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SOCIAL-ORTHODOX UTOPIANISM OF THE RUSSIAN SILVER AGE

Summary

The explosive growth of public interest in religion, in the possibility of social effectiveness of a *renewed* Orthodoxy, was the essential characteristic of the so-called Silver Age period. The topicc of this article are the variants of Russian social-religious/ /Orthodox Utopianism then, the visions of earthly salvation and mundane victory of the Kingdom of Justice, which are viewed as a *historicizing* of the idea of God's Kingdom. At the beginning of the 20th century Russia was rife with religious reform movements, and all of them can be reduced to a common *millenarian project,* consisting in bringing about *religious public life* "here and now", in the near, visible future.

Key Words: Social-Orthodox Utopianism, Russian Silver Age, Revolutionary Millenarianism, Religious-Social Ideal, God's Kingdom on Earth

That which appears Utopian, in Russia is the most realistic of all.
Nikolai Berdyaev. The Russian Idea

God has become fashionable nowadays
Dmitriy Merezhkovsky. Ailing Russia

The last decades of the 19th century in Russia marked a crisis in the sway of positivism, which until then had prevailed in public attitudes. As its methodological functions became exhausted, especially with regard to social reality, the gradual outgrowing of this trend was at first accompanied, most generally, by a transition to idealist worldviews. Even Marxism (in its "legal" versions) was set up on the foundations of philosophical idealism. A turning point in the reorientation of a large part of the Russian intelligentsia of that time was marked by the publication of the collection *Problems of Idealism* (1902), the authors of which would later concretize the title as *Problems of Social Idealism.* The new aspect in the religious-

-philosophical moods at the turn of the century was the *different view on religion and its role in the various spheres of life:* we are talking about a fundamental attempt at *desecularization* of public life, undertaken by various circles of the intelligentsia, but also a shift of emphasis from the *individual, personal* aspect in religion to the *social one.* Regarding religion the intelligentsia of that time was divided into two large groups: social--democrats and Marxist "God-builders" (a combination of left-wing political extremism with theosophic and anthroposophic elements, with ideas drawn from Russian popular sectarianism and philosophical and natural-scientific ideas such as *energetism,* widespread at that time), and the larger group of the "God-seekers" (described by their contemporary Sergey Askol'dov as "an impious attempt to summon God to oneself instead of (...) to embark upon the hard road to reeducation of thought, will, feelings" (Askol'dov 1912: 38)).

The unsatisfactory position of official Orthodoxy regarding issues of "religion-society" relations, its inadequate commitment to current social and political goals and to the sphere of culture and sexual problems, was the main theme of the meetings with representatives of the Church, organized by the intelligentsia (1901-1903). A topic of discussion at these religious-philosophical meetings was the failure of Orthodox institutions to devise a religious-*social* ideal, to reveal "justice on Earth". After the head of the Synod, Konstantin Pobedonostsev, at one point prohibited these meetings, the further attempts of the intelligentsia at desecularization took place entirely outside the Church and often in contradiction with the official ecclesiastical sphere. As a result, Religious-philosophical Societies were founded in Moscow, Saint Petersburg (at the first session of which Anton Kartashev said: "The public is inclined to think that here, in the Society, it will find a complete solution to the religious issues that – to some degree or another – torment it (Kartashev 1908: 1)), and Kiev; this was the first stage of the intelligentsia's large-scale project for *secular religiosity,* which gave a rather free, broad interpretation of Dostoyevsky's idea of *monkhood within the mundane world.*

The explosive growth of public interest in religion, in the possibility of social effectiveness of a *renewed* Orthodoxy, was the essential characteristic of the so-called Silver Age period. In public space were launched notions such as *holy public sphere, holy Flesh;* religion and revolution were seen as identical, and God's Kingdom was perceived as being nothing other than … a new *social* ideal, the embodiment of which seemed to be within view. The end of the world, with the advent of which God's Kingdom would come here, on Earth, was impatiently awaited soon, in "the coming days". As Dmitriy Merezhkovsky, an emblematic figure of the Silver Age, said: "We believe in the End, we see the End, we desire the End… We see what no one else sees; we are the first to see the sun of the Great Day!" (Merezhkovsky 1901: 530).

The 'God's Kingdom' symbol marks the new value system that Christianity brings to the world. God's Kingdom is the transfiguration of

the world, the new harmonious construction of the Cosmos. It has multiple significance: as something immanent, it is a spiritual achievement of the personality (a state of holiness), and as something transcendent, it designates the absolute fullness of being in its natural and social dimensions. Consequently this symbol also refers to the notions of a perfect humanity, of a free association of people, united by love; in other words it is what in secular terms is called a *social ideal*. But its basic characteristic as a Christian ideal is that it is a transcendent ideal – it symbolizes a condition related to the notion of the End of Time and the advent of Eternity. Christian eschatology signifies the "fulfillment" of history, the fulfillment of the meaning of history precisely in terms of its exhaustion and its coming to an End that lies beyond historicity.

Christian eschatology – brought "down to Earth" and "into history" – was transformed into a Utopia that combined different layers of being – "earthly" and "celestial", material and spiritual, horizontal and vertical, state and ecclesiastic, temporal and eternal, empirical and transcendental, God's Kingdom and Caesar's Kingdom. God's Kingdom, which was at first a rationally impenetrable transition in the divine status of the world, attended with catastrophic instants, begins here to appear as a rationally understandable, perfect social order served by Christian terminology. Optimism, the lack of a tragic feeling about the course of history and its End, now became characteristic of the times; individuality is dissolved in the human collective, the concrete is sacrificed for the sake of the abstract universal, the momentary present is sacrificed for the expected future. Man is conceived of as self-sufficient for accomplishing this goal; the heaven on Earth seems attainable through human efforts and will alone. Although it is religious in nature, this Utopia is not unrelated to the familiar social Utopias inspired by the Enlightenment. The history of the Christian world was thought to provide sufficient examples of this "bringing down to Earth" of the celestial Kingdom, which is one of the most important differences between the New Testament notions regarding the state of the world after the End, and the religious Utopia. In the place of the thought of how human action will appear before the judgment of eternity, in place of the desire for fullness of human communion with God and the transfiguration of the whole created world, comes the religious Utopia about the realization of God's Kingdom here, on Earth, in the framework of historical time. In addition to being a future for this world, God's Kingdom also becomes a future *from* this world (cf. Dimitrova 2002).

The eschatological emphasis had always been of prime importance for Russian Orthodox philosophy. But when the eschatological enthusiasm grew into a general attitude, and when the Silver Age became obsessed with various apocalyptic moods, a potential "movement" towards Utopia commenced. This trend towards a globalized eschatological perspective, so typical for the Russian spiritual renaissance (a trend that aimed to shift the stress in Orthodoxy from the individual person to society) contained a

transition to Utopia, in which the personal aspect was dissolved in the collective, in the cohesion of the human community. Utopia and eschatology were both inseparably connected by the thinkers of this movement with the vision of the End of History. The basic difference consisted in their view of the End: whether it is thought of as the End in time, in the framework of "this" present empirical world, or in eschatological terms, as an End that is the crowning fulfillment of time and paves the way to eternity. Consequently, although they pursued one and the same goal (namely, the radical change of being before the advent of the kingdom of love and justice), New Testament eschatology on one hand and the religious Utopia on the other were two different views about the End and the things coming after the End, and were connected with the symbols of the "celestial" and the "earthly" Jerusalem, respectively. Placed between the two was the *millenarian symbol, the specific synthesis between the Utopian and the eschatological,* the emblem of the Russian Silver Age as an "apocalyptic" and "Paracletic" (of the Holy Ghost) age. (It is not by coincidence that many of the ideas and concepts of Joachim of Fiore circulated at that time). Millenarianism was interpreted as a *specific intermediary state,* connecting time with eternity, the empirical with the transcendental. In the words of Sergey Bulgakov, the borderline between the *historical* and the *eschatological* "at times is completely erased, and then deepens to the degree of becoming impassable, and at times becomes so wide that there is enough room in it for a transitional state that belongs neither to one sphere nor to the other – this is the millenary kingdom of the Messiah, the so-called hiliasm in the proper sense" (Bulgakov, 1993: 423). In the Russian variant hiliasm (millenarianism) played the role of "a revolutionary party for the struggle using force against the government", as stated in the most radical forms of religious reformation undertaken at that time.

The topic of this article are the variants of Russian social-religious/ /Orthodox Utopianism in the Silver Age period, the visions of earthly salvation and mundane victory of the Kingdom of Justice, which are viewed as a *historicizing* of the idea of God's Kingdom. At the beginning of the 20th century Russia was rife with religious reform movements, and all of them can be reduced to a common *millenarian project,* consisting in bringing about *religious public life* "here and now", in the near, visible future.

Among the most radical critics of official Orthodoxy (which was then widely considered to be a "perverted religion") was a circle of people around the writer and philosopher Dmitriy Merezhkovsky (the "Russian Luther", as Andrey Bely called him), in which Nikolai Berdyaev took some part.

The initial project of this circle of intellectuals was to replace Orthodoxy, considered by them to be helplessly anti-social, and lay the foundations of a "new religious consciousness", by means of which to accomplish a new social ideal, a religious *stateless* public community. The first step would be the preparation of Russian public life for an integral desecularization. For this purpose it was necessary to conclude a Third Testament with God, and

specifically with the Holy Ghost, which was that member of the Trinity that would "guarantee" the advent of the Third Kingdom on Earth, i.e. the synthesis between Spirit and Flesh. It was very categorically stated that the new social ideal would involve the absence of state: "For us, entering into the Third Testament, into the Third Kingdom of the Spirit, there is no, and cannot be any, positive religious principle in state power", wrote Dmitriy Merezhkovsky (Merezhkovsky 1991: 95). The revolutionary maximalism of Merezhkovsky, masked behind religious and pseudo-religious terminology, was part of the general spirit of social extremism displayed by the Russian avant-garde in general; here specifically were apocalyptic visions of the coming Third Humanity, whose reign would last a thousand years – this would be the kingdom of saints, of love and freedom (as Merezhkovsky asserted later in his book *Jesus the Unknown*, 1934). Millenarianism and the social discontent it incited with respect to "this" world, the impatient expectations for an imminent transformation of life, are the keys to the apocalyptic revolutionary attitudes of Merezhkovsky, who discerned a "Christian" essence in the SR[1] radical movement.

Likewise radical in a way was the programme of Sergey Bulgakov, representative of another intelligentsia group; his name is associated with the efforts to ground a specifically Russian Orthodox socialism. As one of Vladimir Solovyov's most faithful followers, Bulgakov continued that thinker's line of "Christian politics". (Regarding the different versions of *Christian socialism,* in Russia, cf. Scherrer 2000.) Bulgakov was no less critical than the Merezhkovsky circle with regard to the "insensitivity" of official Orthodoxy to social issues. In an article entitled *Religion and Politics,* published in 1905, Bulgakov pointed out that an authentic party could not be 'lacking in religion' – *religionslos*. Since this philosopher thought it an obligation for all "true" Christians to be engaged in public and political life in order to transform life in the spirit of love, freedom, equality, and brotherhood (an emblematic synthesis!), he believed that "it must be recognized that, sooner or later, a purely Christian party will have to emerge, completely alien to clericalism, obscurantism, and other traits of the past, but animated by Christian faith as well as by the ideals of democracy and socialism (which, of course, in its Christian meaning, has nothing in common with atheist social democracy).

What can be considered an initial embryo of such a party was the illegal *Christian Brotherhood for Struggle* (little known to the wide public); and such also was the task pursued by the *Union for Christian Policy,* planned by me". (Bulgakov 1905: 125).

In *A Pressing Task,* an article published in the years of the First Russian Revolution and stating the programme and containing in synopsis the project for creating a *party* entitled "Union for Christian Politics", Bul-

[1] Members of the Social Revolutionary Party

gakov wrote: "There can be no justification for indifference in principle towards politics and public life. On the contrary, this would be, firstly, unfeasible, secondly, evidently counter-Christian, in contradiction with what is basic and central to the teaching of God-mankind" (Bulgakov 1991: 31). The fact that, in Orthodoxy as official religion, the problem of "Christian public life" was lacking, was thought to be a sufficient reason for undertaking a determined attempt to reform it, which in this case would mean tying it to social-political life. The socialist and Christian worldview were seen as not contrary to each other; consequently, quite apart from the unacceptable materialist and atheist forms of socialism, *Christian socialism* was thought to be possible in a variant different from that proposed by Pope Leo XIII. Bulgakov indicated the *urgency of the task* by stating the following requirements: 1) immediately founding a *Union for Christian Politics* that should implement the ideal of Christian public life; 2) this Union should unite all who shared the basic aims of Christian politics without regard to religious confession; 3) the Union should set itself as main task the political and economic liberation of the individual person, and do this following the only available model – the anarchist communism of the first Christian communities. Being a practical programme for action, the Union could not accept the radical democratic and collectivist nature of the debates that excited the existing democratic and socialist parties; 4) *the Union* declared an irreconcilable struggle against "the Black-Hundreds movement"[2]; while rejecting atheism, it also accepted a large part of what was contained in the programmes of the progressive-democratic parties, and sympathized with them, inasmuch as it saw them as being "Christians without Christ" (cf. Bulgakov 1991: 50 – 51). Thus, in its initial version, Bulgakov's Christian socialism, which aimed at making politics a religious undertaking, was clearly marked by positivism; moreover, the logic behind this *Christian positivism* led to justification of revolutionary methods of social struggle. Also evident was the Utopian element in these early ideas of Bulgakov: on one hand, the Christian ideal was absolute, consequently *not to be incorporated* in empirical reality; on the other hand, it was declared to be a *pressing task that must not be postponed.*

In 1910 Sergey Bulgakov published a study that is exceptionally interesting for those who want to understand the mentality of the Silver Age, and very indicative of the ideas of the author himself. (Although millenarianism held an outstanding place in the thought of many Russian religious reformers at the start of the 20th century, only Bulgakov undertook to ground it in dogma). The study, entitled *Apocalypse and Socialism*, was about the importance of millenarianism in the dynamic life of Russia at that time. This "period" was seen as lying at the borderline between time and

[2] The Black Hundreds, an anti-Semite, counter-revolutionary, and anti-liberal political movement, which was in support of Russian autocracy.

eternity; it would be the new age, an age unprecedented in its creativity and the growth of culture and public life. Bulgakov's concept of millenarianism was similar to the ideas about the "new age of the Spirit" shared by Merezhkovsky, Berdyaev, and others. The Apocalypse in the *Revelations* of St. John, regarding which Orthodoxy has not yet come to a definitive dogmatic judgment, contains the prophecy for the coming *Christian public life* and Bulgakov devoted many pages to a discussion of the characteristics of the latter. *Christian* millenarianism was taken as the basis of Christian socialism and Bulgakov devoted special attention to grounding millenarianism.

In some later texts in which Bulgakov compared Christianity with socialism, the author's purpose was to reveal the historical and mystic threads by which the soul of the Russian people is connected to early Christianity. Thus, over the years the Christian socialism discussed by Bulgakov became specific to a single nation, and was presented as an authentic *Orthodox* socialism and a concrete embodiment of the ideas of Dostoevsky. In the period of the 1917 revolution, Bulgakov had already become aware that this variant was also without prospects in Russian reality. Unlike his views at the start of the 20th century, his Utopianism had now given way to much more sober considerations, and in his study dating from 1917, *Christianity and Socialism*, the author wrote: "In general the ideas of *Christian socialism* today have a very suitable soil in Russia, both among the Orthodox clergy and the Orthodox people. The wish is not infrequently voiced that an independent party of Christian socialists should arise in our country. But we can hardly share this wish. Let the socialists become Christians – and thereby Christianize their socialism, but to preach a special party of Christian socialism would mean to degrade the universal commands of Christianity and to place the Church itself in the position of a party. (...) It would be improper for the Church to merge with any party – parties being a conventional and temporary union, while the universal truth of the Church must not be overshadowed by any sort of transitory forms" (Bulgakov 1990: 127).

The émigré period of this Russian thinker was, as we know, dedicated mostly to theology rather than philosophy. In the words of a contemporary scholar, "in the works of Bulgakov, a shift of emphasis has occurred – now the Divine is assigned to Theology, and the world and Man are placed in the domain of *Christian sociology*. Now Bulgakov's originality is displayed in the fact that, in his doctrine, theology and sociology are so interwoven that theology seems to be a section of sociology, just as economics was earlier" (Sapov 1990: 110). From this émigré period date Bulgakov's writings on Orthodoxy in which the question of the attitude of Orthodoxy to socialism is raised once again. Although Orthodoxy had not had the possibility to take a concrete stand on the social question (unlike the other Christian confessions), in Bolshevist Russia "it was confronted with the necessity to build such a standpoint. When the iron pliers of the inhuman communism, which destroy all manifestations of life activity, finally open, Russian Orthodoxy will take advantage of the lessons that Provi-

dence has given it in the hard days of ordeal, and will start to work in the field of social Christianity" (Bulgakov 1994: 283). In the following lines Bulgakov refers to God's Kingdom as a specific Christian Utopia that belongs to the "future age", but commences here and now, on Earth. It is very indicative that his last book, published in 1948, was yet another essay at dogmatic interpretation of the Apocalypse (cf. Bulgakov 1991).

One other major social-religious Russian Utopia arising in the period of Russian émigré movements (which were a kind of "projection" of the Silver Age") was that of Eurasianism. It was provoked by the disaster that befell Russia in 1917. First appearing in the early 1920s in Sofia, the centres of the movement were later moved to Prague and Paris. The movement was based on a book published likewise in Sofia in 1920 by Prince Nikolai Trubetzkoy and entitled *Europe and Humanity,* in which the author asserted that Russia had a separate path as an intermediate country between the East and the West. The book called for the preservation of the unique Russian culture and purposed to shed the complexes of national inferiority and overcome the unquestioned authority of European culture.

One of the specific forms of the central 'East-West' polarity in Eurasianist themes was the opposition between Orthodoxy and the Latin Church (cf. the collection *Russia and the Latin Church,* 1923). Given that the anti-Western, anti-European moods were predominant among Eurasianists, their anti-Catholic attitude was quite consistent. (According to Eurasianists, Buddhism and various pagan beliefs in the enormous Eurasian region were closer to Orthodoxy than was Catholicism, i.e. non-Christian faiths proved to stand closer to Orthodoxy than other Churches within Christianity…) Eurasianism presented itself as possessing deep national roots, one of which was Orthodoxy, asserted to be the form of Christianity that was superior to the others and unique in its perfection and immaculateness. Compared with Slavophilism however, Eurasianism brought the reverence for Orthodoxy as the "Russian religion" to absurd extremes, arbitrarily aligning it with the religious and mythological beliefs of the ethnic groups that were part of the Russian Empire. Paganism was considered to be a potential form of Orthodoxy. In the official Eurasian documents the presumption was expressed that, in the course of its Christianization, Russian and Central Asian paganism would create certain forms and aspects of Orthodoxy that would be closer to Russian mentality than was "European" religion at that time. Many of the first supporters of the Eurasianist strategy backed out precisely because of this aggressive view of Orthodoxy.

Lying at the core of the Eurasianist social-religious Utopia was the idea of creating a united, powerful super-ethnic whole called the *state of Justice.* Similar to the earlier social-religious Utopias of social relations based on Christian charity and brotherhood, the Eurasianists also emphasized religion, but strictly limited it to Orthodoxy alone. An important distinction was the fact that the social ideal of a religious public life – sought for and considered to be attainable in the near future – was no longer viewed as

being *not based on a state.* On the contrary: the strong emphasis on statism placed by the Eurasianists was in conspicuous contrast with the previous, pre-émigré Russian projects of the early 20th century, which were predominantly anarchist in attitude. The "new religious consciousness" discussed by the Eurasianists, which set itself the task of creating a new order, held the state factor to be an inseparable part of the project. In the framework of their views of an impending brilliant future for Russia/ /Eurasia, they combined their belief in the country's religious mission with the idea of Russian military power to be imposed upon the world: the plan was to create a *Eurasian theocracy.* The new "Russian justice" was supposed to be embodied in a united and great Eurasian state, which would make use of the positive and negative aspects of the Soviet experiment.

In order to "deal" with the role assigned to it by Eurasian ideology, Orthodoxy had to be reformed so as to overcome asceticism and turn itself to the world. Evidently *the socialization* of Orthodoxy was a motif that constantly inspired what we called the "Russian spiritual renaissance", or the "Russian Silver Age", including its émigré representatives.

The dividedness of the Russian spiritual renaissance between eschatological aspirations and "down to earth" social-religious projects was emblematic for this period. The trends towards Utopianism were evident in the very project of the renaissance: to achieve a universal synthesis, to illuminate the whole secularized Cosmos through religion, to efface the difference between sacred and profane, i.e. to create a kind of "organic" epoch similar to the Middle Ages. (As early as 1907, before he ever published his famous book about *The New Middle Ages,* Nikolai Berdyaev characterized the "God-seeking" orientation in the following words: "But we indeed speak about that God-seeking, which also together with this was a God-finding, a coming upon and following of God: the religious future in these searchings is bound up with the religious past, which is imbued already with an absolute and utmost reality, an uniquely absolute, unrepeatable, salvific and redemptive fact of world history" (Berdyaev 2001).) Regardless of their often justified criticism leveled at certain real failings of official Orthodoxy, the Utopian projects were in any case damaging for Orthodoxy in general. I would like to conclude by quoting from the notes, dating from 1917, of one representative of the Russian *Christian sociology,* the theologian Ruben Orbeli:

> "Jesus Christ is not a social reformer.
> Jesus Christ is not a national or international reformer.
> Jesus Christ is not an anti-state reformer.
> And what is more, Jesus Christ is not a religious reformer.
> That is the least that can be said.
> Jesus Christ is the manifestation, the personal and human appearing of God.
> There was no reason for Him to reform that which had been created at his will. (...)

Christ is not a system,
Christ is not an institution,
Christ is not a norm,
Christ is not a doctrine,
Christ is not a principle.
Consequently,
Christ is not the destruction of one system in the name of another,
Christ is not an emptying of one institution of its functions for the sake of another,
Christ is not the replacement of one norm by another,
Christ is not a change of doctrine,
Christ is not a betrayal of the principle
Christ is life lived by inspiration coming from above. That is all..."

(Orbeli 1992: 139)

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СОЦИЈАЛНО-ПРАВОСЛАВНИ УТОПИЗАМ РУСКОГ СРЕБРНОГ ДОБА

Резиме

Нагли пораст јавног интересовања за религију, за могућност друштвене делотворности *обновљеног* православља, био је битна одлика периода познатог као Сребрно доба. Теме овог чланка су варијанте руског социјално-религијског/православног утопизма, затим визије земаљског спасења и победе Царства праведности у овом свету, на које се гледа као на *историзовање* идеје Божијег царства. На почетку 20. века Русија је обиловала религијским реформаторским покретима који би у целини могли да се сведу на заједнчки *миленаристички пројекат*, који се састоји у остваривању *религијског јавног живота* "овде и сада", у блиској, видљивој будућности.

Кључне речи: социјално-православни утопизам, руско Сребрно доба, револуционарни миленијаризам, религијско-социјални идеал, Царство божије на земљи