

## Religiosity and Pseudo-Religiosity in Russia's Nineteenth Century Liberation Movement Preceding Bolshevik Quasi- Religiosity

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NINETEENTH CENTURY REVOLUTIONARY RUSSIA is a perfect example of how pseudo-religiosity comes into being in—or, perhaps better, by—the denial of Christian religion. As is well known, Russia's revolutionary nineteenth century was begun by the so-called “Decembrists.” Pavel Pestel' (1793–1825), author of the legendary *Russian Truth* (*Russkaya Pravda*)—an incomplete draft of the constitution to the transitory first Russian Republic envisioned after the abolition of tsarism by a *coup d'état*<sup>1</sup>—was one of the five revolutionaries hanged in 1825 who became important martyrs guiding the next generation of revolutionaries in their fight for liberation from serfdom and for the abolition of tsarism<sup>2</sup> even if the contents of this wording of a law remained unknown for almost a century because it was hidden in the archives.<sup>3</sup> Pestel', a Freemason, had tried to reformulate “veritable Christendom”

1. Pavlov-Sil'vanskiy, “P. I. Pestel',” 233.
2. Florovskiy, “Iskaniya molodogo Gerena,” 278.
3. Nechkina, “Russkaya Pravda,” 9.

(*istinnoye khristianstvo*)—a legacy of Russian Freemasonry<sup>4</sup>—into a state doctrine. His *Truth* prescribed a peculiar theocratic “welfare state” desirable in order to continue Russia’s political fate.<sup>5</sup> Russian Orthodoxy would have made part of Russia’s governmental machinery and was to proselytize non-believers and members of non-Orthodox confessions:<sup>6</sup> censorship would have been no less considerable than as under the Bolsheviks, only based on another ideological paradigm.

The following account of Alexander Herzen’s, Nikolai Chernyshevsky’s, and Nikolai Mikhaylovsky’s vision of so-called “Russian socialism”—all three of them are acknowledged trend-setting revolutionaries—highlights the pseudo-religious myth inherent in their campaigns which created and/or amplified the pseudo-religious atmosphere within the ranks of the Russian *intelligentsiya* (intellectual elite). The omnipotent presence of censorship exercised under the triple slogan *narodnost’* (populism), *pravoslaviye* (orthodoxy), *samoderzhaviye* (autocracy), as it were, created a constant threat of persecution, bringing forth a certain atmosphere of apocalyptic crisis: already this historical situation seemingly called for Biblical metaphors.

Alexander Herzen (1812–70) had become familiar with European Enlightenment philosophy via his French private teacher, who himself was proud of having been one of the judges of Louis XVI. This teacher cautiously prepared Herzen’s future as a revolutionary and his “new religion” contained an apotheosis of personal liberty and independence; in fact, Herzen became the “Russian Voltaire.”<sup>7</sup> In 1848 he chose exile in order to bypass censorship. His journal *The Bell* (*Kolokol*, 1859–70) was extremely successful. Russian intellectuals from the 1860s onwards were educated by Herzen’s prophecies:<sup>8</sup> his writings indeed created the myth of a renewed form of Christianity, which was to launch Russia’s golden age within a very short time. New Christianity (*nouveau christianism*), promulgated first by early French socialists such as Pierre Leroux,<sup>9</sup> was reinforced as a core idea of “Russian socialism” that was based on the pseudo-religious myth of the Russian *obshchina* (rural community). As Herzen maintained, in comparison to European civilization demoralized by capitalism, Russian rural social life had not undergone this fundamental mental change, but had conserved a particular form of brotherhood and communism. Seen from here, the problem left was to abolish

4. Voronitsyn, *Dekabristy i religiya*, 14; Semevskiy, “Dekabristy-masonry” 2.

5. Pestel, “Russkaya Pravda,” 137, 114.

6. *Ibid.*, 153.

7. Tschizewskij, *Hegel bei den Slawen*, 263.

8. Breckner, “Vor-, anti- und postmarxistische Sozialismusideen,” 11.

9. Koyré, *Études*, 183; El’sberg, *Gertsen*, 31.

feudalism and, of course, all its political, juridical, and social consequences: the fabulous *obshchina* was to become the cellular sociological setting of the future Russia and evolve into a loose federation of local self-governmental unities.<sup>10</sup> Within the ranks of the Russian revolutionary intellectual elite this prophecy was widely accepted as creed of “Russian socialism.” It stimulated Russian populism in the 1870s, 80s, and 90s.<sup>11</sup> This pseudo-religious myth then blurred animosities amongst religious Slavophiles and non-religious Westernizers.<sup>12</sup> Herzen then used the title “apostles” with reference to all of the populists engaged in enlightening Russian folk:<sup>13</sup> enlightenment was to make them fully realize their privileged historical situation.<sup>14</sup>

Nikolai Chernyshevsky (1828–89), a student at the seminary of Saratov until 1844,<sup>15</sup> did not in fact continue in his father’s footsteps as a priest himself, but by the end of the 1840’s had instead become an enthusiastic follower of Ludwig Feuerbach. His early journal entries discuss the question of whether there exists a personal God or whether God rather is a myth,<sup>16</sup> yet, later writings clearly document that Chernyshevsky may righteously be considered the “Russian Feuerbach.”<sup>17</sup> In 1848–49 he belonged to the conspiratorial circle propagating French socialism.<sup>18</sup> In 1863 he was banished for the rest of his life. Via his publications as editor-in-chief of the *Sovremennik* (*The Contemporary*) he had become a sort of “politician”<sup>19</sup> of “Russian socialism,” one of the “apostles” of “new Christianity.” He may righteously be considered one of Herzen’s most important disciples. To be sure, the type of socialism they propagated has never been a systematic ideological program, but rather a special type of prophecy basing on the pseudo-religious myth axiomatically turning around the *obshchina*. From 1856 onwards Grigoriy Eliseyev, a member of the Old-Believers, assisted Chernyshevsky in spreading this prophecy, a matter of fact that inspired intense cooperation between religious and non-religious forces. Herzen and Chernyshevsky both called for the joint action of believers and non-believers in defending this

10. Gertsen, “Russkiy narod i sotsializm.”

11. Breckner, “Vor-, anti- und postmarxistische Sozialismusideen,” 11.

12. Gertsen, “Ne nashi,” 298.

13. Gertsen, “K staromu tovarishchu,” 172.

14. Gertsen, “Rossiya,” 187.

15. Dukhovnikov, “Chernyshevskiy,” 540.

16. Cf. Chernyshevsky’s Diary entries of July 11, 1849 and January 20, 1850, Chernyshevskiy, *Polnoye sobraniye sochineniy*, 297, 358.

17. Lyatskiy, “Chernyshevskiy.”

18. Anikin, *Put’ iskaniy*, 273.

19. Venturi, *Roots of Revolution*, 129.

pseudo-religious myth as to represent the nucleus of golden times ahead.<sup>20</sup> In the early 1860's Afanasiy Shchapov, one of Elseev's students, successfully recruited Old-Believers to the first revolutionary combat unit of Zemlya i volya (*Land and Liberty*).<sup>21</sup> The second unit of this type in the beginning of the 1870's followed this example. At this time, the New Testament had become the most frequently used statement of defense; the saying of a man facing arrest that he respected as "teachers" solely "Christ, Saint Paul, and Chernyshevsky"<sup>22</sup> has become famous. In the 1870's, "revolutionary" and "seminarist" (student of theology) were used as synonyms and the *Sovremennik* was called a "consistory."<sup>23</sup>

Nikolai Mikhaylovsky (1842–1904) admitted to having been educated by Herzen and Chernyshevsky.<sup>24</sup> Like his brothers in arms he became journalist, reviewer, essayist, in short, a revolutionary of the word. When in 1868 Eliseyev asked him to join the staff of the *Otechestvennyye zapiski* (*National Notes*) he had already become familiar with early French socialism, for in 1867 he had translated *De la capacité de la classe ouvrière* by Pierre-Joseph Proudhon into Russian.

Mikhaylovsky was extremely popular amongst the active and passive participants of Russian Populism, the *narodnichestvo*,<sup>25</sup> for he highlighted conjoint views instead of insisting on dissent between the three fractions: the first followed Mikhail Bakunin in his belief in violent uprising, the second trusted the concept of enlightenment by words as Herzen had preached it, and a third recalled the French Jacobins. Yet, by the end of the 1870's Mikhaylovsky clearly positioned himself in favor of Herzen's concept of "enlightenment."<sup>26</sup> Especially his work *Pis'ma o pravde i nepravde* (1877) witnesses to the fact that Mikhaylovsky also shared the myth about the Russian *obshchina* as the cornerstone of all ideal visions of future Russia. He, himself a non-believer, nonetheless acknowledged the Slavophiles' discourses on knowledge of the self as not being comprehensible beyond the "we," or otherwise said as to always connote the existence of the next within

20. Cf. Chernyshevskiy, "Slavyanofily i vopros ob obshchine," 737 and Gertsen, "Russkiy narod i sotsializm," 307, and also in many other writings by both authors.

21. Venturi, *Roots of Revolution*, 253.

22. Billington, *Mikhailovsky*, 120.

23. *Ibid.*, 123.

24. Vilenskaya, *Mikhaylovskiy*, 23.

25. Kolosov, *Ocherki mirovozzreniya*, 63.

26. Rusanov, "Politika Mikhaylovskogo," 125.

oneself in metaphysical and in terms of existence.<sup>27</sup> The above-cited work is extremely important with respect to his heuristics, too.

Refusing the disconnectedness between “theoretical truth” (*istina*) and “practical truth” (*pravda*) he intended “subjective truth” (*pravda sub’yektivnaya*) to be the focus of his discourses.<sup>28</sup> Referring to August Comte, he also believed in a three step development of history. He saw those three phases distinguished by means and modes of the division of labor. This discursive view represents the *istina*, the theoretical discourse he upheld. The first period was then epitomized by total absence of division of labor and belief in non-personal God, the second by increasing division of labor and Christianity plus increasing capitalism, whereas in the third phase of history civilization would return to a situation where people would live and work collectively and not divide their labor into branches of production isolated from one another. Capitalism would necessarily end and be substituted by some sort of socialism, with the socializing of property and labor.<sup>29</sup> This decisive turn of history would arise out of people’s immense psychological strain caused by growing poverty, but even more importantly by the growing isolation from each other. He called this assessment of the historical situation *pravda*.<sup>30</sup> In order to bypass the risks of capitalism augmenting both negative developments, he recommended also the Russian rural community, the *obshchina*, to set the example of how labor and property could be organized also with respect to growing modern industries.<sup>31</sup> This vision denotes the *subjective truth*—a mixture of *pravda* and *istina*—he defended. In his eyes this pseudo-religious myth represented the appropriate basis for debates on Russia’s future. He considered Marxism dreadful, for he feared a “new terror” if social revolutions replaced political reform.<sup>32</sup>

I hold that in the nineteenth and twentieth century Russian Orthodoxy did not significantly react either to the ongoing resistance against tsarism and its institutions or to the Bolshevism. The destiny of Russian Orthodoxy differs fundamentally from the fate of the European Christian Churches. By the nineteenth century, the latter had already gone through many centuries of constant religious adjustment and change in the Renaissance, Reformation, and Enlightenment to guide themselves and make them formulate

27. Mikhaylovskiy, “Pis’ma o pravde i nepravde.”

28. Mikhaylovskiy, “Predisloviye k 3-mu izdaniyu.”

29. Mikhaylovskiy, “Iz literaturnykh i zhurnal’nykh zametok,” 719, and “Chto takoye progress?” 103.

30. Mikhaylovskiy, “Geroi i tolpa,” 174.

31. Frangian, *Michailovsky*, 41.

32. Kolosov, *Ocherki mirovozzreniya*, 66, and Ziemke, *Marxismus und Narodnichestvo*, 388.

and reformulate religious guidelines according to historical change. Contrastingly, official post-Petrinian Orthodoxy did not even aspire to develop models of adjustment assistance in the face of modernity that step by step had also begun to take its rise in the feudal empire. As Fr. Sergey Bulgakov put it, Orthodoxy never developed such a thing as “autonomous ethics” which rather constitutes a “spiritual gift of Protestantism.”<sup>33</sup> “The ideal foundation of Orthodoxy is not ethical, but religious, aesthetic; it is the vision of ‘spiritual beauty.’”<sup>34</sup>

This essay was not to discuss the rightness or wrongness of his judgment, but drew a picture of how processes of secularization went in Russia’s intellectual history in the nineteenth century until the Church’s influence was reduced to nothing by the Bolsheviks. It seems of immense interest to follow up the development of today’s Orthodoxy as it has gained new spheres of liberty and new importance. One of its new assignment of tasks might be to examine closely spheres and impact of pseudo-religiosity that seeks analogies with Christian thought and differs from quasi-religiosity in this point. What I call quasi-religious thinking is when eschatological analogy is *not* intended, yet nevertheless appears so to say unconsciously as a constituting feature of a sentence, a comprehensive discourse, an ideology etc. Consequently I agree with Nikolai Berdyaev,<sup>35</sup> Sergey Bulgakov,<sup>36</sup> and other prominent thinkers in their point that Marx declaring “the sum of proletarians” to fulfill history’s purpose comes down to a quasi-religious vision. Marxism really was Hegelianism with a new face. Hegel’s saying that the world’s history is progress in the consciousness of freedom was, in Bulgakov’s eyes, borrowed and vulgarized by Marx and Engels when they spoke of a leap from the kingdom of necessity into the kingdom of freedom. The “economic base” substituted what had been *die letzte Instanz* (“the final instance”) in Hegel, and just as the World Spirit uses human desires and interests for its own ends, so in Marx’s historical ontology the leap to the kingdom of freedom originates in the *List der Vernunft* (“cunning of reason”), too. People fulfill, as if against their will, history’s intentions. This infamous “cunning of reason” comes into play, because otherwise the metamorphosis from “wolf” to “brother,” the sudden leap from “social Darwinism” to socialism, to paradise on earth, is inexplicable. Historical materialism, devoid as it is of any suitable concept of man, cannot justify the introduction of

33. Bulgakov, *Orthodox Church*, 153–55.

34. *Ibid.*, 154.

35. Berdyaev, *Filosofiya neravenstva*, 155, and many other places throughout his works.

36. Bulgakov, *Christentum*, 28.

socialism.<sup>37</sup> Adam Smith and Marx defended the same “hedonistic” end, yet whereas Smith introduced, as Bulgakov asserts, the dogma of the *homo economicus* merely in terms of a “hypothetical presumption” Marx made it an axiomatic, fundamental thesis.<sup>38</sup> Yet, the Leviathan Marx had created was much “worse,” since a collective entity devoid of personal character was to take over the rule of the world:<sup>39</sup> a “pit of wolves” was to work its way up to a crowd of “brothers, loving and kissing each other.”<sup>40</sup> This metamorphosis from “wolf” to “brother” constituted, as far as Bulgakov was concerned, the central weakness of Marx’s historical materialism. He, just like his ideological friend Berdyaev, suspected it of being a disguised religious faith of quasi-chilastic character: in fact, Marxism—which is also true with respect to Bolshevism—is a “secularised chilastic teaching” about the 1000 years long Sabbath to come.<sup>41</sup>

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37. Bulgakov, “Religiya chelovekobozhiya,” 58, and many other places throughout his works.

38. Bulgakov, “Ob ekonomicheskom ideale.”

39. Bulgakov, *Christentum*, 37.

40. *Ibid.*, 28.

41. Bulgakov, “Apokaliptika,” and many other places throughout his works.



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