

6. The battle against superstition in eighteenth-century Russia: between ‘rational’ and ‘spiritual’

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Russia entered the Age of Enlightenment by initiating a number of reforms designed to modernise her social and political order, and to create a regular state based on European models. Changes took place not only in the socio-political system which was undergoing active reform, but also in the lexicon being used in that state. Among the numerous new words that appeared in the Russian language in the late seventeenth to early eighteenth centuries was the word-formation *sueverie* (from ‘vain belief’, ‘to believe in vain’) – the translation of the Latin word ‘superstitio’.¹

The impressive speed with which this word began to be applied in secular and ecclesiastical documents, as well as in religious discourse, indicates that it was needed both by the intellectual elite and the authorities. The notion of a *suyever* (superstitious person) became indispensable whenever some intellectuals wanted to distance themselves from ‘others’ – the *prostetsi* (simpletons), *nevezhdy* (ignorants) and *dikari* (savages) – and to praise the achievements of the Enlightenment. What the authorities had in mind while building a regular state was that all its secular and ecclesiastical institutions should operate as a single clock-work wound up in accordance with the will of the country’s ruler, and they wanted the subjects of this ruler to live and *to believe* in conformity with the *Spiritual regulation*, without being permitted to have their religious practices marked by ‘enthusiasm’ and exalted manifestations of religiousness, or by ‘fanaticism’ and *sueveria* (superstitions).²

1. On Western parallels, see *The Religion of fools? Superstition past and present*, ed. S. A. Smith and Alan Knight (Oxford and New York, 2008); Jean-Claude Schmitt, ‘Les “superstitions”’ in *Histoire de la France religieuse*, ed. Jaques Le Goff and René Rémond (Paris, 1988), vol.1, *Des dieux de la Gaule à la papauté d’Avinion (des origines au XIV^e siècle)*, p.417-551; Jean Delumeau, ‘Les réformateurs et la superstition’, in *Actes du colloque L’Amiral de Coligny et son temps* (Paris, 24-28 octobre 1972) (Paris, 1974), p.451-87.
2. See also Viktor M. Zhivov, ‘Disciplinarnaia revoliuciia i bor’ba s sueveriem v Rossii XVIII veka: “provaly” i ih posledstviia’ [Disciplinary revolution and the battle against superstitions in eighteenth-century Russia: failures and aftermaths] in *Antropologiia revoliucii. Sbornik statey...*, ed. Irina Prokhorova (Moscow, 2009), p.327-60; Simon Dixon, ‘Superstition in Imperial Russia’, in *The Religion of fools? Superstition past and present*, ed. Smith and Knight (Oxford, 2008), p.207-28.

It should be noted, though, that it took some time for the proper definition of what the word *sueverie* actually meant to be provided. Simeon of Polotsk (one of the first to apply this notion) associated *sueverie* with ‘devilish temptation’³ (an attitude that was typical of the Western tradition as well), and the major prejudice for him was sorcery.

In the eighteenth century, however, the term acquired new meanings. A 1701 anonymous report denouncing the deplorable state of Moscow parishes used the word as an antonym to the word denoting the ‘proper’ devotional practices (*blagoverie*). The report’s author complained that the parish priests’ neglect led many faithful to lapse into ‘superstition’. There were many who made the sign of the Cross in an unorthodox manner (the author implied the spread of the ‘Schism’ of the Old Belief that required a two-fingered sign of the Cross), or ‘knelt so low that their foreheads touched the ground, kissing the soil underneath them’, and engaged in ‘other superstitions’ in defiance of ‘the right and proper ways’ (*blagoverie*) of our piety (*blagochestie*).⁴ The ‘superstitious person’ or a ‘bigot’ (*suever*) assumed a permanent place among the enemies of Church, on a par with heretics and pagans. A faith free of superstition was considered one of the highest virtues of the true Christian. Thus archimandrite Kirill (Florinskii) implored Empress Elizabeth: ‘May you uphold the Orthodox faith without any superstition’.⁵ A Holy Week homily listed ‘superstitious persons’ as well as ‘pagans’ and ‘heretics’ among those benighted heathens whose ‘willful ignorance obstructs their path to salvation’.⁶

In the works of both ecclesiastic and secular authors the term *sueverie* was quite liberally applied to a very wide range of matters – from belief in signs to the *inoverie* (different faith) of Catholics, Moslems, Buddhists⁷ and of course to Russia’s ‘internal foes’: Old Believers.⁸ Moreover, an enlightened writer of the eighteenth century – who was absolutely free of any demonomania – would also associate *sueverie* with the madness, feeble-mindedness and ignorance of fools.

3. *Krasnorechiye Drevney Rusi XI-XVII vv.* [Eloquence of the early Rus’. XIth-XVIIth centuries] (Moscow, 1987), p.376.

4. Moscow, Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts (RGADA), fond 371, op.2, d.912, f.1-2.

5. Kirill (Florinskii), *Slovo v vysokotorjestvenyi den’ rojdeniya Elisavety Peruyia* [An Oration at the birthday of the Empress Elizaveta Petrovna] (St Petersburg, pri Imperatorskoy Akademii Nauk, 1741), p.17.

6. Gavriil (Petrov), Platon (Levshin), Gedeon (Krinovskii), *Sobranie raznykh slov i poucheniy na vse voskresnye i prazdnichnye dni* [Collection of different sermons for all Sundays and Feasts], part 1 (Moscow, Sinodal’naya tipografiya, 1775), p.86a-87.

7. For example, Damaskin (Semenov-Rudnev), *Propovedi [...]1775-1782* [Sermons [...] 1775-1782] (Moscow, Universitetskaya tipografiya u N.Novikova, 1783), p.78-79; Ivan Lepelin, *Dnevnye zapiski 1768-1769 g.* [Diary notes of 1768-1769] (St Petersburg, pri Imperatorskoi Akademii nauk, 1771), p.475.

8. See, for example, Tsapina, ‘Secularisation and opposition’, p.334-89.

The intellectual elites were aware that superstition, a product of 'ignorance' and human 'folly', was not limited to the common folks but rather distributed evenly throughout all ranks of Russian society. The 'bigot' became a familiar fixture in Russian literature. The image that peppered the pages of novels, magazines, journals and almanacs demonstrated that the blight of superstition affected nobility and gentry as much as it did more lowly folks. In her plays, Catherine the Great routinely highlighted the common sense of virtuous servants as set off against the superstition of their ignorant masters. However, if 'soldiers', 'merchants', 'judges' or 'lords', if properly educated, appeared to be capable of shedding these lamentable tendencies, the 'benighted slaves' seemed perpetually affected. Until the end of the century, 'superstition' remained one of the main characteristics of the 'common folk'. In his 1766 essay calling for a programme of public education for peasants, A. Ya. Polenov noted that it was the 'ignorance, superstition, excesses, idleness, and recklessness' of the 'common folk' that made them 'contemptible and even repugnant'.⁹

Another social group that was routinely described as prone to superstition was the men of the cloth, the very same people who were expected to spread true devotion. Ecclesiastics prominently figured in investigations and trials that had to do with magic practices; clergy defendants appear in 25-30 per cent of the cases.¹⁰ One 1730 case featured, for example, priest Petr Osipov, who confessed to having recited a magic incantation to make his parishioners more generous when he visited them with icons during the Christmas season! The magic did not seem to work, and Osipov found himself chased off by his irate parishioners, some wielding clubs and some assisted by dogs.¹¹ The authorities who investigated the crimes of witchcraft and magic found out that clerics rather than laymen tended to amass the largest collections of magical texts and apocrypha.¹²

9. *Izbranniye proizvedeniya russkikh mysliteley vtoroy poloviny 18 veka* [Selected works of Russian thinkers of the second half of the eighteenth century], ed. Ivan Ya. Shchipanov (Moscow, 1952), vol.2, p.17.
10. Compare Alexandr Lavrov, *Koldovstvo i religia v Rossii: 1700-1740 gg.* [Witchcraft and religion in Russia: 1700-1740] (Moscow, 2000), p.123; Elena Smilianskaia, 'Pravoslavniy pastyr' i ego suvernaia pastva (k izucheniyu narodnoy religii v Rossii pervoy trety XVIII veka' [An Orthodox priest and his superstitious flock in Russia of the first three decades of the eighteenth century], in *Chelovek mezhdu tsarstvom i imperiey*, ed. Marina S. Kiseleva (Moscow 2003), p.407-15.
11. See more in my publication: Elena Smilianskaia, 'Zagovory i gadaniia iz sudebno-sledstvennykh materialov XVIII veka' [Spells and fortune-tellings from trial cases' materials of the eighteenth century], in *Otrechemoe chtenie v Rossii XVII-XVIII vekov* [Prohibited reading in Russia of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries], ed. Andrey Toporkov and Anatoliy Turilov (Moscow, 2002), p.126-27.
12. Elena Smilianskaia, *Volshhebnyki. Bogohul'niki. Eretiki: narodnaia religioznost' i 'dukhovnyye*

The Russian Crown and the Church who declared a battle against superstition their foremost priority faced formidable challenges. The religious practices deemed 'superstitious' were widespread and affected all classes of Russian society, including of course the clergy. They also seemed impervious to the attempts to instill religious uniformity and conscious, enlightened piety.

The much needed strategy against superstition was articulated in the *Spiritual regulation* (1721). In the main ecclesiastical document for the Synodal Russian Church, a superstition was described as something:

- superfluous;
- not essential to salvation;
- devised by hypocrites only for their own interest, beguiling the simple people;
- and like snowdrifts hindering the passage along the right path of truth.¹³

The *Spiritual regulation*, although somewhat vague with regard to defining what was 'not essential to salvation', nevertheless expressed some hope that superstitions would be rapidly eradicated – since they were something like mere 'snowdrifts'. Also, it was in the *Spiritual regulation* that the major methods to be applied in the struggle against superstition were specified, namely: to punish 'hypocrites' and 'swindlers' and to enlighten 'the simple people'.

Now, after having analysed the major milestones in the struggle that was going on in eighteenth-century Russia, we will attempt to determine in which areas, by the end of that century, the superstition fighters had achieved success and where they had been undeniably defeated.

Firstly, persecutions. The sequence of persecutions started in the reign of Peter I and continued, with ups and downs, throughout the eighteenth century, gradually depriving both judges and legislators of their initial optimism. The list of crimes being punished as 'superstitious' was so long that it can hardly be expected to fit in the volume of this paper. The acknowledgement that superstition involved the attribution of excessive importance to non-canonical literature (the Apocrypha, magic or prognostic texts) and 'the outward ritual' (stickling for rituals) and the way

prestupleniia' v Rossii XVIII v. [Magicians, blasphemers, heretics, popular religiosity and 'spiritual crimes' in eighteenth-century Russia] (Moscow, 2003), p.27-201; Elena Smilianskaia, 'Sobranie nujnejshih statey na vsiaku potrebu' [Collection of necessary articles for different purposes], in *Otrechennoe chtenie v Rossii XVII-XVIII vekov* [Prohibited reading in Russia of the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries], ed. Andrey Toporkov and Anatolii Turilov (Moscow 2002), p.318-21.

13. *The Spiritual regulation of Peter the Great*, ed. and translated by A. V. Muller (Seattle, WA, 1972), p.15-16.

superstition was defined in the *Spiritual regulation* allowed a broad range of interpretations. Like in Europe, Russia's authorities also believed that magical practices (sorcery, witchcraft) should be punishable – but by no means these alone. The 'Reform of Piety' initiated by Peter I targeted many previously tolerated although not fully canonical religious practices pertaining to the worship of sacred things, as well as the popular attitude to 'God's fools' and *klikushy* (female demoniacs).¹⁴ Until the end of the eighteenth century, some members of the Holy Synod suggested that even 'people's madness' at Shrove-tide and Christmas holidays, as well as 'shameful amusements' such as swings, should be persecuted under the same article as these 'superstitions'.¹⁵

The campaign to root out superstition continued under Peter's successors. The investigations and trials involving charges of witchcraft and magic peaked during the reigns of Anna Ioannovna and Elizaveta Petrovna (about 150 out of 240 witchcraft cases known in eighteenth-century Russia).

From 1737 onwards, spiritual authorities were ordered not only to vigilantly detect any 'superstitions' that might occur with regard to icons, wells and springs and any false miracles allegedly produced by relics, *klikushy*, God's fools, 'barefooted with plica polonica' – but also, twice a year, to submit reports as to whether everything was 'all right' with their flock.¹⁶ If any 'superstitions' were detected, punishment was imposed immediately.

The cruelty that permeated legislation resulted, up to the 1760s, in forceful interrogations and torture being applied in legal practice to the 'holders' of the texts of 'magical' spells, to 'false saints' and to 'the inventors of false miracles'. In eighteenth-century Russia, 'superstitious' persons were even sometimes put to death. In 1702, the *starets* (monastic elder) Dionysius the Greek was burnt at the stake on Boloto in Moscow, together with the magic 'heretical letters' written by him; in 1720, Minka Buslaev and his comrades, involved in putting the evil eye on their landowners, were executed at Tula; in 1721, the death penalty was imposed on the Novgorod sacristan Vasilii Efimov who had invented

14. This name 'The Reform of Piety' and the analyses were offered by Alexandr Lavrov in his *Koldoustvo i religiiia v Rossii: 1700-1740 gg.* [Witchcraft and religion in Russia: 1700-1740] (Moscow, 2000), p.408-423.

15. Ardalion Popov, *Sud i nakazaniia za prestupleniia protiv very i npravstvennosti po russkomu pravu* [Court trial and punishment for crimes against the faith and the morality according to the Russian law] (Kazan', 1904), p.258-60.

16. These reports were very formal and rarely reflected a real situation. See Gregory L. Freeze, 'Institutionalising piety: the Church and popular religion, 1750-1850', in *Imperial Russia: new histories for the empire*, ed. Jane Burbank, David L. Ransel (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN, 1998), p.212.

and announced a miracle;¹⁷ in 1735, a convict in stocks, Peter Vichin, was executed for having spread the word about his ‘magical dream’ (it should be admitted that it predicted the death of the Empress Anna Ioannovna);¹⁸ in 1736, the Simbirsk ‘sorcerer’ and apostate Iakov Iarov was burned alive at Kazan.

The Age of Catherine introduced some changes into legislative discourse and visibly alleviated punishments imposed on ‘superstitious persons’. However, the secular authorities were in no haste to reduce to a penance the punishment for unauthorised devotional practices. In 1775, the investigation of cases concerning ‘sanctimonious’ hypocrites, ‘sham’ sorcerers, and so on was entrusted to the just-created secular conscience courts, and in 1782 to police boards. Article 57 of the new Regulation of Public Decency (*Ustav blagochiniia*, 1782) made upholding the ‘peace and tranquility of the Holy Orthodox Church’ the prerogative of law enforcement. The specially created Board of Public Decency (Uprava Blagochiniia) was to monitor and regulate Church attendance, including making sure that the faithful behaved in church ‘with reverence’ and kept ‘worshipful silence’ during the service (Article 59). The Board was also given jurisdiction over those offenders who used to fall under the purview of ecclesiastical courts – false prophets (Article 254), sorcerers (Article 266) and even blasphemers (Article 237) who, unlike the first two categories, could not possibly be qualified as swindlers. Rooting out ‘superstition’ became the business of civil government. Civil courts and law enforcement was now in charge of investigations of fraud and other criminal offences perpetrated by ‘superstitious persons’ as well as of punishing the offenders, including assigning the appropriate Church penance or confinement to monasteries and convents.

Thus, the responsibility for persecuting superstitions and superstitious persons in the name of correcting the religious life of Russia’s Orthodox subjects was initially jointly vested in secular and ecclesiastic authorities. Feofan Prokopovich proclaimed at the time that ‘superstitious persons [...] are the worst enemies of both heaven and earth as well as of *the Church and the Fatherland*’.¹⁹ However, by the end of the eighteenth century this responsibility had become divided: the Church was to stigmatise ‘superstitions’ *verbally* while the State was to punish superstitious persons *bodily*.

After all, secular authority decided against totally abstaining from participation in the battle against superstition. And it invented a specious excuse for the continuation of persecutions *for* ‘superstitions’

17. St Petersburg, Russian State Historical Archive (RGIA), fond 796, op.1, d. 306.

18. RGADA, fond 7, op.1, d. 443.

19. Feofan Prokopovich, *Slova i riechi pouchitelnyia, pokhvalnyia i pozdravitelnyia* [Praising, didactic, congratulatory words and speeches] (St Petersburg, Pri Suhoputnom Shliahetskom korpuse, 1760), vol.1, p.156. My emphasis.

by declaring them criminal offences – namely swindle and fraud (let us recall the *Spiritual regulation*: ‘devised by hypocrites only for their own interest’).

It could be safely said that by engaging in the ongoing campaign against ‘superstitious persons’ the secular authorities obtained long-term weighty justifications for intensifying their interference in the daily life of each of their subjects. The war against superstition turned out to be endless, while the scope of the corresponding activity was very wide: the persistent absence of clarity made it extremely easy to characterise many traditional religious practices as ‘superstitious’ and to find their adherents ‘in all ranks’ of society.

Secondly, equally ambiguous were the successes achieved in the war against ‘prejudices’ with regard to the enlightenment of clergy and laymen. The plan outlined in the *Spiritual regulation* envisaged that the struggle against ‘prejudices’ and other religious ‘aberrations’ should be waged by means of words:

- via parish priests trained as religious educators;
- via the composition of ‘brief and lucid books [on Faith] understandable to a simple man’;
- via regular preaching.

The argument that it is precisely ‘ignorance’ or ‘non-learning’ that leads to the emergence of ‘superstitions’ was taken as an axiom by the majority of both secular and ecclesiastical writers. In the eighteenth century, praise of ‘enlightenment’ became an important attribute of ecclesiastical rhetoric which played an important role in Church sermons. Feofan Prokopovich was the first to put forth a far-reaching programme of catechising the flock which was designed to provide basic theological knowledge to ‘everybody’. However, the actual implementation of this programme took many decades, while the initial project which managed to survive only due to persistent interference of the secular authorities was much truncated.

The achievements of spiritual enlightenment in eighteenth-century Russia varied considerably with regard to different social strata of the empire’s Orthodox subjects: so far as the clergy is concerned, the number of ecclesiastical educational establishments substantially increased throughout the century, while the programme of spiritual education became more attuned to the needs of the flock.

Divinity began to be taught to secular youth (who came mostly from the nobility and some sections of the urban population) on the basis of new textbooks, including those published in Russian and printed in modern typeface (the catechisms by Platon (Levshin) and F. I. Yankovich de Mirievo, the textbook by F. Emin). Sermons, too, targeted the afore-

mentioned circle of 'secular people'.²⁰ In accordance with the guidelines set out in the *Spiritual regulation*, preachers extolled the glory of the imperial office, expounded on the principles of 'commonweal' and the duties and obligations of different social classes, and set out examples of virtuous and deplorable behaviour. The sermons were tailored to the educated urban audience and targeted the 'lords' rather than 'serfs'. This effort to bring out a 'new breed of mankind' endowed with extensive knowledge and firm understanding of the fundamentals of faith resulted in a generation gap of sorts. Many early nineteenth-century intellectuals, aware of the colossal gulf that set their religiosity apart from traditional Orthodoxy of the 'common people' as well as that of their own elders, sneered at their 'superstitious' grandmothers: 'Shcherbatov's grandmother was very pious but very superstitious. It was quite common in the olden days, but now it is amusing to recall what kind of silly things she was scared of.'²¹

Quite different was the situation with the 'enlightenment' of 'common people', especially the peasantry. For a long time, preaching, including instructions against 'superstitions', failed to reach those who were most prone to preserve and practise these 'superstitions'. Up until the 1840s, the authorities had not even succeeded in establishing a system of parish schools throughout the Russian Empire (except Ukraine). Illiterate parishioners were accustomed to oral instruction, but regular preaching in the rural parish continued to be a rarity; according to G. Freeze's estimates, by the year 1847, despite the numerous demands of the Holy Synod, sermons were regularly delivered in no more than 8 per cent of Russia's parishes.²²

Even the strategy aimed at *simplifying* spiritual education so that the believers could better understand the sermon did not justify the hopes of its designers, Peter I and Feofan. In 1724, Peter I wrote to the Holy Synod that, 'since we have too few learned preachers', the composition of sermons – '*more simple for the villagers and more elegant [for delivery] in towns, so as to please the listeners*', should be accelerated.²³ Later on, apparently after having failed to receive the expected response from its flock, the Church continually adjusted its policy of spiritual instruction in

20. Viktor M. Zhivov, 'Yazyk i kul'tura v Rossii XVIII veka' [*Language and culture in eighteenth century Russia*] (Moscow, Shkola 'Yazyki russkoi kul'tury'), p.382, 459.

21. *Rasskazy babushki: iz vospominanii piati pokolenii zapisannye i sobrannye ee vnukom D. Blagovo* [Grandmother's tales: from 'Memoirs of five generations', collected by her grandson Dmitrii Blagovo], ed. T. I. Ornatskaya (Leningrad, 1989), p.40-41.

22. Gregory L. Freeze, 'The Rechristianization of Russia: the Church and popular religion, 1750-1850', in *Studia Slavica Finlandensia* 7 (Helsinki, 1990), p.110.

23. *Polnoe sobranie postanovlenii i raspriazhenii po vedomstvu pravoslavnogo ispovedaniya* [Full collection of resolutions and directions in the jurisdiction of the Orthodox confession] (St Petersburg, 1874), vol.4, p.104-105. My emphasis.

order to achieve the ever greater *simplicity* of the catechetical education of common people.

In the mid-eighteenth century, some officials in the Holy Synod went so far as to affirm that even Feofan Prokopovich's textbook, *The First instruction to boys*, 'is not understandable because of its elevated style',²⁴ and from the 1760s onwards the best ecclesiastical writers literally competed to create 'concise' and 'abridged' catechisms.²⁵

Most popular were Platon (Levshin)'s textbook *The Initial education of a man*, republished seventeen times in Moscow and St Petersburg between 1769 and 1798, and his *Abridged catechism for educating boys* whose thirteen small format pages managed to contain all the answers to the questions 'What is Christianity?' and 'What are the Church sacraments and commands?' It was this *Abridged catechism* that all the priests, deacons and junior deacons were required to learn by heart, while the parishioners were merely recommended 'that they themselves should know, and should teach their children to know: (1) the Jesus Prayer, (2) the Lord's Prayer, (3) the Creed, (4) the Ten Commandments of God [...] and to make [the parishioners] say them in front of you, and if any of them would turn out to be ignorant, those persons should be spiritually admonished and denounced'.²⁶

In 1788, the Church published *The Guidances concerning the proper duties of every Christian* by Bishop Tikhon of Zadonsk (Sokolov), later repeatedly republished. So what was required of every Christian, according to Saint Tikhon? To reject Satan and to know the Ten Commandments, 'to keep in mind the Christian duties (God is omnipresent and omniscient; Christ has suffered for us; all of us shall die and the Final Judgment – Hell or Paradise – awaits us)', and to serve Christ ('to have Faith in Him, and to pass your life in piety and in the fear of God'). Here, there is already no place for reasoning in support of the postulate that each Christian should know catechetical teaching 'without which it is impossible to obtain salvation'.²⁷ On the contrary, the *Guidances* contain the bishop's lamentation that 'learned and clever fools can be worse than ordinary ignoramuses'.²⁸

Thus, in the late eighteenth century, it was recommended to 'common'

24. See N. K. Odintsov, 'K voprosu o sochinenii i izdanii uchitel'nykh knig v XVIII stoletii' [On the issue of the composition and edition of didactic books in the eighteenth century], *Khristianskoye chteniye* 220, part 1 (1905), p.184-96.

25. In 1762 there appeared an abridged catechism by Bishop Feoktist (Machul'skii), in 1764 by Gavriil (Petrov). For more, see Odintsov, 'K voprosu o sochinenii i izdanii uchitel'nykh knig v XVIII stoletii', p.184-96.

26. Platon (Levshin), *Pouchitel'niye slova* [Sermons] (Moscow, Senatskaya tipografiya u F. Gippiusa, 1780), vol.7, p.133, 141.

27. Makarii (Petrovich), *Tserkvi vostochnyia pravoslavnoe uchenie* [The Orthodox teaching of the Eastern Church] (St Petersburg, pri Akademii Nauk, 1778), p.12.

28. Tikhon (Zadonskii), *Tvoreniia* [Works] (Moscow, 1994), book 1, vol.3, p.201.

parishioners ‘from the numerous people’ that they should become acquainted with Orthodox teaching only in its most general and simple form. In his *Guidance on how catechetical teaching should be presented to people*, Bishop Tikhon of Zadonsk pointed out that that catechism should be taught for *no longer than half an hour* and only on Sundays: ‘one deacon should instruct on the requirements *most important* for salvation *briefly, clearly and simply, so as common people could understand them*’.²⁹

However, the *simplicity* of explanations failed to radically change the religious consciousness of the ‘ignoramus’, and it is unlikely that its effects could be considerable. Moreover, some modern researchers go so far as to assume that ‘the catechising efforts of the Synod’ only contributed to the ‘alienation’ of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century priest from his peasant flock, who were ever more frequently shifting their allegiance to the Old Believers or sectarians not subordinated to the Holy Synod.³⁰

So far as the preacher was concerned, his confidence in a quick victory over ‘superstitions’ made it less important for him to get concerned with *how* his flock were manifesting their religious beliefs and *how* their ‘superstition’ and piety were actually coexisting. Nearly without exception, ecclesiastic and secular writers shared the illusion that *all* ‘superstitions’ would disappear as soon as they were exposed and debunked. Guided by this illusion, the ‘enlightened’ focused their efforts in another direction. Both the clergy – from the parish priest to the bishop (especially after the issuance of the 1737 decree) – and the learned minds embarked on detecting and describing new and old ‘superstitions’.

The positive effect of this campaign aimed at inventorying ‘superstitions’ should not, however, be underestimated: in the course of the eighteenth century, a considerable number of non-canonised customs, tokens and ritual practices and texts were collected and even classified. Yet another sign of the times was the need to compose (following the European example)³¹ compendiums and dictionaries of Russian superstitions, which clearly manifested itself in the 1760s. Undoubtedly the most prominent ones among these publications are *The Description of ancient Slavic pagan fables [...]* by M. I. Popov (1768) and the dictionary *The ABC of Russian superstitions* by M. D. Chulkov (1782).

However, with rare exceptions, the numerous ‘superstitions’ described in literary, scientific or moralising religious works – thoroughly or

29. Tikhon (Zadonskii), *Tvoreniia*, vol.1, p.17-18. Alexandr Polenov offered the same: *Izbraniye proizvedeniya russkikh mysliteley vtoroy poloviny 18 veka*, vol.2, p.17. My emphasis.

30. Alexandr A. Panchenko, *Khristovshchina i skopchestvo: folklor i traditsionnaia kultura russkikh misticheskikh sekt* [Folklore and traditional culture of Russian mystical sects] (Moscow, 2002), p.72-73.

31. I mean, for example, Jean-Baptiste Thiers, *Traité des superstitions* (Paris, 1679).

superficially – did little to increase the reader’s understanding of the true reasons for the adherence of ‘superstitious persons’ to wrong beliefs – other than ‘foolishness’ or ‘lack of enlightenment’. Both the Orthodox preacher and the secular writer explained any ‘aberrations’ in the religious life of the flock by their *ignorance* alone. ‘[There are] Christians who believe in Jesus Christ but are oblivious to His miracles, His life, His Teaching, His Passions, or His Glory [...] These Christians have their Gospel but are ignorant of its truths or its tradition; they observe feast days without understanding their purpose. Alas! Nowadays there is no difference between Christian feasts and pagan festivals.’³²

This was not the kind of Christianity expected from the faithful. However, the faithful who lacked any kind of religious education, rarely heard a sermon, and whose religious instruction was limited to brief catechism lessons, possessed a remarkable ability to mould the rudiments of the doctrinal or moral theology according to their own categories, that had very little in common with the standards of theological or academic learning. In 1728, in his sermon in the Moscow Kremlin Cathedral of Ascension of Our Lady, Feofan sneered:

It is a ridiculous and pitiful sight when a man who can barely make ink splotches on paper and does not know his way around a book begins to expound on theological truths, fibbing and pontificating on God, angels, demons, what is pleasing and what is abhorrent to God, which charms work for good luck and which help to avoid witchcraft, and what days are lucky, and which psalms and prayers work best, and similar daft fables, carrying on as if he had been taken to the highest Heaven and came back endowed with all this nonsense.³³

Later in the century, preachers continued to inveigh against popular ignorance:

The ignoramus talks of God as if He were a creature [rather than Creator] and thus plunges into an abyss of error. The worship of God is replaced with a *discourse offensive to His glory* and with *entreaties unworthy of His sanctity*. This is a realm of schisms not piety, superstition not faith. This is a realm where the reverence for His law is driven away by willful ignorance and neglect and where an ungrateful wretch, not seeing instant gratification to his false prayers, rails against Divine love.³⁴

Such censure, however, fell on the deaf ears of the ‘ignoramuses’ who tenaciously clung to their own understanding of holiness, divine grace, and salvation. The less than modest success in the campaign against

32. Gavriil (Petrov) *et al.*, *Sobranie raznyh slov i poucheniy na use voskresnye i prazdnichnye dni*, part 2, p.61.

33. Feofan (Prokopovich), *Slova i riechi pouchitelnyia, pokhvalnyia i pozdravitelnyia*, vol.2, p.245-46.

34. Gavriil (Petrov) *et al.*, *Sobranie raznyh slov i poucheniy na use voskresnye i prazdnichnye dni*, part 3, p.99b-100. My emphasis.

superstition made some elites wonder whether the ‘superstition’ of the ‘common folks’ was in fact real faith and real piety. Then, after pointing to ‘ignorance’ as the only cause of ‘superstition’, those who desired to eradicate the latter would make another important move by immediately resorting to *ratio* – in full accordance with the logic of the philosophers of the Enlightenment. They declared that opposition to ‘superstitions’ should be Faith ‘based on reason’ (*vera razumnaia*).

In the late 1600s, Simeon of Polotsk already described superstition as conflicting with reason. In one of his sermons, he called it ‘abhorrent to God, unacceptable to Christianity, contrary to reason, leading into sin, and [...] forever condemning the soul.’³⁵ The argument that superstition was fundamentally unreasonable would become more prominent in the next century. Damaskin (Semenov-Rudnev), a prominent and learned preacher of the second half of the eighteenth century wistfully admired ‘a pleasant sight of those nations where love of learning and the arts prevails [...] There nobody speaks in tongues, there are no sorcerers, witches, palm-readers, or *klikushi* [hysterical demoniacs], since nobody there believes in these things.’ He then went on to extol true Christian religion free of ‘false teachings, superstition, and greed’, a religion that conformed to ‘enlightened reason’ and ‘natural piety’.³⁶ These appeals to reasonable religion, however, were no more likely to root out superstition than persecution or thundering sermons. It is unlikely they ever reached the mass of Russian faithful. They did, however, endanger the faith of educated classes who exhibited increasing penchants for religious indifferentism, Deism, or even atheism:

You feel your own weakness that makes you waver in your faith and, instead of the succour of Divine Law, you rely on your own prying and agitated reason that you pit against religion. Your belief is sustained by speculation and theories propounded by people who have rejected virtue. *You try to analyze the faith as befits philosophers; but soon you will argue against it as befits atheists.*³⁷

In attempting to root out ‘superstition’ while preventing the learned classes from lapsing into ‘Lutheran heresy’ or, worse, atheism, Enlightenment theologians advocated following the *via media*, the golden median between extremes that Christianity conceived as a balance between faith and reason.³⁸

35. *Krasnorechie Dreinei Rusi XI-XVII vv.*, p.379.

36. Damaskin (Semenov-Rudnev), *Propovedi*, p.72, 78.

37. Gavriil (Petrov), *et al.*, *Sobranie raznyh slov i poucheniy na vse voskresnye i prazdnichnye dni*, part 3, p.18b. My emphasis.

38. On ‘the middle way’ in the Western Christian tradition see, for example, Sorkin, *The Religious Enlightenment*, p.67-109; Martin Pott, *Aufklärung und Aberglaube: die deutsche Frühaufklärung im Spiegel ihrer Aberglaubenskritik* (Tübingen, 1992), p.182-90.

Oh blessed is he who avoids both excesses [of fanaticism and indifference]! Who follows the noble middle way, repulsed by malicious and insane fervour but guided by the sacred flame of wise and humane zeal! This zeal is full of tender devotion without superstition, the selfless love of truth, pure and genuine love of humankind, and, lest the weak be led into a temptation, sensible caution. He is the true son of the Church, a wise and noble member of society, who loves all and is loved by all.³⁹

This middle way between reason and irrationality, however, was too narrow to accommodate the complex, unruly, and highly variable system known as ‘popular religion’. Neither the arguments based on reason nor the appeals to ‘reason’ and ‘common sense’ could significantly shake the foundations of ‘superstitious’ religiosity, and it is unlikely that all these arguments and appeals could be adequately comprehended by the majority of the flock. In mass consciousness, faith remained far removed from ‘reason’, and such typical features of ‘popular faith’ as the combination of the hope of salvation in Christ and the belief in ‘magic’, devotion to sacred objects, readiness for a ‘miracle’ and the resulting expectation of ‘miracles’ to be produced by icons, relics and springs were left unchanged and blocked the adoption of the ‘new culture’ and the ideas of the Enlightenment.

Moreover, arguments about ‘Faith based on Reason’ threatened to undermine the religious beliefs of the ‘learned’ flock increasingly prone to indifferentism, ‘naturalism’ (deism) and even ‘atheism’. And it goes without saying that ‘Faith based on Reason’ was not adopted by those who searched for a ‘new spirituality’ in the sectarian movements of ‘Spiritual Christians’, mysticism, and even in the Church’s own movement toward *starchestvo* and the ‘spiritual renaissance’.

The low effectiveness of the policy aimed at eradication of ‘superstitions’ gave rise to increasingly frequent lamenting that for many people, ‘true faith’ and piety still consisted in the things which the enlightened called ‘superstition’. As regards such people, no less a figure than Feofan Prokopovich wrote: ‘all the other sins man is aware of being sinful of, but he *is deluded to believe that by being in superstition he renders service to God*: and thus perishing he thinks of himself as being saved, and, having bandaged his eyes, he carelessly approaches the precipice of hell’.⁴⁰

Some opponents of Feofan Prokopovich started to express some misgivings that the extremely broad interpretation of ‘superstitions’ could undermine popular piety. In November 1741, when recalling the

39. Gavriil (Petrov) *et al.*, *Sobranie raznykh slov i poucheniy na use voskresnye i prazdnichnye dni*, part 2, f.28b. See also, Feofan (Prokopovich), *Slova i riechi pouchitelnyia, pokhvalnyia i pozdravitelnyia*, vol.2, p.94.

40. Feofan (Prokopovich), *Slova i riechi pouchitelnyia, pokhvalnyia i pozdravitelnyia*, vol.2, p.155. My emphasis.

heyday of 'Feofanism' and the reign of Anna Ioannovna, the renowned preacher Amvrosii (Yushkevich) said:

They trampled piety and our Orthodox faith, but did it in such a way and on such a pretext as if they were eradicating not faith but a worthless superstition harmful to Christianity. Oh how great is the multitude of ecclesiastics extirpated and monks unfrocked and tortured on this false pretext! Let us ask: what for? We will hear no other answer but this: a superstitious person, a hypocrite, a worthless sanctimonious dissembler.⁴¹

At the close of the eighteenth century, in 1786-1787, even the Russian Freemason Prince M. M. Shcherbatov mixed his lauding of Peter's efforts to eradicate superstition with the following lament: 'by depriving non-enlightened people of [their] superstitions, he [Peter the Great] was taking away the very faith in God's Law [...] the curbing of superstitions also caused harm to the most fundamental elements of faith; superstition decreased but faith also decreased'.⁴² However, the voices of Amvrosii (Yushkevich) and Prince Shcherbatov were drowned out by the enthusiastic exclamations of those who expected that all superstitions would be completely eradicated very soon, and so believed that 'in our enlightened times the frightful sorcerers and witches have already disappeared and departed for Siberia'.⁴³

Thus, having bluntly nicknamed as 'superstition' everything that lay beyond 'Faith based on Reason', and optimistically expecting soon to do away altogether with all those 'transgressions', the advocates of the Enlightenment had, in fact, failed to come any nearer to understanding essentially what it was like – that 'crude' and 'incorrect' belief of 'many', which they were condemning. The statement of the fact that popular religiosity is 'blind' ('with the exception of the few, a great number [of people] *are blind with regard to understanding faith*')⁴⁴ turned out to be just a weighty pretext for revising the role and status of Orthodox instruction in the eighteenth century, but not a pretext for analysing the 'otherness' of the faith of the flock.

In the eighteenth century, the concept of 'superstition' did not become the key to understanding the diversity of individual manifestations of the religious feelings, views and ritual practices of Orthodox

41. 'Pridvorniye propovedi v tsarstvovanie imp. Elizavety Petrovny' [Court sermons in the reign of the Empress Elizaveta Petrovna], in *Letopisi russkoy literatury*, vol.2, ed. Nikolay S. Tikhonravov (Moscow, 1859).

42. Mikhail M. Shcherbatov, *O povrezhdenii nraov v Rossii* [On the corruption of morals in Russia] (St Petersburg, 1906), p.28.

43. *Onomatologia curiosa artificiosa et magica, ili Slovar' natural'nogo volshebstva* [A dictionary of a natural magic], translated by Vasilii Levshin (Moscow, University Press, 1795), part.1, p.vi.vii.

44. Gavriil (Petrov) *et al.*, *Sobranie raznyh slov i poucheniy na vse voskresnye i prazdnichnye dni*, part 2, f.60b. My emphasis.

believers. On the contrary, it created some new obstacles by deepening the chasm between the 'enlightened' and the 'ignorant', and between those 'pious' in their 'Faith based on Reason' and those who were 'superstitious swindlers'.

It was only in the nineteenth century that learned minds engaged in the quest for the ever-evasive boundaries between 'superstition' and 'true faith' would abandon rigid definitions and, after having completed the 'inventory' of 'superstitious' customs and beliefs, would turn their benevolent attention to the 'popular world-outlook'. Only then it would become possible for V. I. Dahl to note in his *Dictionary*: 'The borders between Orthodox faith and superstition depend on convictions, and everybody has his own faith so far as these things are concerned'.⁴⁵ And at the end of the nineteenth century, the author of the entry on superstition in *The Theological dictionary* would write that 'it is almost impossible to eradicate them [superstitions]'.⁴⁶

45. Vladimir I. Dahl', *Tolkovnyi slovar zhivogo velikoruskogo iazyka* [Explanatory dictionary of the living great Russian language] (Moscow, 1982), vol.4, p.357.

46. *Polnyi pravoslavnyi bogoslovskii entsiklopedicheskii slovar'* [Complete Orthodox theological encyclopaedia] (Moscow, 1992), vol.2, column 2129.

