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Deification and Political Theology

Merezhkovsky, Gippius, Filosofov, *Tsar and Revolution* (1907)

> There exists a person who can do anything, even cut off a human life. This is the only being with the right to the life of others, who can also make use of their property, the fruit of their labour, everything. Thus, for this one person there are no other real beings; it is as though others do not exist. In other words, if he is human then others are not human; if they are humans then he is a superhuman, God, standing outside of human laws. But Human or God, everything is permitted to him. This is the most vital, most profound, and most hidden root of autocracy.
>
> Zinaida Gippius, 'Revolution and Violence'

In consequence of the 1905 revolution many in Symbolist circles became politicized, and perhaps none more so than Dmitry Merezhkovsky and his intimate circle: his wife Zinaida Gippius, and their friend Dmitry Filosofov.[1] Between 1905 and 1914 Merezhkovsky's essayistic output—which includes the collections *The Coming Boor* (*Griadushchii kham*, 1906), *Not Peace but the Sword* (*Ne mir no mech*, 1908), and *Sick Russia* (*Bol'naia Rossiia*, 1910)—was primarily devoted to the relationship of religion to politics in Russia, and specifically to the coming revolution. Intellectual energy that had since the turn of the century been directed towards promoting the 'new religious consciousness' with its utopian aspiration to personal and collective deification through the transformational power of sublimated eros,[2] was now directed towards the dream of social transformation through the force of revolution.

[1] Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal, *D. S. Merezhkovsky and the Silver Age: The Development of a Revolutionary Mentality* (1975), pp. 152–62. Rosenthal considers that Merezhkovsky's thought of the inter-revolutionary period 'provides a "case study" of the tremendous ideological impact of the revolution': p. 162.

[2] See the Introduction to this book.

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The focus on deification, however, remained the same. This focus is nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in the essay collection *Tsar and Revolution* (*Le Tzar et la Révolution*, 1907), in which the Merezhkovskys (as I shall call them) polemically deconstruct the Russian Orthodox myth of the deified ruler in the cause of the deification of the people, whose belief in the myth has enslaved them.

Tsar and Revolution was published in Paris, France, where the Merezhkovskys lived between February 1906 and July 1908. The idea for the collection was born of the Merezhkovskys' abandonment of hope for a rapprochement between the religious intelligentsia and the Russian Orthodox Church, following the negative experience of the Religious-Philosophical Meetings (1901–3), and a hardening of their attitude to tsarist power following the revolution of 1905. The relationship between the church and the state in Russia had been a central issue at the Meetings: now, in the aftermath of the formal separation of church and state in France in December 1905 and amidst public debate about a similar reform in Russia, the Merezhkovskys wished to take a stand against 'reaction' in the name of the 'new religious consciousness' and Christian anarchy.[3] Their choice to publish in France, and their re-location to Paris at this time, was motivated partly by their increasing ideological estrangement from other factions of the Russian religious intelligentsia,[4] and partly by a positive desire to connect with like-minded agents of recent developments in France: the Syndicalists and the Catholic Modernists.[5] Though circumventing the domestic censorship may not have been the primary driver of the decision to publish *Tsar and Revolution* abroad,[6] it seems likely that publication in Russia would not have been straightforward, such is the anti-monarchical and anti-ecclesiastical bias of the collection. Merezhkovsky's essay 'Revolution and Religion' ('Revoliutsiia i religiia'), the longest in the work, was published in the journal *Russian Thought* (*Russkaia mysl'*) in 1907, and in 1908 in the volume *Not Peace but the Sword* (together with his 'Preface' to *Tsar and Revolution* under the enigmatic title 'Preface to a Certain Book') ['Predislovie k odnoi knige']: but its

[3] For an excellent historical contextualization of the *Tsar and Revolution* project, see Margarita Pavlova, 'Mucheniki velikogo religioznogo protsessa', the introductory essay to D. Merezhkovskii, Z. Gippius, D. Filosofov, *Tsar' i Revoliutsiia*, ed. M. A. Kolerov, trans. O. V. Edel'man (1999), pp. 7–54.

[4] The project in its initial conception was to have included essays from a very broad spectrum of religious intellectuals in a demonstration of a 'united front' against the monarchy and the Synodal Church, but this proved unrealizable. See Pavlova, 'Mucheniki velikogo religioznogo protsessa', pp. 13–24.

[5] Ibid., pp. 32–42. [6] Ibid., p. 7.

focus on Russian intellectual history makes it the least overtly subversive contribution to the collection. Filosofov's essay 'Tsar-Pope' ('Tsar'-Papa') is the most orientated to a French readership, as it explores the parallels between the power struggle of the popes with the French kings and the historical relationship of the Russian tsars with the Orthodox Church. Gippius' two essays are highly provocative: the first, 'Revolution and Violence' ('Revoliutsiia i nasilie'), arose out of her engagement with the Social Revolutionaries in exile, I. I. Bunakov-Fondaminsky (1880–1942) and B. V. Savinkov (1879–1925), whilst the second, 'Istinnaia sila tsarizma' ('The True Power of Tsarism') represents an attack on the cult of the sacred ruler as demonic. None of the three was published in Russia. *Tsar and Revolution* is greater than the sum of its parts. Taken together, the essays represent a powerful and informed treatment of the political dimension of the deification theme, the age-old apotheosis of the emperor, and its significance for Russian cultural, political, and social history.

When the Merezhkovskys take up the theme of revolution and religion, they enter the field of political theology.[7] For this they find a ready native language, symbolically rich and of ancient origin, in the form of the ideology of the medieval Muscovite theocracy and the early modern Russian reworking of it, particularly during the reign of Peter the Great. The Merezhkovskys immerse themselves in this language and adapt its semantic markers and tropes to a contemporary context and for their own ideological purposes. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that, in their thinking about the relationship of the early twentieth-century Russian revolutionary situation to religion, they are bound, in a sense, to have recourse to precisely these markers and tropes, because they remained deeply entrenched in Russian religious and political culture in the form of a national myth: the myth of the sacred ruler, the deified monarch, or tsar-god. As Michael Cherniavsky has asserted of Vladimir Soloviev (another philosopher who thought hard about the relationship of faith to power), the Merezhkovskys were 'caught within the logic of the myth',[8] even though, as we shall see, their intention was to expose and overturn it.

Over fifty years ago Cherniavsky explicated both the ruler myth and the related popular myth of 'holy Russia' in his seminal study, *Tsar and People:*

[7] For an analysis of the political theological theme in Merezhkovsky's historical fiction, see Judith Kalb, 'Merezhkovskii's Third Rome: Imperial Visions and Christian Dreams', *Ab Imperio* 1–2 (2001): pp. 125–40, Project MUSE, muse.jhu.edu/article/538364.

[8] Michael Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People: Studies in Russian Myths* (1961), p. 212.

Studies in Russian Myths. Some thirty years later Boris Uspensky and Viktor Zhivov published their masterly semiotic analysis of the historical process of the sacralization of the Russian tsar, 'Tsar' i Bog' ('Tsar and God').[9] More recently, Richard Wortman, in his *Scenarios of Power: Myths and Ceremonies in Russian Monarchy*, has shown how successive Russian rulers enacted or performed their versions of the ruler myth, in symbols and rituals designed for public consumption, in order to justify their power.[10] I suggest that reading Merezhkovsky's work, and that of his inner circle, on the relationship of religion to power, in the context of this scholarship has the potential to deepen our appreciation of their ideas, and to restore, from a certain point of view, their credibility as theorists of Russian culture. The Merezhkovskys have been consistently criticized, both by their contemporaries and by later scholars of their work, for eschewing proper empirical analysis and adopting an overly schematic approach to history.[11] According to Bernice Rosenthal, for example, 'Merezhkovsky's greatest […] weakness [was] his tendency to graft his intuitive findings onto dialectical historical schemes.'[12] She considers his basic approach to history, as psychological rather than socio-economic, to be defective.[13] Uspensky and Zhivov, however, acknowledge that the problem of the sacralization of the monarch belongs, among other things, to the sphere of religious psychology.[14] Similarly, Cherniavsky justifies his study as a historical exercise on the grounds that, whilst myths are founded 'on human insecurity, on a universal need to justify and in some sense to explain away reality' (that is, they have their basis in psychology), they are nevertheless specific to particular cultures and arise within time and space: 'In all their irrationality and even perversity […] myths are created by man in response to challenges and questions posed by the conditions of their lives; thus, myths reflect reality or, what is the same thing, the history of a

[9] B. A. Uspenskii and V. M. Zhivov, 'Tsar' i Bog. Semioticheskie aspekty sakralizatsii monarkha v Rossii', in B. A. Uspenskii, *Izbrannye trudy v trekh tomakh*, *vol. I*, *Semiotika istorii. Semiotika kul'tury*, 2nd ed. (Moscow: Shkola 'Iazyki russkoi kul'tury', 1996), pp. 205–337. Translated by Marcus C. Levitt as 'Tsar and God: Semiotic Aspects of the Sacralization of the Monarch in Russia', in Boris Uspenskij and Victor Zhivov, *'Tsar and God' and Other Essays in Russian Cultural Semiotics*, ed. Marcus C. Levitt (2012), pp. 1–112. All quotations from this essay are from Levitt's translation.

[10] Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power: Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy from Peter the Great to the Abdication of Nicholas II*, new abridged one-volume paperback ed. (2006).

[11] Pavlova, 'Mucheniki velikogo religioznogo protsessa', p. 44. Contemporary critics include Petr Struve and Berdiaev. See P. Struve, 'Spor s D. S. Merezhkovskim' (1908), and N. Berdiaev, 'Novoe khristianstvo (D. S. Merezhkovskii)' (1916). Both reprinted in *D. S. Merezhkovskii: pro et contra*, edited by A. N. Nikoliukin (2001), pp. 166; 333.

[12] Rosenthal, *Merezhkovsky and the Silver Age*, p. 121.

[13] Ibid., p. 193.

[14] Uspenskij and Zhivov, *Tsar and God*, p. 2.

society—even if the reflection is distorted.'[15] And conversely, once myths have become established, they have the potential to define the way people think and act, and thus in their turn to influence history, as Wortman maintains of the Russian emperors, for example, in connection with the political conflict of the early twentieth century.[16] Thus, the Merezhkovskys' engagement with the deep psychological stratum in Russian political history, as expressed in myth and symbol, does have a certain explanatory power on the level of its subject matter (the relationship between religion and power in Russia). In addition, of course, the fact that such a discourse could arise and be seriously engaged with in early twentieth-century Russia tells us a great deal about the intellectual climate of that time and the enduring vitality of the idea of sacred power. Indeed, this idea was one of the expressions of the deification theme in inter-revolutionary Russian thought, and it finds its clearest expression in *Tsar and Revolution*.

The overarching thesis of *Tsar and Revolution* falls into two parts. The first maintains that the alliance of state and church, of temporal and spiritual power, that has pertained since Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire under Constantine the Great in the fourth century, represents an extended experiment in theocracy, defined by Merezhkovsky as 'religious politics; the realisation of the Divine City in a human city' (132/PSS 39).[17] The second alleges that this theocratic experiment is false, and essentially demonic (100; 133/PSS 40). The Merezhkovskys' vision is for a genuine theocracy, understood literally as the direct rule of Christ on earth in the absence of any form of temporal power. The means to achieve this vision is revolution. If under the false theocracy it is the ruler who is deified at the cost of the enslavement of the ruled (103), then under the true theocracy all will be free and deified by the power of the Holy Spirit (PSS 34).[18] Thus, the Merezhkovskys' utopian dream of the future rests on a particular analysis of the past. It is the latter that can be tested against scholarship on the Russian myth of the sacred ruler to the Merezhkovskys' credit.

[15] Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People*, pp. 1; 3. [16] Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, p. 411.

[17] Page references to the essays in *Tsar and Revolution* are from Edel'man's Russian translation in Merezhkovskii et al., *Tsar' i Revoliutsiia*, and appear in parentheses in the text. In the case of Merezhkovsky's contributions, I also include a page reference to *Not Peace but the Sword*, taken from *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii Dmitriia Sergeevicha Merezhkovskago*, vol. 13 (1914). Reprinted in Dmitrij Sergeevič Merežkovskij, *Polnoe sobranie sočinenij*, vol. 4 (1973), pp. 1–168. All translations into English are my own. A redacted English translation of Merezhkovsky's 'Revolution and Religion' can be found in Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal and Martha Bohachevsky-Chomiak, eds, *A Revolution of the Spirit: Crisis of Value in Russia, 1890–1924*, trans. Marian Schwarz, 2nd ed. (1990), pp. 187–221.

[18] In Merezhkovsky's essay 'The Sword' ('Mech', 1908).

Tsar and Revolution and the tsar-god

The Merezhkovskys are anxious to impress upon their French readership (though they have Russian liberals also in mind), that the revolution that was building in Russia cannot be understood without a proper recognition of its religious dimension (58/PSS 164). They argue that Russian autocracy is not simply an anachronistic form of enlightened absolutism that will eventually give way to a version of constitutional democracy, as it did in the West. Rather, the principle of absolutist power is underlain by the powerful, irrational, theocratic idea of the autocrat as the vicegerent (deputy) of Christ, the earthly representative of God (64). The enduring power of this idea is such that the autocrat is incapable of ceding any authority. Autocracy cannot be reformed; it can only be overthrown, moreover by a revolution that is driven by an unconscious religious idea equal in power to that of autocracy (61/PSS 165).

At the deepest level, the Merezhkovskys recognize, the notion of the sacred ruler is a creation of the human imagination in response to a psychological need. Merezhkovsky singles out the need for a sense of unity: 'Monarchy, or the rule of one, reflects in the external forms of the state an internal religious need of the human spirit, the need for Divine Unity or monotheism: one tsar on earth, as one God in heaven […] ; monarchy is a symbol of theocracy' (129–30/PSS 36–7).[19] Gippius lays emphasis, alternatively, on the universal human longing for a perfect world, as expressed in the Christian idea of the 'tsardom (*tsarstvo*) of God on earth' (199).[20] Particular cultures, however, have shaped the image of the sacred ruler in specific ways. Gippius states that Russia produced 'the unique monster' of autocracy 'from the dark and burning hot depths of its religious feeling' (199), which she characterizes—in agreement with the nineteenth-century anarchist Mikhail Bakunin (1814–76)—as particularly inclined to 'realism': 'As for the Russian people, "a predominantly *realistic* people" [Bakunin], it saw the tsar as the incarnation of God' (198). She endorses Bakunin's view that the people idealize the tsar as a benign and nurturing '*Russian Christ*' (198).

[19] The expression 'one tsar on earth, one God in heaven' is of ancient origin and is a classic statement of the 'monarchic argument' of Christian Hellenism. Eusebius (in his *Life of Constantine*) gives it its final formulation. See Francis Dvornik, *Early Christian Byzantine Political Philosophy: Origins and Background*, vol. 2 (1966), pp. 611 ff. For more context, see Chapter 1.

[20] In this chapter I translate 'tsarstvo' as 'tsardom', despite the awkwardness of this word to the ear of the English native speaker, because of the importance to the Merezhkovskys' argument of the correlation between Christ as the heavenly Tsar and the Russian ruler as an earthly tsar.

In addition to the psychological dimension, the Merezhkovskys are conversant with a range of historical determinants of the image of the sacred ruler. In the introductory paragraphs of 'Revolution and Religion', Merezhkovsky states that '[t]he roots of the Russian autocracy go down through Byzantium, the second (Christian) Rome, into the first (pagan) Rome and beyond, into the deep of the centuries, to the monarchies of the East' (129/PSS 36).[21] This statement alludes to the political theological theory of the three tsardoms that became established in Muscovite Russia after the fall of Constantinople to the Turks in 1453. According to this theory, at this time Moscow became the third Rome: the successor to the fallen Byzantine Empire and the guardian of the true (Orthodox) faith. The title 'tsar' was officially adopted by the Russian monarch (who had previously been known as 'Grand Prince') from 1547 and the accession of Ivan the Terrible to the throne,[22] to signify that he was the successor to the Byzantine Emperor ('tsar' derives from 'caesar', meaning 'emperor'). However, as Uspensky and Zhivov have pointed out, the title took on a different meaning in the Russian context:

> In Byzantium calling the emperor 'basileus' (tsar) referred primarily to the imperial tradition; the Byzantine sovereign acted as legal successor to the Roman emperors. In Russia the title of the monarch referred primarily to the religious tradition, and to the texts in which God was called 'tsar'; and in Russia the imperial tradition was not relevant. Thus if in Byzantium the name tsar (basileus) was perceived as describing the office of supreme ruler (which metaphorically could be applied to God), in Russia the same title was perceived, in essence, as a proper name, as one of the divine names; in these circumstances, calling a person a tsar could take on mystical meaning.[23]

The Muscovite tsardom was thus primarily a symbol of the heavenly tsardom; whilst the tsar symbolized God himself. The Merezhkovskys' entire political theological discourse is predicated on the enduring relevance to the question of tsarist power of this symbolic configuration, which they reject whilst nevertheless wholly sharing the realistic linguistic sensibility that

[21] By 'monarchies of the East' Merezhkovsky means the Hellenic kings. See Chapter 1.
[22] Uspenskij and Zhivov, *Tsar and God*, p. 7.
[23] Ibid., pp. 7–8. The idea of the parallelism of tsar and god was assimilated from Byzantium. On the other hand, similarity with the West was manifested in the understanding of the monarch's charismatic power as a personal gift: 'The tsar was seen as partaking in the divine as an individual, which defined his relations both to God and to man', p. 12.

made it possible: the image of the 'other', 'divine' or 'holy', city that he uses as a leitmotif to unite the spiritual aspirations of the diverse range of thinkers whom he considers in 'Revolution and Religion', is opposed to the ancient image of Moscow as the 'new Jerusalem' that persists as a substratum in the notion of the modern Russian state.

Muscovite political theology was profoundly eschatological, since according to the third Rome theory Moscow was the final Christian tsardom, the failure of which would mark the end of Christian history. In practice, since—as Cherniavsky has argued—the ruler came to be viewed at this time as the personification of the state, this meant that the fate of Christianity rested on the personal piety of the tsar.[24] Whilst the Merezhkovskys do not elaborate greatly on the third Rome ideology (their historical focus being in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries), it is worth pointing out that the seventeenth-century schism in the Russian Orthodox Church and the culture of religious dissent and sectarianism that came out of it, which feature prominently in their political theological narrative, and with which they personally identify, was to a significant extent a reaction to the perceived betrayal of third Rome values on the part of the tsar. Perhaps more importantly still, the feelings of religious dread evoked by the possibility of the collapse of the tsarist regime in Russia at the time the Merezhkovskys were writing, which account also for much of the pathos of their own narrative, were undoubtedly connected to the continuing resonance of third Rome eschatological thinking in the Russian cultural imagination.

For the Merezhkovskys, the most important historical moment for the sacralization of the Russian monarch was Peter the Great's abolition of the office of Patriarch of Moscow and the subordination of the Russian Orthodox Church to himself as head of the Russian state under a new system of administration of the church by a state-controlled Holy Synod.[25] The Synodal system had endured into the twentieth century, and recent expressions of intent from within the church to abolish it and reinstate the patriarchate had galvanized the Merezhkovskys' thinking about the tsar's position vis-à-vis the church.[26] In the Byzantine Empire, temporal and spiritual power, emperor and patriarch, had, at least in theory, co-existed in symphonic

[24] Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People*, p. 71.

[25] James Cracraft, *The Church Reform of Peter the Great* (1971).

[26] See James W. Cunningham, *A Vanquished Hope: The Movement for Church Renewal in Russia, 1905–1906* (1981) and Vera Shevzov, *Russian Orthodoxy on the Eve of Revolution* (2004), for an account of the early twentieth-century reform movement within the Russian Orthodox Church.

harmony. Yet it was not a question of the strict division of powers. As Filosofov points out in 'Tsar-Pope', the Byzantine emperor combined his secular power with a high-priestly role by virtue of the fact of his special anointment upon his coronation (67):[27] he could thus not be subordinate to the patriarch, as the medieval kings were to the Pope in the West. The Moscow patriarchate was instituted in 1589 in imitation of the Byzantine model, but during the reign of Aleksei Mikhailovich (Peter the Great's father) Patriarch Nikon strongly resisted measures taken by the tsar to exercise his high-priestly authority in church matters as part of a drive to further Byzantinize the state;[28] he considered these measures to be an encroachment on the church's proper domain and on his own authority as head of the Russian church. For Filosofov, Nikon's stance amounted to 'papist tendencies' (68).[29] He notes that the Eastern patriarchs endorsed Aleksei Mikhailovich's decision to depose Nikon on the grounds that the patriarch was bound to obey the tsar as the 'anointed one (*khristos*) of God, who receives his sceptre, orb, and crown from Him' (68).[30] Peter the Great resolved the power struggle by abolishing the patriarchate and effectively instituting himself as head of the Russian Orthodox Church. In evidence of the latter, Filosofov adduces: the oath sworn by incoming members of the Holy Synod, declaring the monarch to be its 'ultimate Spiritual Judge' (*krainii Sudiia Dukhovnyi*);[31] the manifesto for the institution of the Senate giving the monarch the right to introduce church reforms as he saw fit; and Article 42 of the Fundamental Laws (*Svod zakonov*) declaring the emperor to be 'a Christian sovereign, the supreme defender and preserver of the dogmas of the reigning faith, the guardian of orthodoxy and of every holy decorum in

[27] See also Uspenskij and Zhivov, *Tsar and God*, p. 11. The definitive study is Gilbert Dagron, *Emperor and Priest: The Imperial Office in Byzantium*, trans. Jean Birrell (2003).

[28] Uspenskij and Zhivov, *Tsar and God*, pp. 14–16.

[29] According to Cherniavsky, Nikon developed a new concept of the ruler as lesser ruler over men's bodies (whilst priests rule over their souls). The priest blesses the ruler; the tsar confesses his sins to the priest; it is the patriarch who is 'the living and animate image of Christ'. 'The practical consequences of these theories for the radical patriarch were the inadmissibility of any interference on the part of the tsar in any church matters and the right of the patriarch to pass final judgement on all State actions and measures.' Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People*, pp. 65–6. This is what lies behind Filosofov's judgement.

[30] See also Uspenskij and Zhivov, *Tsar and God*, p. 25.

[31] Uspenskii and Zhivov likewise single out the phrase 'ultimate judge' (ibid., p. 39). In his essay 'Now or Never' ('Teper' ili nikogda', 1905), which was a response to proposals by St Petersburg clerics for reforms to the system of church governance, Merezhkovsky too quotes from the oath, as this was set out in Peter's 'Spiritual Regulation' ('Dukhovnyi Reglament', 1721), objecting that the role of supreme judge properly belongs to Christ: Merežkovskij, PSS 4, vol. 14 (*Griadushchii kham*), p. 119.

the church' (68–9).[32] For his part, Merezhkovsky draws on the memoirs of Andrei Nartov, a servitor of Peter the Great, to corroborate his assertion that Peter at least sensed the significance of what he was doing. According to Nartov, when approached by clerics regarding the election of a new patriarch, Peter handed them the 'Spiritual Regulation' with the admonition 'here's a spiritual patriarch for you' ('*vot vam dukhovnyi patriarkh*'). Nartov states that Peter 'became head of the church himself', quoting him as saying: 'I am both: sovereign and patriarch for them; they have forgotten that in ancient times these were united.'[33]

Why did Peter's church reform represent a central moment in the process of the tsar's deification? For the Merezhkovskys this was because for the first time the monarch became the image of Christ not merely in the sense of being earthly tsar to Christ's heavenly Tsar, but in the sense of replicating Christ's dual, divine–human, nature. This, at least, is how Gippius appears to interpret Peter's combination of temporal rule and spiritual oversight in his own person when she defines tsarism as 'the confluence of two principles—empire and priesthood—in one personality; the embodiment of unlimited power, because it is simultaneously divine and human' (200).[34] The key change here from the position of the Muscovite tsars is that, with the abolition of the patriarchate, the monarch absorbed the high-priestly charisma previously attached to the patriarch, and became for the first time the 'deputy' or 'vicar' ('*namestnik*', literally 'the one in the place of') of Christ.[35] Thus, to quote Gippius again, what occurs with Peter is 'the incarnation of

[32] In a footnote, Filosofov tells the reader that the first part of this formula is derived from the 'Spiritual Regulation' and the second from the law of succession of 5 April 1797 (Paul I). Corroborated in Uspenskij and Zhivov, *Tsar and God*, p. 41; p. 96 n. 222.

[33] Merežkovskij, PSS 4, vol. 14 (*Griadushchii kham*), pp. 121–2 ('Now or Never'). Also quoted by Filosofov, p. 87. The material from Nartov constitutes rare evidence of one of Merezhkovsky's sources. Though he does not say so, it is likely that he consulted *Rasskazy Nartova o Petrom Velikom*, ed. L. N. Maikov (St Petersburg, 1891), which is the edition that Cherniavsky quotes from (*Tsar and People*, p. 73). Uspenskii and Zhivov also cite from the same work both Nartov's account of Peter's confrontation with the clerics (Uspenskij and Zhivov, *Tsar and God*, p. 98, n. 241; *Rasskazy Nartova*, p. 71) and his comment that he had become both sovereign and patriarch (ibid., p. 40; *Rasskazy Nartova*, p. 72). (A full reference is missing in the English translation, but is given in the Russian original: Uspenskii, *Izbrannye trudy*, p. 261; p. 326 n. 61).

[34] Gippius' formula at least connotes the divine–human nature of Christ, the God-human. Neither Cherniavsky nor Uspenskii and Zhivov discuss the sacralization of the monarch in these precise Christological terms.

[35] According to Uspenskii and Zhivov, the Russian patriarch's enthronement service involved a special consecration, known as *chirotony* or *cheirotonia*, which was unknown outside the Russian church. They suggest that this accounts for the special charismatic (as opposed to merely administrative) status that he enjoyed in relation to the bishops and lower clergy. It enabled Nikon to declare that 'the patriarch is the living image of Christ and in his spirit, acts and words embodies the truth' (Uspenskij and Zhivov, p. 43; see also Filosofov, 'Tsar-Pope', p. 68).

God in a human personality, in an earthly and heavenly tsar, through a human being who is a deputy [*namestnik*] for God' (200). Merezhkovsky likewise frequently underscores the importance of the notion of deputization for Christ that comes with the tsar's assimilation of the patriarch's role. In the essay 'Now or Never', for example, he asserts that '[t]he Russian autocrat becomes the supreme pastor, the high priest, the visible head of the church, the deputy of the Invisible Head, Christ Himself';[36] and in the Preface to *Tsar and Revolution*: 'The Tsar is not only the tsar as head of state, but also as head of the church, the high priest, God's anointed (*pomazannik Bozhii*); that is, in the ultimate, mystically essential (if not historically realised) limits of his power he is Christ's deputy, […] Caesar and Pope together' (59/PSS 164).

The phenomenon of anointment occupies an important place in the Merezhkovskys' analysis. Filosofov is aware that the Byzantine emperors were anointed with oil during the coronation ceremony (67). He is also aware that the Greek term for 'the anointed one' is *khristos*, 'christ' (as used by the Eastern prelates in their endorsement of Aleksei Mikhailovich's authority over Nikon, which, as we have seen, Filosofov cites) (68; 73). In this context, he argues that when Peter abolished the patriarchate he was taking the theory of anointment to its logical conclusion (68), which we may take to mean that he decided there was room for only one anointed one, only one *khristos*. Merezhkovsky explicitly draws out the connection in the Russian ruler myth between the fact of the tsar's anointment and the identification of him with Christ; that is, the shift from lower to upper case in the Russian imagination: 'There is […] a kind of terrible temptation in this most Russian of Russian insanities: the tsar as "God's Anointed"; the tsar as "Christ", for *Christ* in fact means "God's Anointed" ' (159/PSS 64). Uspensky and Zhivov affirm the historical connection between the idea of anointment and the practice of referring to the monarch as 'Christ', beginning from the early eighteenth century, citing the same patriarchal Epistle of 1663 that Filosofov does in evidence that this derived from Byzantine tradition, whilst pointing out that the Russians went beyond linking the tsar and Christ by virtue of their common anointment to a direct connection of the tsar with the image of Christ.[37] It quite quickly became common to address the

Uspenskii and Zhivov propose that it was this image that was transferred to the tsar after the abolition of the patriarchate: an endorsement of the Merezhkovskys' central intuition.

[36] Merežkovskij, PSS 4, vol. 14 (*Griadushchii kham*), pp. 121–2 ('Now or Never').

[37] Uspenskij and Zhivov, *Tsar and God*, p. 25. The anointment of the Russian tsar during the rite of enthronement predates the abolition of the patriarchate. The first tsar to be anointed was

emperor as Christ in rhetorical works, letters to the tsar, and liturgical texts, and the practice continued throughout the Synodal period.[38]

Thus, in the Merezhkovskys' reading, from Peter the Great onwards the tsar became the image of Christ both by combining Christ's roles as ruler and priest, and by replicating his divine humanity by conjoining temporal and spiritual power. There is an additional dimension to be considered, however; a further reason why the Merezhkovskys singled Peter the Great's reign out in connection with the deification of the tsar. This dimension has to do with the way in which Peter's combined roles represent 'the embodiment of unlimited power' (200). According to Gippius, '[t]sarism is a universal idea to the highest degree, insofar as comprehensiveness is in its very nature' (201). Merezhkovsky asserts that from the time of the abolition of the patriarchate, the tsar can say, with Christ, 'to me belongs all power on earth and in heaven', and that in this aspiration to total power Peter was actually fulfilling the ordinance of Moscow and, before it, Byzantium, not destroying it, as is commonly supposed (133/PSS 40). He did challenge the cultural isolationism of the Muscovite theocracy, but, however, 'with the purpose of making the Russian Third Rome universal: for the demand of universality is included in the idea of the unlimited power of the Roman Caesar, of the Emperor, which Peter desired to be, and indeed he could not have failed to desire it if he was to take the Byzantine tradition of the eastern Roman empire to its conclusion in the Russian autocracy' (134/PSS 40–1). In this statement Merezhkovsky once again evokes the three Romes, perceptively suggesting that Peter's reign contained echoes of all three.[39] On one level, as

Fedor Ivanovich, son of Ivan the Terrible, in 1589, though the order for the ceremony was mapped out some thirty years previously. Its first use coincided with the establishment of the Moscow patriarchate and was part of the symbolic appropriation of the Byzantine heritage. Wortman says that the anointment served not to consecrate the tsar's secular power, since it took place after the investiture, but to endow the tsar 'with a special charisma that set him apart as the most holy of laymen' (Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, p. 11). Uspenskii has shown that Muscovite practice differed significantly from the Byzantine, in that it exactly followed the rite associated with the sacrament of Chrismation (confirmation). Specifically, in Constantinople the patriarch pronounced 'Holy, Holy, Holy', whilst in Russia the patriarch pronounced 'The seal and the gift of the Holy Spirit'. The former refers to the Old Testament tradition of anointing the king, whilst the latter refers to the New Testament and has the effect of likening the tsar to Christ, who was also anointed by the Holy Spirit (B. A. Uspenskij, 'Enthronement in the Russian and Byzantine Traditions', in Uspenskij and Zhivov, *Tsar and God*, pp. 155–7). Though neither the Merezhkovskys nor Uspenskii and Zhivov, in 'Tsar and God', allude to it, this proclamation thus represents an additional, older, semiotic layer in the perception of the tsar as Christ.

[38] Uspenskij and Zhivov, *Tsar and God*, pp. 27–9.

[39] He in fact anticipates the well-known essay by Iu. M. Lotman and Uspenskii 'Echoes of the Notion "Moscow as the Third Rome" in Peter the Great's Ideology': B. A. Uspenskii and Iu.

we have seen, the Christian imagery associated with the second and third Romes remains in play and even intensifies. On another, Peter is set on the secularization of the state and the notion of imperial power. As Merezhkovsky suggests: 'Consciously Peter imagined the autocracy rather to be a secular affair, a rational and positivistic tsardom of this world, eternally opposed to the tsardom not of this world, the tsardom of Christ.'[40] For Merezhkovsky, this 'positivistic tsardom' is a return of sorts to the ideal of pagan Rome, in which Caesar, whilst also styling himself a high priest—a Pontifex Maximus—nevertheless as *Divus Caesar*, a Caesar-god, ruled without reference to a higher power.[41] Cherniavsky makes a similar argument when he says that the rejection of the eschatological focus of Muscovite political theology under Peter 'meant the existence of the state for its own sake and meant that the tsar, godlike for the sake of Christ, was now god for his own and the State's sake'; 'the divinity of the prince lost any outside referent or control'.[42] This opened up the possibility for Peter to be seen as an 'earthly god' or 'god on earth', which is in fact how Nartov and others described him.[43] Like Merezhkovsky, Cherniavsky sees this as a reversion to an older conception of power, whose source lies in itself alone, though he suggests the Tatar khan rather than the pagan Roman emperors.[44]

It should be stressed that the Merezhkovskys were not engaging with this medieval and early modern semantic field relating to the status of the Russian tsars in isolation from contemporary discourse. Far from it, the myth of the sacred ruler enjoyed wide currency during the reign of Nicholas II, and indeed, as Wortman has shown, was deliberately perpetuated and reinforced in the public imagination by a series of symbolic displays designed for public consumption that Wortman calls Nicholas' 'scenario of power'. Wortman does not directly address the question of the monarch's perceived divinity. For him, imperial myths were designed by the ruling elite to justify and reinforce its domination since '[d]ivine sanction provided constant but not sufficient grounds for absolute power'.[45] Nevertheless, according to the 'National myth' adopted by the last two Romanov tsars—Alexander III and

M. Lotman, 'Otzvuki kontseptsii "Moskva—tretii Rim" v ideologii Petra Pervogo. (K probleme srednevekovoi traditsii v kul'ture barokko.)' In Uspenskii, *Izbrannye trudy*, pp. 124–41. An English translation can be found in Ju. M. Lotman and B. A. Uspenskij, *The Semiotics of Russian Culture*, ed. Ann Shukman (1984), pp. 53–67.

[40] Merežkovskij, PSS 4, vol. 14 (*Griadushchii kham*), p. 129 ('Now or Never').
[41] Ibid. [42] Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People*, p. 78.
[43] Ibid., p. 75; Uspenskij and Zhivov, *Tsar and God*, pp. 30–1.
[44] Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People*, p. 89. [45] Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, p. 2.

Nicholas II—the monarch enjoyed a close spiritual bond with the people in which Orthodoxy played a central role.[46] In Alexander's reign, emphasis fell on the Russian Orthodox Church as an institution, whilst in Nicholas' reign, the emphasis was on 'a direct though unspoken and invisible spiritual bond with the people—a shared sense of piety that [Nicholas] believed had persisted from ancient Russia'.[47] In the years immediately preceding the Merezhkovskys' focus on tsarism, 'performances' of this self-image of Nicholas included: two elaborately staged Easter visits to the 'shrines and relics of Moscow' (as the capital of the Muscovite tsars) in 1900 and 1903;[48] two 'winter balls' in February 1903 conducted in seventeenth-century dress (Nicholas dressed up as Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich);[49] and the canonization ceremony of Seraphim of Sarov in July 1903 which was ordered by the royal couple, who personally attended the celebrations in Sarov.[50] All of these events, which Wortman describes as 'mass spectacles',[51] in addition to the coronation ritual and celebrations of May 1896, were widely covered in the national press, including *Moskovskie vedomosti*, *Novoe vremia*, *Niva*, and *Sankt-Peterburgskie vedomosti*; additionally, the coronation events were captured in a lavishly illustrated coronation album, the *Koronatsionnyi Sbornik*.[52]

The Merezhkovskys will of course have been alive to the elaborate symbolism of these events. In his essay 'Tsar-Pope', Filosofov offers a brief but perceptive and apparently well-researched analysis of Nicholas' personality and attitude to his role, in which he places special emphasis on the coronation ritual and oath as defining moments of Nicholas' reign: 'Amidst triumphal pomp in the Assumption Cathedral, that most holy of places on Russian soil, Nicholas II, at once a person of faith and the head of the church, placed the crown on his own head, and as Tsar-pontifex gave himself communion at the altar, which he reached through the Royal doors [*Tsarskie vrata*].[53] He swore an oath to protect Orthodoxy and autocracy' (73). Taking communion in the sanctuary, according to the priests' rite,[54] dates to 1676 and the coronation of Fedor Alekseevich (r. 1676–82). The practice was introduced to strengthen the analogies between the Russian tsar and the Byzantine

[46] Wortman distinguishes between two basic myths of imperial power. In the European myth the sovereign is a saviour redeeming Russia from despotism or ruin; in the National myth the heroic monarch rescues Russia from alien elements. *Scenarios of Power*, p. 3.

[47] Ibid., p. 347. [48] Ibid., pp. 347–9. [49] Ibid., pp. 352–4.

[50] Ibid., pp. 355–9. [51] Ibid., p. 412. [52] Ibid., *passim*.

[53] The Royal Doors are situated in the middle of the iconostasis that separates the sanctuary from the nave.

[54] That is, taking the elements of the Eucharistic meal, the bread and the wine, separately. See Reginald Maxwell Woolley, *Coronation Rites* (1915), p. 29.

emperors: hence Filosofov's reference to the Tsar-pontifex.[55] The act of self-crowning, however, was initiated in 1742 with the coronation of the Empress Elizabeth: the Metropolitan (senior Archbishop) was relegated to handing the crown to the ruler.[56] It seems clear that Filosofov singles out these two moments to underscore the absolute nature of tsarist power in both temporal and spiritual domains. Cherniavsky views self-crowning as the 'final symbolic step in the evolution of the autocratic ruler': 'The Sovereign Emperor was emperor *sui generis*, containing within himself all power and the source of all power, completely secular, or, what is the same thing, deified.'[57] Filosofov and Wortman are in agreement that the October Manifesto of 1905, in which the Tsar consented to the establishment of the State Duma and guaranteed certain civil rights, was in no way viewed by Nicholas as a concession of his autocratic power, but on the contrary as a confirmation of his authority (74).[58] For Filosofov, it is the secular absolutist emperor who gave his consent, whilst the religious high-priestly tsar withheld it. Thus: 'The Tsar refuses the people what the emperor grants it' (74).[59]

The exposure of the ruler myth as blasphemy; the antichrist

From Peter the Great onwards, then, two distinct conceptions of royal power co-exist in Russia: a religious conception of the tsar as the image of Christ as ruler and high priest, as Christ's deputy on earth; and a secular conception of the emperor as 'containing within himself all power and the source of all power', a conception that evokes the pagan perception of Caesar as a deified man, or earthly god. Exposing the distinction between the two, the Merezhkovskys at the same time identify an inner connection: both are seen as a blasphemous distortion of Christian truth. Specifically, both are regarded as illegitimate substitutions of the real Christ for a fake one. In their exploration of this theme, the Merezhkovskys again take up elements

[55] Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, p. 17; Uspenskij and Zhivov, *Tsar and God*, p. 14. For a full analysis of the practice of entering the sanctuary (a privilege normally reserved for the clergy) by the Byzantine emperors, see Dagron, *Emperor and Priest*, pp. 97–103.

[56] Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People*, p. 90.

[57] Ibid., p. 91.

[58] Wortman, *Scenarios of Power*, p. 364.

[59] See also 'Tsar-Pope', p. 89, where Filosofov argues that the logical development of liberalism out of absolutism was halted in Russia as the Orthodox Tsar blocked the designs of the liberal Emperor.

of traditional discourse, this time the discourse of religious dissent, but now assimilate these to nineteenth-century discourse about blasphemy pioneered by Fedor Dostoevsky and Vladimir Soloviev, with elements of Friedrich Nietzsche. Thus, they creatively combine the traditional tropes 'antichrist' and 'imposture' (*samozvanstvo*) with the modern tropes 'human-god' (*chelovekobog*) and 'superman' (*sverkhchelovek*/*Übermensch*), and oppose these to their own interpretation of the Solovievian concept of 'divine humanity' (*bogochelovechestvo*).[60] By adopting this strategy, the Merezhkovskys both declare their spiritual identification with the sectarian communities of Russia and at the same time challenge the conservative political world views of their nineteenth-century predecessors by turning their own language against them (both Dostoevsky and Soloviev were ideological tsarists). Their purpose is to relate the apocalyptic sensibility of the seventeenth century to the revolutionary mood of the early twentieth and harness it in the service of the inauguration of a new religious world order.

It is well documented that the mid-seventeenth-century schism in the Russian Orthodox Church issued in a large dissenting community which was opposed to the tsarist state on religious grounds. The schism was provoked by reforms to church ritual under Patriarch Nikon during the reign of Aleksei Mikhailovich (in the service of the same Byzantinization of the Muscovite state that has been alluded to above). These were perceived as a betrayal of Moscow's supremacy in matters of faith as established in the ideology of the third Rome, and therefore as an act of apostasy that inaugurated the end of history. In this context, Peter's abandonment of Moscow as the state's capital for St Petersburg (the 'fourth' Rome), his assimilation of the role of patriarch and simultaneous elevation of his own, personal power, and his aggressive and brazenly blasphemous attacks on Muscovite religious values, caused him to be perceived by religious dissenters as Antichrist.[61]

Merezhkovsky calls the notion of the tsar as antichrist 'the unconscious prophetic horror of the Russian schism' (135/PSS 50). He concedes that the schismatics were not literally correct in their perception, but sees the tsar-antichrist as an historical symbol that points the way to the real Antichrist, the incarnation of the Beast that, according to the Book of Revelation, will occur at the end of history. Gippius, too, situates the image in the collective unconscious of the Russian people: 'the legend of Antichrist is the very idea

[60] For the nineteenth-century context, see Chapter 2.

[61] For further context, including reference to studies of the schism and religious dissent, see Chapter 2.

of tsarism as this is revealed in dreams most removed from any historical reality' (204). For her, the legend 'has existed for centuries and was always the first thing to be taken up by the Russian people. It is like a living and concrete faith, like a feeling, or rather a premonition, true and dreadful, of some kind of event, for the definition of which the people could find no other word, no closer word than "Antichrist" ' (203).

For both Merezhkovsky and Gippius the combination of state and church, temporal and spiritual power, in Peter's person lies at the heart of the matter. Merezhkovsky observes that the early schismatics, who 'declared Russian autocracy to be "the tsardom of antichrist" ', 'were historically correct in their sense of the religious impossibility of orthodox autocracy' (135/PSS 42). For Gippius, it was 'far from without foundation that the people saw the Antichrist in Peter', since his ideal—tsarism as total power—is from a Christian point of view 'the tsardom of Antichrist', understood as 'the complete incarnation of [the] highest lie' (204): 'This was the first autocrat, the first tsar, that is the first emperor-high priest, to be declared "Antichrist" in unconscious sighs of horror in the depths of the people, as if what the people believed in as the highest truth had been incarnated in him as the highest lie' (205).

With Peter, two forms of blasphemy merge: the anti-Christian (accepting the appellations of Christ, Saviour, Sun, and so forth: that is, blaspheming within the Christian tradition), and the neo-pagan (ruling as an 'earthly god' without reference to a higher power: that is, blaspheming against the Christian tradition).[62] In 'Now or Never', Merezhkovsky claims that Peter was himself unable to distinguish between the two: 'Peter's greatest weakness […] was his inability consciously to differentiate between […] his Christian and pagan roles as high priest. After all, in ancient pagan Rome caesar was also a high priest: the *Pontifex Maximus*, although, of course, in a different sense, diametrically opposite to the meaning of Christian high-priesthood, that is in the human-divine [*chelovekobozheskii*], and not the divine-human [*bogochelovecheskii*] sense (*Divus Caesar*, Divine Caesar, Caesar-God, Human-God).'[63] The designation 'Pontifex Maximus' is perhaps the key to this confusion since—as Filosofov points out—the title was adopted from the

[62] Merezhkovsky defines the pagan type as 'caesar, an autocrat in the ancient Roman sense, who demands for himself not only "what belongs to Caesar", but also "what belongs to God", and who thereby places himself, a person, in the place of God': Merežkovskij, PSS 4, vol. 14 (*Griadushchii kham*), p. 134 ('Now or Never'). The reference is to Matthew 22: 21. Compare Filosofov: the Russian tsar is effectively 'an earthly God, whose essence cannot be other than that possessed by the Caesar, the deified (*obozhestvlennyi*) pagan' (77).

[63] Merežkovskij, PSS 4, vol. 14 (*Griadushchii kham*), p. 129 ('Now or Never').

pagan Roman emperors and Christianized by their successors, the Byzantine emperors. Declaring the metaphysics of joining God to Caesar to be the same in both the Roman Catholic and the Orthodox churches, Filosofov writes: 'In the west the theocratic ideal was embodied in the Roman prelate, who added to the priestly office the pagan power of Caesar-God. In the East the inheritor of the Roman emperors declared himself to be the highest pontiff [*pontifik*] of the church. Historical Christianity in this way created two similar earthly gods, before whom it prostrated itself' (82).[64]

The opposition 'true/false', 'genuine/fake' is crucial to the narrative of blasphemy. For the schismatics, as for the Merezhkovskys, 'antichrist' was not so much a moral as an ontological category, denoting falseness, imposture, usurpation, and 'pretending'. For both, this was the essence of the demonic. Uspensky and Zhivov propose that the moral distinction between a just and an unjust ruler was replaced in Russia by the ontological distinction between a genuine and a false one in direct connection with the process of the sacralization of the tsar, namely, at the point during the Muscovite era after the fall of Constantinople at which the title 'tsar' is adopted by the Grand Princes, and 'the monarch acquires a special charisma, special gifts of grace due to which he begins to be seen as a supernatural being'.[65] Such a monarch cannot be deposed on moral grounds. So long as the succession was secure, the problem of ontological legitimacy did not arise, but in the Time of Troubles (1598–1613), after the end of the Rurikid dynasty and until the election of the first Romanov tsar, when there was a series of interim rulers, it did so with force. At the same time, and not coincidentally, according to Uspensky, the peculiarly persistent Russian phenomenon of imposture (*samozvanstvo*: 'self-naming') came into being. It became possible to debate whether the person on the throne was the 'true' tsar or an imposter, a tsar 'in outward appearance only'.[66] It became possible to declare oneself to be of royal descent, usually by claiming to be the heir to the throne who was not murdered, as supposed, but survived and went into hiding (such as

[64] Filosofov's essay is devoted to the parallels between caesaropapism in the West and the trope of the sacred ruler in Russia, as it is directed at a French readership in the context of the recent (1905) formal separation of church and state in France. The Merezhkovskys attribute immense significance to the historical coincidence of this event with the fall of the Russian autocracy.

[65] Uspenskij and Zhivov, *Tsar and God*, pp. 3; 10.

[66] B.A. Uspenskij, 'Tsar and Pretender: *Samozvanchestvo* or Royal Imposture in Russia as a Cultural-Historical Phenomenon', in Uspenskij and Zhivov, *Tsar and God*, pp. 113–52, p. 116. The Russian original can be found as 'Tsar' i samozvanets. Samozvanchestvo v Rossii kak kul'turno-istoricheskii fenomen' in Uspenskii, *Izbrannye trudy*, pp. 142–83. Quotations from this essay are from David Budgen's translation in Uspenskij and Zhivov.

Dmitry, son of Ivan the Terrible, Alexei, son of Peter the Great, or Peter, son of Anna Petrovna and husband of Catherine the Great). As is well known, numerous rebellions against the authorities featured a talismanic pretender at their head.

Uspensky's analysis of the phenomenon of royal imposture includes elements that feature strongly in the Merezhkovskys' narrative, notably its connections with mummery (masquerade or dressing-up) and with demonism. Uspensky claims that the behaviour of a pretender was seen as carnival behaviour, and that pretenders were seen as mummers, connecting this with the game of 'playing at tsar' that was popular at times of the year such as Yuletide and Shrovetide, when mummery was common.[67] He also points out that the early Russian suspicion of masquerade as 'anti-behaviour', that is, as demonic in principle, survives in the later attribution of demonism to pretenders. He adduces evidence that the False Dmitry, for example, was perceived as a sorcerer.[68] 'Playing at tsar', dressing up in tsar's clothing, was considered blasphemous behaviour.[69] Finally, returning to Peter the Great, Uspensky emphasizes that Peter was famed for his own 'blasphemous entertainments',[70] which spilled out beyond Yuletide and Shrovetide; that the European dress that he forced his court to wear was perceived as demonic masquerade (he 'dressed people up as devils');[71] and, finally, that this conduct led to him being perceived 'essentially as a pretender': 'Rumors to the effect that a substitute had been exchanged for the real Tsar (either while he was abroad or else in infancy) and that another man sat upon the throne in his stead—i.e. a pretender, a Tsar in outward appearance only—were widespread in Peter's reign and were extraordinarily persistent.'[72]

In their creative assimilation of the dissenting tradition, the Merezhkovskys connect the trope of imposture with that of antichrist. They view not only Peter but each subsequent tsar 'essentially as a pretender', as tsar 'in outward appearance only', and as a demonic substitute for the real thing; except that the 'real thing' is not the genuine tsar, as the dissenters believed, but Christ himself. In other words, the very phenomenon of the sacralization of

[67] Uspenskij and Zhivov, *Tsar and God*, p. 121. [68] Ibid., pp. 129–31.
[69] Ibid., p. 127. [70] Ibid., p. 128. [71] Ibid., p. 131.
[72] Ibid., p. 132. See also Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People*, p. 94: 'One could be the sovereign emperor without being the pious Russian tsar. In fact, a very large minority of Russians, the schismatic Old Believers, drew the extreme conclusion: beginning with Peter I, to be the emperor meant *not* being the tsar. For masses of Old Believers Peter and his successors remained Antichrists exactly because they were emperors. The more extreme groups refused to pray for the ruler; that is, in effect they refused to recognise the existence of the State as such.'

the Russian tsars is called into question as deeply blasphemous. In this connection, the Merezhkovskys make a further identification between the trope of imposture and the title of *namestnik*: vicegerent, deputy, or vicar (literally 'one in the place of'), which, as we have seen, was given to the Byzantine and Russian emperors and the Roman Pope. The following passage from 'Revolution and Religion' encapsulates this constellation of images very clearly:

> But if Christ is not ideally and fleshlessly, but really and incarnately *Tsar on earth as in heaven*; if His word, *Behold, I am with you to the end of the age. Amen*, is true, then there can be no other Tsar, no other High Priest, than Christ, existing to the end of the age with us and in us, in our flesh and blood, through the sacrament of Flesh and Blood. This is why any kind of substitute for the real Flesh of Christ, the real Face of Christ, in the form of human flesh and a human face (*lik*), is only a mask (*lichina*), a pope or a caesar, is an absolute lie, absolute anti-Christianity. Who can stand 'in the place' of (*na mesto*) Christ—*instead* of (*vmesto*) Christ—if not Antichrist? In this sense, any 'deputy' (*namestnik*) of Christ is an imposter (*samozvanets*) of Christ: Antichrist. (143–4/PSS 49)[73]

Here we see an inference not made historically hitherto: that to occupy someone's place is to give oneself a false name. Both are acts of pretending, 'dressing-up', or masquerade: hence the reference to the mask. Both are demonic, revealing Merezhkovsky's understanding of evil to be the imitation of the good. (As he affirms in an open letter to Berdiaev: 'The Human-god is not the antithesis of the God-human, but a fake God-human; the Antichrist is not the antithesis of Christ, but a fake Christ.')[74]

The above-cited passage also demonstrates both a theological and a linguistic realism. Merezhkovsky professes to believe in the God-human, the incarnate and resurrected, living Christ. He affirms here the transubstantiation of the elements of the Eucharist, and the deifying effect of participating in the sacrament. The bread and the wine are in this discourse not signs, but symbols, in which two orders of reality are mystically combined. In addition, as a Symbolist Merezhkovsky adheres to a non-conventional, iconic view

[73] Compare Filosofov: 'The Roman Pope and *God's anointed (khristos)* the Byzantine Emperor, who have seized the power of the real head of the church, Christ the Tsar, are both in essence imposters' (82).

[74] Merežkovskij, PSS 4, vol. 13 (*Griadushchii kham*), p. 181. The letter is entitled 'On the New Religious Action' ('O novom religioznom deistvii').

of language, whereby names embody or body forth the noumenal reality of the named thing.[75] His theological realism in combination with his linguistic Symbolism is what allows the myth of the sacred ruler and its tropes to be perceived by him as blasphemous. In this connection Uspensky and Zhivov's thesis as to why the process of the sacralization of the tsar intensified in the era of Peter the Great, and at the same time met with fierce resistance, is of great interest. The rhetoricians at Peter's court were steeped in the imported culture of the Baroque, which was characterized by a highly conventional view of language as signs which can and should be played with to display learning and generate new meanings. Feofan Prokopovich (1681–1736), for example, thought nothing of comparing the tsar to God and Christ and using biblical quotations out of context to support his argument. But beyond the court this type of ornamental and ludic discourse was read against the background of the traditional Great Russian cultural consciousness, which was characterized by a highly non-conventional view of language. Widespread use of religious tropes in official panegyrical discourse thus created an environment in which the tsar could either be perceived literally as God, Christ, and so forth, or—as in the case of religious dissenters—as the ultimate demonic blasphemer.[76] By virtue of his Symbolist view of language, Merezhkovsky thus shares the cultural perspective of the pre-Petrine, and post-Petrine 'traditional', national consciousness. In this peculiar way, the arch-modernist makes common cause with the anti-modern stance of traditional popular culture.

Uspensky and Zhivov point out that 'both of these [responses to Baroque imagery] were grounded in the same world-view'.[77] The Merezhkovskys' affinity is, however, clearly with the dissenters. In 'Revolution and Religion', Merezhkovsky describes their participation in the annual gathering of 'schismatics and sectarians' on the banks of Svetloe ozero ('Bright lake') on St John's eve (23 June). The lake is said to be the site of the legendary drowned and invisible city of Kitezh, where the saints are preserved until the Second Coming.[78] The Merezhkovskys felt that for the first time they had found people with whom they shared a common language, as they

[75] Thomas Seifrid, *The Word made Self: Russian Writings on Language, 1860–1930* (2005), pp. 23–5; 59–66. Stephen C. Hutchings, *Russian Modernism: The Transfiguration of the Everyday* (1997), pp. 28–42.

[76] Uspenskij and Zhivov, *Tsar and God*, pp. 18–21.

[77] Ibid., p. 21.

[78] Since Kitezh, as the legend goes, disappeared beneath the waters to escape the Mongol invasion, long before the emergence of tsars and the schism, the city preserved the Orthodox faith in all its purity.

discussed 'the end of the world, the second coming, the antichrist, and the Johannine church of the future' (185/PSS 89).[79] According to Merezhkovsky, they succeeded where the socialist intelligentsia had failed: in bonding with 'the people', but on the basis of religion, not politics. The overarching thesis of his essay is that the revolutionary movement has its popular origins in religious dissent, and that the revolution will succeed only when the political revolutionaries of the intelligentsia reconnect both with their own unconscious religious drive and with the Russian people's fundamentally religious opposition to the tsarist state.

The Merezhkovskys work hard to establish that it is the schismatics and sectarians, not the Orthodox peasantry, who represent the authentic Russian people, by employing the circular argument that the true Russian people fundamentally rejects any substitute for Christ, therefore the dissenters are the true Russian people. In a separate strategy, both Filosofov and Gippius challenge the Slavophile view that the people's faith is identical with Orthodoxy. According to Filosofov, the religious power that Russian literature attributes to the peasantry 'still lies hidden, insofar as Orthodoxy is not a worthy vehicle for the expression of the religious aspirations of the Russian people' (100). Gippius argues that whilst the Russian soul is predominantly Christian, it is not Orthodox (116): 'Precisely because it cannot cease to be religious and Christian, the people must rid itself of Orthodoxy. It has outlived any Christianity that includes Orthodoxy, and now, since only the name remains there, it carries its Christianity, or rather its faith in Christ, onwards' (117). Again, 'the Orthodox Church is alien to [the people] in many respects and does not hold decisive significance for it, particularly in recent times' (204). Filosofov blames the Russian Orthodox Church for '[seducing] its flock with the ideal of a false theocracy' (100) and for leading it to believe that 'to go against the Tsar is to go against God' (101). Gippius, from the other end, sees tsarism as the idol of the people, which, surpassing the Israelites and their golden calf, 'strives to create an incarnated God for itself, a living idol, a ceaselessly existing, not-made-by-hands God in the likeness of a man, a Messiah: this is the autocratic Tsar, to whom the prelates of the Orthodox Church might write, as they did to Peter the Great, "you are our incarnate Christ" ' (210). She argues that the most effective strategy to turn the masses to revolution would be to expose their belief in the tsar as a sin: 'Your faith is in vain! Look, it is not God whom you worship but a person like yourself,

[79] On the visit, see Alexander Etkind, *Khlyst: sekty, literatura, i revoliutsiia* (1998), pp. 190–2.

weaker than yourself. From faith in an incarnate God you have made faith in a Human-god. You have abandoned Christ long ago; more than that: you have accepted the Antichrist. Your life is not only dark, dirty and insignificant; it is also sacrilegious (*sviatotatstvenna*). And perhaps it is so dark and insignificant just because it is sacrilegious' (211). On this view, the Christian instincts of the people have been misdirected, but can be set straight with the right leadership.

Just as the schismatics were in the vanguard in terms of popular resistance to the tsarist state, so the revolutionary intelligentsia is in the van of the educated class. The Merezhkovskys regard the revolutionaries as akin to the schismatics among the people. In his essay 'The Coming Boor' ('Griadushchii kham', 1906), Merezhkovsky suggests that 'it sometimes seems that our native-soil conservatives, our nationalists, are much less Russian than our nihilists, our intelligentsia "runners" and "no-sayers"';[80] he observes that the nineteenth-century anarchist Bakunin has a great deal in common with the seventeenth-century Old Believer Avvakum. Gippius goes further, claiming that the revolutionary intelligentsia and the people cannot be distinguished, first and foremost because 'the majority of Russian revolutionaries even come from the people and are related to it by blood' (114).[81] Already in 'The Coming Boor' Merezhkovsky is rehearsing the argument that he later fleshes out in 'Revolution and Religion': 'Russian sociality was baptised with religious fire in its infancy, and the same fire will descend upon it in its maturity, will burst into flame on its forehead, in a new descent of the Holy Spirit onto the living spirit of Russia, the Russian intelligentsia.'[82] In plainer language, the popular dissenting 'revolution from below' and the intelligentsia-led political resistance to tsarism, which shared a religious motivation at first but separated after the Decembrist rebellion (of 1825), will come together to bring about the ultimate revolution: a transformation of the spiritual order of things. All the Merezhkovskys insist that, despite their overt atheism, the revolutionaries are unconsciously motivated by a religious passion. Filosofov describes them as 'unconscious mystics' who fully understand the 'irrational power of autocracy' and the impossibility of

[80] Merežkovskij, PSS 4, vol. 14 (*Griadushchii kham*), p. 30 ('The Coming Boor'). The Beguny and Netovshchiki were two of a number of radical dissenting sects active in late-imperial Russia.

[81] See also p. 206, where Gippius stresses the shared psychological characteristics of intelligentsia and people and denies that the intelligentsia is a separate class. For an account of the historical relationship of Russian revolutionaries to religious sectarians, see Alexander Etkind, *Internal Colonisation: Russia's Imperial Experience* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), chapter 10, 'Sects and Revolution', pp. 194–213.

[82] Merežkovskij, PSS 4, vol. 14 (*Griadushchii kham*), p. 38 ('The Coming Boor').

compromise with it (98–9). For him, 'the religious might that lies hidden in the people has gone over into the service of the atheistic revolution' (101). Blame for the atheism of the revolutionary movement is laid firmly at the door of the Russian Orthodox Church, which has betrayed Christianity. As Gippius puts it, '[t]he name of God is not yet present in the new idea [of the socialist revolution]. The name is still in the place from which God has departed' (111).[83]

If the Merezhkovskys distinguish between the right-thinking Russian people, represented by the dissenting communities, who reject the tsar and the Orthodox Church, and the misguided Russian people who have remained within the Orthodox Church and regard the tsar as a sacred being, they implicitly make a similar distinction between right-thinking and misguided revolutionaries. All Russian revolutionaries are opposed to tsarism, but only a portion of them also oppose the state as such. These are the anarchists within the Populist camp of the Social Revolutionaries, with whom the Merezhkovskys most closely identified and associated.[84] They are seen as more radical, more utopian, more mystical, than the Marxist (and statist) Social Democrats, and thus more akin to the spirit of popular religious dissent, which Merezhkovsky describes as 'an almost conscious religious anarchism' (135–6/PSS 42). In 'Revolution and Religion', Merezhkovsky juxtaposes the figure of Aleksandr Dobroliubov, the decadent poet who rejected his class to become a popular mystic, with A., a fugitive sailor-revolutionary from the Black Sea Fleet who once visited Merezhkovsky to talk about God, as 'two opposite extremes that touch'. What unites them is 'the rejection of any form of the state, that limitless anarchy in which, it seems, the secret, *nocturnal soul* of the Russian revolution consists' (183/PSS 87–8). The preference for anarchism and its perceived connection to the Russian popular spirit comes out clearly in Merezhkovsky's 'Preface' to *Tsar and Revolution*. Here he tells his French readership that 'at the ultimate limit of your freedom you remain statists, whereas we, in the depths of our slavery, have almost never ceased to be rebels and secret anarchists' (58/PSS 163). He opposes anarchy to socialism, arguing that the latter is 'the same old statism, the enforced dependence of the individual on the group, of the personality on the impersonal laws of economic necessity' (61/PSS 165–6). In fact, though the 'conscious empirical limit' of the Russian revolution is

[83] See also p. 116: 'Their atheism consists entirely in words, and it is inevitable, since autocracy has appropriated the divine word for itself.'

[84] Pavlova, 'Mucheniki velikogo religioznogo protsessa', pp. 43–54.

socialism, its 'unconscious mystical limit is a stateless religious community' (165), characterized by 'a new religious unity of the personality and society, the one and the all, unbounded freedom and unbounded love' (166). This is what Merezhkovsky looks to beyond the revolution.

'Istinnoe bezvlastie est' Bogovlastie': true anarchy is Theocracy (61/166).[85] What looks like anarchy on the outside, from the inside appears as a theocracy.[86] Thus, the false theocracy represented by the unholy alliance of autocracy and Orthodoxy, and embodied in the sacrilegious myth of the sacred ruler, will be exchanged for a genuine theocracy, in which the sole ruler is Christ himself. For Antichrist, Christ; for the human-god, the God-human. What is more, a tsardom characterized by the rule of one earthly god over many slaves will be exchanged for a community in which all are gods, a community for which Merezhkovsky uses the Solovievian term Godmanhood, or divine humanity.[87] As he writes to Berdiaev, 'Christianity is the religion of divine humanity; at the foundation of any form of the state lies a more or less conscious religion of human divinity.'[88] He conceives of divine humanity as 'the final revelation of the Holy Spirit in the Holy Flesh, when *God will be all in all*'.[89] This is nothing less than a vision of deified humanity, to be in the new millenium, as Merezhkovsky makes clear in an important passage in his essay 'Now or Never' which merits quoting at length:

> From now there must be revealed in universal history, or, more accurately, at the end of universal history, the truth of the universal Church and of all humanity, the truth not only about the spirit, but also about the flesh, not only about heaven, but also about earth, not only about the descent of the heavenly to the earthly, but also about the ascent of the earthly to the heavenly, not only about life beyond the grave, but about life [right] here, not only about personal, but also about general, *all-human* salvation, which is accomplished in the *divine-human* process throughout universal history and will finally be completed at the end of that history, which will coincide with the end of the cosmic process, with what for believers in the unalterable truth of Revelation is the *end of the world*. […] From now before the face of the entire world the chiliastic prophecy of the book of Revelation about the 'thousand-year reign of the saints on earth', which

[85] On the Merezhkovskys 'theocratic anarchism', see P. P. Gaidenko, *Vladimir Solov'ev i filosofiia serebriannogo veka* (2001), pp. 346–55.
[86] Merežkovskij, PSS 4, vol. 14 (*Griadushchii kham*), p. 171 ('On the New Religious Action').
[87] On Soloviev, see Chapter 2.
[88] Merežkovskij, PSS 4, vol. 14 (*Griadushchii kham*), p. 171 ('On the New Religious Action').
[89] Merežkovskij, PSS 4, vol. 13 (*Ne mir no mech*), p. 155 ('The Last Saint').

with undoubted accuracy is predicted *before the end of the world*, that is, still in the present physical order of the cosmos, must be openly fulfilled; the prophecy must be fulfilled about a certain universal *theocracy*, which will abolish, as no longer necessary and out-moded, all historical forms of statehood, all temporal powers, laws, tsardoms, authorities; the prophecy about the New City of God, in which there will be neither tsar nor high priest, for there all are tsars and priests, while the single Tsar of tsars and High Priest is the Lord Himself.[90]

Conclusion

Cherniavsky proposes that in Russia the myth of the sacred ruler was counterposed by an equally significant and culture-shaping myth of land and people: the myth of 'Holy Russia'. He argues that in its origins and among the people themselves this popular myth was anti-tsarist and anti-state.[91] He dates popular use of the epithet to the Time of Troubles, a time 'when the traditional central authority was virtually absent', and the salvation of Russia was in the hands of the Orthodox Russian people (which subsequently elected a tsar, Mikhail Romanov). 'Holy Russia' 'was the concentrated essence of Russia, visible when the form of Russia was destroyed'.[92] As an absolute and immutable category, he argues, it was inherently antagonistic towards the historical, mutable, tsardom. What is more, it 'became a possible standard against which the ruler and the state could be judged', and thus a potential threat to the tsar and officialdom itself.[93]

What we see in the political theological discourse of the Merezhkovskys in the wake of the 1905 revolution is, first, an identification with the popular myth in opposition to the ruler myth; second, a projection of the popular myth into a future world when the tsar and the state will have been overcome; and, finally, an attempt to globalize the popular myth. The Merezhkovskys belong to the intelligentsia class, which was born, as Cherniavsky points out, out of officialdom in 1762, when the gentry was released from obligatory state service. From this point forward it found itself caught between the two dominant Russian myths and intrinsically belonging to neither: 'the solution lay in either creating a myth of their own or of identifying with the

[90] Merežkovskij, PSS 4, vol. 14 (*Griadushchii kham*), p. 133 ('Now or Never').
[91] Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People*, p. 110. [92] Ibid., p. 116. [93] Ibid., p. 117.

existing ones'.[94] Cherniavsky's very attractive idea—that in its search for a Russian identity the intelligentsia was constrained by the power of the myths—is borne out in the intellectual journey of the Merezhkovskys. As Merezhkovsky admits in print in his open letter to Berdiaev, he was once in thrall to the 'deep' and 'dangerous' lie of the sacred ruler: 'I now recognise how close I was to Antichrist […] when I raved about the coming "pope-caesar", "tsar-priest", as the forerunner of the Coming Christ. I thank God that this deception has passed from me utterly.'[95] Characteristically for him (and numerous other Russian intellectuals), rather than escaping from the myth altogether, he then swung to the position I have been analysing in this chapter, which can be described as an inversion of the ruler myth, the ruler myth inside out: the tsar as demonic forerunner of Antichrist.

Reversing his position on the tsar, Merezhkovsky naturally falls into the ambit of the popular counter-myth. If holiness does not reside in the person of the tsar, it does so, at least in potential, in the Russian people. As we have seen, the Merezhkovskys persistently associate the revolutionaries with the people, and the people with the religious dissenters. They also persistently try to dissociate the Russian people from the Orthodox Church. All this speaks of a particular construction of the popular myth. In the essays I have been analysing, the Merezhkovskys do not refer to 'Holy Russia'. By the early twentieth century the epithet had become clichéd from overuse by the conservative intelligentsia, and too prey to assimilation into the myth-making of the autocratic regime.[96] Elsewhere, Merezhkovsky uses the term only with heavy irony.[97] He doubts the fitness of the Orthodox peasantry, which has enslaved itself to the myth of the sacred ruler, to represent the idea of 'Holy Russia'. As a religious anarchist he is antipathetic to the ethnic nationalism inherent in the term. As an enemy of the Russian Orthodox Church he does not wish to be associated with the epithet's correlation with Orthodoxy as 'correct worship'. Even the Old Believers, whose principled religious resistance to the post-Petrine autocracy Merezhkovsky admired, remained within the imaginative confines of Muscovite nationalism and Orthodox

[94] Ibid., p. 125.

[95] Merežkovskij, PSS 4, vol. 14 (*Griadushchii kham*), p. 176. Cherniavsky notes Merezhkovsky's 'fury of a betrayed man, of a man who would have wanted so desperately to believe', as expressed in essays like 'Mother Pig' ('Svin'ia Matushka', 1909): Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People*, p. 214. Merezhkovsky himself, in 'Religion and Revolution', reads Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Soloviev as victims of the ruler myth's power.

[96] See Cherniavsky, *Tsar and People*, p. 134, on how it became expedient for the regime to appropriate the popular myth for the purposes of rallying the people to fight Napoleon.

[97] Ibid., p. 220.

supremacism. Merezhkovsky rejects their nostalgia for a 'Holy Russia' of the past,[98] but makes his own instead their apocalyptic yearning for an end to the present order, and capitalizes on what he perceives as their intuitive anarchism. Thus, in 'Revolution and Religion', he adopts as a leitmotif the schismatics' expression: 'We are people without a present city, in search of a future city' (136/PSS 42–3), marrying this to the ideal of the 'Tsardom of God' (*Bozhie tsarstvo*) in the name of which Russia's greatest writers, from Chaadaev to Soloviev, according to Merezhkovsky, rejected present Russian reality. For Merezhkovsky this Tsardom of God is synonymous with his own 'Tsardom of Divine Humanity', the true Church of deified humanity that will replace the institutional churches in the future age (192–3/PSS 95–6).

Finally, though the religious revolution will be made in Russia, its effects will engulf the West also. As Merezhkovsky puts it in the 'Preface' to *Tsar and Revolution*: 'The Russian revolution is universal' (61/PSS 165). The Christian era, which was marred by the fatal alliance of the church with the state in both East and West, is coming to an end, as evidenced by the recent successful culmination in France of the long struggle to achieve the separation of the state from the church. The Russian revolution is finishing what the French revolution began; a new era is coming into being. In this way, the Merezhkovskys' political theological attack on the peculiarly Russian culture of tsar-worship is inscribed into their wider vision of a post-Christian Third Testament of the Holy Spirit in which all will be gods under Christ.

[98] Ibid., p. 117.