

## THE CONCEPT OF PRIMITIVE THEISM IN THE RUSSIAN PRE-REVOLUTIONARY RELIGIOUS STUDIES

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*Abstract: The paper dwells on a formation of the primitive theism concept in religious and philosophical ideas of the Russian Empire in the late XIX - beginning of XX century. This stage in development of the Eastern European religious studies remains poorly studied nowadays. Much attention is paid to the fact, that before the establishment of the Soviet government, Russian religious studies had its own rich scientific traditions and serious theoretical groundwork in the concept of primitive theism, which carried a great potential for its future development. The author describes the main points of this concept in the pre-revolutionary Russian religious studies, dwelling on the landmark works of several scientists. Necessity of critical rethinking of the pre-revolutionary heritage of religious sciences in the context of the modern religion studies is stated in the conclusion.*

*Keywords: pre-revolutionary Russian religious studies, urtheismus concept, primitive theism, original theism, primordial religion, Ukrainian philosophers.*

### 1. Introduction

Emerging in the XIX century academic religious studies from the beginning marked two opposite views on the origin of theism: materialistic evolutionary, placing the idea of God at the end of a long step-by-step process of the development of religion, and spiritualistic anti-evolutionary, postulating the idea of God prior to this process [1]. Evolutionary views on the development of religion by the principle “from simple to complex” seemed self-evident and indisputable to many people since David Hume (1711-1776) and Gotthold Lessing (1729-1781), however, at the same time, these views found the opposition. It was clearly designated among German researchers of mythology, folklorists, linguists and philosophers. Thus, Friedrich Kreuzer (1771-1858), Friedrich Gottlieb Welcker (1784-1868), Jacob Grimm (1785-1863), William Mannhardt (1831-1880) and Friedrich Schelling (1775-1854) defended the concept of primordial theism. Later on such a well-known figure in religious studies as Max Muller (1823-1900) spoke out in defense of the primitive theism concept.

This state of things in European science dramatically warmed up an interest in original monotheism and primitive revelation in Philosophy and Church-academic circles of the Russian Empire, creating a whole galaxy of scientists who evolved in their works anti-evolutionary and antireductionist picture of the religious history of humanity. Scientific religious studies in the Russian Empire were born in the theological academies: Kiev, Moscow, Saint Petersburg and Kazan. A significant role in this birth played acquiring of the Muller’s ideas and especially his comparative methodology.

### 2. Brief historiographical essay of the pre-revolutionary Russian religious studies

However, one of the first references to the problems of the history of religion in the spiritual and academic traditions occurred before its acquaintance with the works of Muller. This is the work “Gradual development of the ancient

philosophical doctrines in connection with the development of pagan beliefs” written by the Ukrainian philosopher Orest Novytsky (1806-1884). Religion and consciousness of the Supreme Being, according to the professor, are immanent to man [2]. The basis of any religion is primordial theism [3], but the first historically documented religious form is fetishism. Further development of religion occurs teleologically, being directed towards the “God-man phenomenon on earth” [4].

Thesis for a Doctor's degree by Bishop Chryzant (Rietivcev) (1832-1883), a man of versatile knowledge who gathered on his lectures crowded audiences, became the first systematically and methodologically elaborated work on the history of religion in the Russian Empire, which was the world’s Religious Science of that time [5]. Unlike the preceding theologians, Chryzant did not consider paganism as something static, but saw some kind of progress in it, where “various rivers and streams of religious life ... are connected with each other” by a common direction, aspiring to one God. Progress, however, was preceded by a degradative dynamics of religious consciousness: primitive theism, as the original religion of humanity [6], reborn in a naturalistic pantheism, which, in its turn, turned into a “subdivided polytheism” later. This is confirmed by “the undeniable historical traces of the concepts of one God, apparently, which are prior to polytheism” [7]. Therefore, two opposite paths are found in the religious and historical process: the path out from God and the path to God.

Deep philosophical maturity differed criticism of evolutionism and protection of the idea of primitive theism stated by the philosopher Victor D. Kudryavtsev-Platonov (1828-1891). The scientist published a number of articles devoted to the original form of religion, while working on the thesis for a Doctor's degree [8]. Kudryavtsev-Platonov perceived the original “minimum” of religious consciousness in “the undefined and vague recognition of existence of pretersensual Beginning, followed by not less a vague sense of alienation from Him and moral guilt” [9].

Master's theses by Alexei Vvedensky (1861-1913) and Alexander Pokrovsky (1873-1942), dedicated to the questions about primordial theism, also have the right to be taken into account [10, 11]. Vvedensky spoke about his philosopheme of theism like about some common heuristic principle, on which the scientist was developing his scheme of the early stages of religious and mythological consciousness of humanity, substantiating it through criticism of the religious concepts of Max Muller, Herbert Spencer and Edward Taylor [12].

Among all scientists in the pre-revolutionary religious studies, Sergei Glagolev (1865-1937) did a significant step, being ahead of his time in his conclusions for half a century. The scientist considered that should be careful with respect to the concept of primitive theism. First, the science does not have the necessary materials for a precise formulation of the question about the origin of religion, and the available ethnological information does not provide sufficient grounds for a clear reconstruction of the original religion. Second, faith in a Supreme Being among primitive peoples can be conditioned by some late borrowings from the Christian missionaries in addition to the original revelation and philosophical reflection. Basically, Glagolev suggested to confine to ur-theismus (statement of faith in a Supreme Being as one of the beginnings of religion) instead of ur-monotheismus (faith in a Supreme Being as the beginning of religion): "as our knowledge go to ancient times, we meet with all known to us types of religions: pandemonism, polytheism, pantheism, monotheism" [13].

Famous philosopher Vladimir Solovyov (1853-1900) also worked on a scheme of the historical and religious process, which did not bring to evolutionism, and was based on teleological orientation to God overcoming inertia of pagan magicism [14]. In one of his earliest works, Solovyov expressed a number of innovative and original ideas that had something in common with a modern phenomenology of religion.

Many members of the spiritual and academic science in Russia and Ukraine actively evolved the urtheismus concept in the course of history and philosophy of religion until the revolution. Among them: Timofey Boutkevitch (1854-1925), Alexander Smirnov (1857-1933), Alexander Klitin (1860-1919), Jacov Galakhov (1865-1938), Nikolai Bogolyubov (1872-1934), Alexander Elchaninov (1881-1934) and others.

New stage of development of the primitive theism concept in Europe was associated primarily with The Culture Historical School of Ethnology, headed by the Austrian scientist Paul Wilhelm Schmidt (1868-1954). A massive process of empirical filling and clarifying of the theoretical basis of the primitive theism ideas by new discoveries in Ethnology took place in the West since the beginning of the XX century, while in Russia development of this area became impossible after the establishment of the Soviet government, because the ideas of religious studies were completely destroyed. All theological schools were closed and publishing houses were liquidated. All specialists in religious studies of the old school either died or lost their

homeland. A crushing blow struck spiritual and academic religious studies in Russia.

Replacing by the Soviet religious studies was like a "sanctuary" of the Taylor's theory of animism at first, where it was still alive for some time after its falling under the blows of criticism in Europe [15, 16]. An opinion of the ethnologist Peter Preobrazhensky (1894-1941) was especially notable on such a monotonous background of the animistic schemes of Marxist scholars. In contrast to the materials about primitive religion to a single form, he pointed to its diverse roots: "the cult of the dead body", magic, and the anthropomorphic images of the Supreme Being — a cultural hero, "primeval creator" and "all-father" [17]. Preobrazhensky considered all these forms pre-animistic, fairly reproaching Taylor and other evolutionists for the linearity of their theories. After such "impertinence" an answer was quick: in 1932 the scientist was accused of "heartwarming reviews" about The Culture Historical School of European Ethnology [18], all its studies were violently denied by the Soviet Ethnology and religious studies. In the next year, Preobrazhensky was arrested on charges of the "anti-Soviet group of scientists", and in 1941 he was executed by shooting for the "anti-revolutionary activities".

### 3. Conclusions.

For all those reasons, the pre-revolutionary Russian religious studies had its own rich scientific tradition and serious theoretical groundwork in the primitive theism concept that carried a great potential for its future development. This fact is contrary to the assertions of the Soviet authors that only philosopher Soloviev supported the "unpopular even in church circles" primitive monotheism ideas before the revolution [19]. The development of the Russian theological school of primitive theism and its research programs was forcibly terminated in 1918 by almost a total destruction of the spiritual and academic education. As a result, in the USSR the concept of primitive theism for many decades has been driven into the church fence, which is still there, and has not overcome the Soviet inertia in the post-Soviet science. It seems that one of the key mechanisms to overcome this inertia can be a critical rethinking of the pre-revolutionary theoretical heritage of religious sciences in the context of the modern materials in Anthropology and Ethnology.

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