inherit the everlasting life.

According to Skovoroda, religion exists to provide humanity with the knowledge of how to live, founding the life not upon "the sand"³⁴ of "human evil will,"³⁵ human beliefs or opinions, but upon "the rock"³⁶ of God's good will, true faith and the truth. This art of living begins with knowledge of oneself, which reveals the duality of human existence, set between time and eternity, temporal and eternal. Skovoroda is convinced that the only thing God demands from a human being is that one may discover the own personal calling and truly become the self.

This way starts with discovery a tiny "spark"³⁷ in the inner deep of own human nature of spiritual life, and then the discovery in the Self two "irreconcilable armies"³⁸ of spiritual intentions, inclinations, and thoughts, representing the wills that belong to two different masters—God and Devil, God and the World. The latter draws the human being outward to perish, when God draws to become the Self, sharing his divine plan about the world and the human being that can be saved both in God and eternity. Choosing God's side, the human being discovers his/her calling, which comes to be an "inexhaustible source" of peace and joy of heart, enabling him/her to meet any challenge of this earthly life with inner courage, endowing the life with sense.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 216, 389, 737.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 238, 781.

³² *Ibid.*, 238.

³³ *Ibid.*, 218, 295, 298.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 73, 213, 260, 310, 399, 406, 428, 797, 903.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 64–65, 82–83.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 55, 64, 66, 70, 83, 85, 105, 218, 302, 312, 321, 389, 391, 395, 400, 404, 406–07, 797.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 565, 660–61, 792, 848.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 455.

Summarizing the first part of Skovoroda's apology of religion it must be mentioned that his response to the secular criticism of religion includes, on the one hand, negative statements, describing the errors of secularists, and on the other, Skovoroda develops his positive teaching of religion. It can possibly be called his philosophy of religion, since he appeals rather to rational argumentation. Therefore, Skovoroda's intention is to prove religion to be one of the most important spheres of human life, offering the most important existential knowledge on which, after all, depends human happiness. However, religion is not to be confused with superstition, this confusion is rather caused by a mere likeness in appearance, that is why those who does this confusion Skovoroda calls "the hypocrites," i.e. those who judge things by face, not by heart.

The *second part* of Skovoroda's apology of religion addressed superstition, which Gregory Skovoroda recognizes as a secular influence within the Church. On the one hand, superstition, confused with religion, becomes a cause of secularist attacks; on the other, it does a great harm to the spiritual life of those who wish to lead a Christian life. The superstition is a sort of imposture, pretending to be a godly life, though it is not: superstitious people are rather "monkeys of the true sanctity,"³⁹ as Skovoroda puts it. Besides that, the position of the superstitious people within the Church is almost a direct reflection of hypocrites' one outside the Church, but on ecclesiastical grounds.

The *first error* of superstitious people is that they falsely confuse sensual and spiritual lives, believing that the spiritual life depends on the sensual one. Thus, they pervert the truth, as the truth is rather the contrary, since the sensual life is directly dependent on the spiritual one. The confusion shows that the superstitious people (the same as the hypocrites) know nothing about the spiritual life, but rather keep the belief that is materialistic in nature. Skovoroda associates this position with idolatry, saying that "A superstitious person believes in the vanity, an idolater worship the emptiness."⁴⁰

Their *second error* is that they do not understand the Holy Scripture, taking it in a merely historical and profoundly literal way. As a result, they believe many things that are rather nonsense, vain and useless, which neither change their life for the better nor help them to grow into the knowledge of God. Moreover, the literal understanding of the Bible, along with the understanding of Christianity confined to the narrow historical perspective become cause for many plagues of the human history, such as heresies, bloodsheds, wars, etc.

³⁹ Ibid., 841.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 738.

The *third error* is that they firmly believe that saving grace can be obtained only through the liturgical worship, arranged in a special way. Therefore, they disregard the fact that any form of liturgical worship is rather conventional and may vary, depending on time and place, culture, and groups of people who perform the worship. Thus, they tend to absolutize their own position and religions (or pretending to be such) experience, opposing it to the rest of the world.

Their *fourth error* is that they believe in the saving power of mere outward actions, being completely unaware that firstly they would have to inherit the salvation is the inner conversion. Therefore, they are rather eager to sing psalms or go to pilgrimage than to change their lives, bringing them in accordance with the divine principles.

However, the main feature of superstition—at least according to Skovoroda—is the connection with the flesh. Superstition can see and aim at nothing but flesh and carnal things. Often superstitious people justify their own offences and wrongdoings by finding the same in characters of the Bible. This way superstition justifies with God's word the ungodly works and actions: drunkenness, adulteries, concubinage, jealousy, fear of death, greediness, arrogance, etc. Even the faith is reversed by superstition to vain things: "flesh and blood of saints," "matter in incense and candles, in pictures, in images and ceremonies, having forgotten there is nothing good but God."⁴¹

Everything said above brings us to a *conclusion*.

Firstly, it must be concluded that the present study gives us a rightful opportunity to say that Skovoroda's apology of religion is a fine example of post-secular thinking, as well as Gregory Skovoroda himself can be rightfully recognized to be a representative of post-secular thinking in the territories of the Russian Empire.

Secondly, Skovoroda's apology of religion appears to be a response to two tendencies, which are quite different, but both hostile to even the spirit of religion and religious life. The first tendency comes from the secular world, and the second from within the Church. However, Skovoroda recognizes the second as a mere reflection of the first, but on Christian grounds. The first he calls *hypocrisy*, and the other *superstition*.

Thirdly, *hypocrisy* appears to Skovoroda to be a result of misunderstanding of the very nature of religion, along with a perverted vision of the world and human life. Therefore, Skovoroda develops his criticism of this position, taking as his starting point the lively existential reality, interests, wants and needs of

⁴¹ Ibid., 782–83.

a human being. Taking for his focal point human aspiration and ac craving for happiness, Skovoroda gradually demonstrates that there is nothing to satisfy the craving but religion. As far as he demonstrates the urgent necessity of religion for humanity, he also disproves errors that laid the foundation for the criticism religion of intellectuals' religion of the Enlightenment.

Fourthly, criticizing *superstition* (which was also one of the most favorite targets for the fervent criticism of the enlighteners as well as general objections of the time against religion) Skovoroda distinguishes it from religion. The distinction helps him to demonstrate that superstition is not the same as religion, but is rather a perversion of religion, made under the influence of the secular world. Skovoroda states that the very foundation of superstition and superstitious beliefs is nothing but materialistic beliefs and complete unawareness of what the true spiritual life and religion are like.

Fifthly, Skovoroda's apology of religion, therefore, offers a fine example of post-secular criticism, based on both the Christian tradition and the achievements of the secular culture of the Age of Reason. In this way, Gregory Skovoroda endeavors to find a *via media*, a way between the extremities of secular enmity towards religion, on the one hand, and religious fanaticism on the other.

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