



# Church History and the Predicament of the Orthodox Hierarchy in the Russian Empire of the Early 1800s\*

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# Церковная история и положение православной иерархии в Российской империи начала XIX в.

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## Abstract

In this article, the author tries to reflect the emergence of the intellectual concept of “Church History” through a number of theoretical frameworks, setting this discursive turn on the map of the epoch. The first is the problem of the cultural gap arising during the 18th century between the intellectual elites of the nobility and clergy. Second, we examine the bureaucratization of the empire leading both to the convergence of parallel “ecclesiastical” and “civil” administrative structures and to the emergence of the bureaucratic layer between episcopate and the monarch, who was considered as the formal “head” of the earthly ecclesiastical structure. Third, we consider the establishment of the administrative bonds between governmental authorities and individuals, which were understood as being in competition for the “pastoral” power of the church hierarchy. We next examine the change in the mode of knowledge distribution, which took place within the emergence of the “public sphere” in the early 19th-century

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Russian Empire. Finally, we look at the problem of the national identity emerging in the late 18th and early 19th centuries, which was centered around the concept of the ethnic community and political body (and its history) rather than on the community of believers actualized in the discourse of the epoch as the concept of Church (and its history). All those narratives on social change strive to explain the global change in Orthodox theology, which became centered on ecclesiology. This change might be effectively problematized as a transition between first and second “orders of theology” within the framework proposed by G. Kaufman. This method of explanation may be especially productive when it comes to drawing an analogy between Russian and Western theology in the modern period.

#### Keywords

Russian Church history, intellectual history, Christianity in the modern Russian Empire, ecclesiastical historiography, history of theology

#### Резюме

В данной статье предпринимается попытка с точки зрения ряда теоретических программ осмыслить возникновение в Российской империи начала XIX в. интеллектуального феномена “церковной истории”. Выделяется несколько нарративов, в рамках которых может проясниться место этого дискурсивного поворота “на карте” высказываний эпохи: 1) проблема культурного разрыва, который в течение XVIII в. образуется между дворянской и “духовной” интеллектуальными элитами; 2) бюрократизация империи, приведшая, с одной стороны, к созданию параллельных “церковных” и “гражданских” административных инстанций, а с другой — к возникновению бюрократической “прослойки” между епископатом и императором как формальным главой церковной организации; 3) установление административной связи между властью и индивидом, которая различается как “конкурентоспособная” по отношению к пастырской власти церковной иерархии; 4) изменения в характере “дистрибуции знания”, происходящие в процессе становления в Российской империи конца XVIII – начала XIX в. “публичного пространства”; 5) проблема возникновения национальной идентичности, от которой отстраивается отличная от нее конфессиональная идентичность, центральным элементом которой является понятие о “Церкви”. Эти нарративы о социальном изменении могут объяснить глобальное изменение в характере православного богословия, в центре которого начиная с XIX в. оказывается понятие о Церкви и ее бытии во времени — эkkлeсиологическая проблематика. Наряду с прочими вариантами осмысления, этот терминологический сдвиг может быть продуктивно проблематизирован в качестве перехода от первого ко второму “порядкам теологии” в рамках системы, предложенной Г. Кауфманом, что позволяет провести аналогии в истории европейской и российской богословской мысли Нового времени.

#### Ключевые слова

история Русской церкви, интеллектуальная история, христианство в России Нового времени, церковная историография, история богословия

The beginning of the 19th century was an era of rapid development of the Russian Empire. This immense state at the eastern border of Europe at this period became an evident leader in the international political arena of the time, especially after the Napoleonic wars. It is generally accepted that the Russian Orthodox Church was a beneficiary of this victorious march of Russian political force. However, this dramatic change was in fact a serious challenge for the Russian Church's intellectual leaders. This paper shows the gravity of this shift through the example of a new intellectual concept invented in the Russian context in the early 19th century: "The History of the Church." Earlier history was understood as a unity of its actors by both Church and State leaders. The political development and modernization of the Russian Empire eliminated this unity. The historiographical concept of the "History of the Church" was crucial for the building of a new "Church identity," while this identity was strictly opposed both to the emerging national, governmental, and liberal ideology and to the non-Orthodox intellectual movements within the Russian intellectual elite.

### The Church and the State?

There is a widespread assumption that Church and State in Russia are merged under any regime. Indeed, on the one hand, one of the key features of Orthodoxy is the predominant loyalty of its hierarchy to the political authority, which is seen not as a historical variable, but as an integral component of the reality of life. On the other hand, it should be noted that our discussion of the relationship between the Church and the State in Russia throughout its history is based on the modern understanding of social structure. When we think about history, we extrapolate the existing structures into the reality of the past. This approach may help to build neat narratives, but it will not get us to the root of the matter. In other words, when we speak about such categories as "the History of the Church" or "the relationship between Church and State" at the time of Emperor Alexius I Comnenus, Pope Gregory VII, or Ivan the Terrible, we introduce discursive constructions which are a priori inapplicable to these epochs. Thus, we deprive ourselves of the possibility of distinguishing a more nuanced actuality.

However, we cannot deny the fact that, once the structure of knowledge had taken its present shape, abstract social entities such as "Society," "State," "Church" (as a confessional community), "Culture," "Medicine," "Science," and so forth began to be distinguished in a historical perspective. In this paper, we are not making an attempt to conceptualize these changes as a whole, but will focus on the concept of "Church History" in the Russian cultural space, including the process of its emergence and transformation within the settings of Russian Empire in the late 18th–early 19th centuries.

## The Emergence of the Concept of “Church History”

In the third quarter of the 18th century, the “Church History” genre in Russia emerged. The first author who used this terminology was Archpresbyter Peter Alekseev (1731–1801), who made an attempt to create a comprehensive ecclesiastical history in the late 1770s [КНИГПЦ]. It can be stated that his manuscript was written in the clearly “presbyterian” style, as was his social activism. As shown by O. Tsapina, Archpresbyter Peter transferred the social tensions between the educated white clergy and monastic hierarchy onto the content of the historical text [TSAPINA 2002]. We can even say cautiously that his work was part of the Catherinian project of the reintegration of the ecclesiastical hierarchy into the body of her modernized “regular state.” Of course one of the main themes in this project was the “clash” between imperious bishops and educated and loyal white clergy [TSAPINA 2001]. It seems that later, Catherine abandoned this theme, and the white clergy was gradually “returned” to the bishops’ domain. However, the historical work by Archpresbyter Peter has never been published, and the ecclesiastico-historical theme was shortly thereafter intercepted by his opponent, Metropolitan Platon [ПЛАТОН 1805] and his adherents, that is, by the academic “episcopalian” tradition, which was bound together with the learned monastic identity [МЕТНОДИУС 1805; СКОРОДУМОВ 1807; ФИЛАРЕТ 1816; ИННОКЕНТИЙ 1817]. But why did the concept of “Church History” become so relevant to this “platonic” tradition and afterwards become crucial for the Russian Orthodox self-representation in the 19th century? And what is the difference between this modern historical worldview and the traditional one?

In 1805, a provincial priest called Nikita Smirnov published a book entitled, according to the half title: *The History of the Memorable Council of Florence in terms of the Union Undertaking to Unify the Eastern Church with the Western Church* [СМИРНОВ 1805]. However, the real author of this book was his elder brother, Archbishop Methodius (Smirnov) [STRAHL 1828: 481], who gave this publication a different title, which appears on the book’s title page: *The History of the Council of Florence Convened to Restore the Connection between the Greeks and the Romans*. That this latter title was intended to be the original title of the book is indicated by the fact that it does not mention the Church or churches, but only the relationships between the “Greek” and “Roman” communities. The author still sees no difference between *international* and *inter-confessional* relations. However, this was noted by someone who edited the book—a Petersburg censor or editor—someone who put this set of relationships in the “modernized” categories. The quantity of ecclesiastico-historical literature that appeared at that time suggests that it was not a one-off event. In this paper, we will try to answer the question why the concept of Church in the Russian

Empire of the early 19th century finds its place in the topology of public space and in the space of historical memory, which it occupies to the present day, and we will state the possible reasons for this shift.

### The Cultural Gap after the Petrine Reforms

It is generally accepted that Peter's reforms led to an insurmountable cultural division between the Russian nobles and members of other estates in the empire.<sup>2</sup> The estate [*soslovnaia*] system itself, in which everyone takes care of their own business, works for the benefit of the state, and does not interfere with the powers of the other, was an outstanding invention by Peter and, from a pragmatic point of view, was, of course, quite effective. At the same time, we do not suggest that an "estate system" was exclusively a "state project" without any interest "from below" [FREEZE 1986; CONFINO 2008: 688; МИРОНОВ 2014: 334–340].

At the same time, this set the scene for the emergence of two intellectual elites: the nobility and the clergy. By the beginning of the 19th century, the estrangement between the estates had reached such a degree that some researchers speak about the emergence of "if not a state within a state, then at least a subsociety within the larger society" [МИРОНОВ 2014: 370]. This situation is very vividly described by R. Pinkerton, an English missionary, who devoted an entire book to the Russian Church: "The candidates for the priesthood being thus trained up from their early years in these secluded retreats, have but few opportunities of mixing in civil society. Therefore, on leaving the seminary, and entering the world, a student is like a foreigner coming into a strange country, with the language and manner of which he has but an imperfect acquaintance" [PINKERTON 1814: 10].

We should note that at the same time in England, future ministers were educated together with all the other members of the elite [PARK 1990: 79]. However, in Russia the cultural gap had gradually formed an estate-based mindset characterized by the separation from other communities. This separation was based on the concept of a special "soteriological" destination of priestly dynasties and by the reluctance to admit outsiders into their ranks [МИЛЮКОВ 1897: 138–141; MANCHESTER 2008: 68–94]. By the end of the 18th century, the hierarchy (i.e., monastic Orthodox bishops) had acquired the features of a monolithic corporation unified by ethnicity (Great Russians) as well as by the ecclesiastical estate background. Their formal education and career path (seminary education, monastic vows, administrative posts in the theological and educational institutions, episcopal ordination, system of transfers from a less prestigious eparchy to a central one) would remain unchanging through

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<sup>2</sup> See some classic masterpieces on the history of the clergy in Russia [ЗНАМЕНСКИЙ 1873; FREEZE 1977].



the 19th century. They were united by a single ethos with the key features of “theological wisdom” [СУХОБА 2012], i.e., efficient management of the eparchy, and emphasis on the development of religious education [FREEZE 1985: 96].

### Modernization and Bureaucratization of the Empire

According to Freeze, in the early 19th century, the government of the Russian Empire noticed an ordered hierarchy of social estates among its subjects [FREEZE 1986: 35].

§ *Changes in the structure of the social elites, the cultural gap between the nobles and other populations of the empire, and the isolation of the clergy estate are sometimes viewed through the prism of “Westernization” as a process of the artificial saturation of the intellectual and mundane living space of the nobles with elements of Western culture. However, in our opinion, westernization was just a side effect of the modernized state building process designed to put everything in its place and to set functional goals for everything.*

In general, the beginning of the 19th century was a time of rapid sophistication, that is, modernization and functional differentiation of the society. Alexander I was determined to fulfill his grandmother’s intention to build a “modern state,” and was preparing for efficient organization of the empire, particularly in the first half of his reign. An emphasis on functional differentiation in relation to the nobility and the clergy had already been made by Peter: during the 18th century, the Church hierarchs had been gradually discharged from control of political and economic processes in the empire. The apogee of this process was marked by Catherine’s secularization decree of 1764. Gradually losing their *institutional autonomy*, representatives of the Church hierarchy had to construct the *autonomy of “discourse.”* In the early 19th century, the concept of social ordering develops further—this period is characterized by widespread separation between “religious” and “civil.”

Thus, in 1803 and 1814, two educational systems were formed: secular and ecclesiastical. As a result, if previously the clergy’s education had been isolated only by custom, after the reform of 1814, the “system” of ecclesiastical (i.e., based on social estate) education received a legal basis [СУХОБА 2007]. In 1804, the secular and ecclesiastical censorship areas were delimited; or, rather, this dichotomy was the result of taking everything not directly related to the issues of dogma, church life, etc. out of the control of an ecclesiastical censor [ЖИРКОВ 2001: 40]. The same holds for the intellectual elites: whereas in the 18th century, the Academy of Sciences had not only foreign and Russian secular scholars but also many members of the clergy, in the 19th century, such blending became rather an exception to the rule. As the result, the Ecclesiastical Academy, founded in 1814, is considered not only an institution of

higher education, but also a special academy “of all sciences needed by the clergy,” similar to the “secular” Academy of Sciences in Petersburg [СУХОВА 2013: 141]. Even the area of the empire itself seems to concentrate around two poles, Moscow and Petersburg, which began to be considered the “ecclesiastical” and “civil” centers of the empire.

§ *According to the suggestion of Boris Uspenskij and Lotman, Peter’s idea envisaged the “Moscow the Third Rome” concept to be split semiotically into religious and political components. Petersburg would be declared a new “Third Rome” and Moscow would be deposed as a center of “sanctimonious holiness” and “papal” spirit, remaining, however, the center of the pre-Petrine culture, which—after the ideas of the Orthodox kingdom are removed from its core and after this symbolic nature is transferred to Petersburg—became the center of exclusively religious culture [УСПЕНСКИЙ, ЛОТМАН 1996].*

A natural consequence of the “ordering” of the empire was an immense expansion of its bureaucratic presence. And this presence no longer involved any Church hierarchs. Whereas Patriarch Nikon had been virtually an equal partner in governance with Tsar Alexei Mikhailovich, and Archbishop Theofan Prokopovich was the primary counselor and coordinator in various key issues for Peter I, Alexander I placed representatives of the Church hierarchy at the end of the line in guiding his decision making. And while even Catherine II actively communicated with bishops and used their authority in her political game, Alexander had no such relations, which had lost all their political value.

§ *Catherine II and Paul were, perhaps, the last Russian monarchs who had a coherent political program in relation to the clergy. In particular, Catherine strove to “disengage” white clergy from the monastic hierarchy. Moreover, she actively heated up (where it was politically reasonable) conflicts between the two groups. In line with these ideas was Catherine’s reluctance to recognize the right of the clergy to constitute a separate estate. In the Alexander era, bureaucracy (and secularization) of the empire had reached such a scale that the government (with the exception of the Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod) was much less interested in parish clergy in isolation from the monastic hierarchy [RAEFF 1974; TSAFINA 2001].*

Weakening direct and immediate relations between the episcopate and the monarch at a time of the expansion of the empire, the growth of the bureaucracy, and the “depersonalization of the state” (the rise of the concept of the “state affairs” [DIXON 2003: 191])—all of these were built on the model of the European absolute monarchies. All these factors initially caused the concept of “Moscow the Third Rome,” which had been so meaningful in the 16th century, to become irrelevant for the given time period. And despite the fact that the emperor of Russia formally remained “head of the Greco-Russian Church” until 1917, his person begins gradually to drop out of the theology of ecclesiastical intellectuals [ХОНДЗИНСКИЙ 2010: 66–67, 256–272].

## Two "Pastorates"

A medieval Russian monarch is a shepherd to his subjects surrounded by members of the Church hierarchy who share this pastorate with him or her. This dialectics of the princely pastorate is well expressed by Joseph of Volotsk:

For the tsar by his nature is like all people, but by his power he is like the Supreme God. And just as God wants to save all the people, so the tsar should protect everything that is subject to him from any harm, both mental and physical [Иосиф: 547].

Evidently St. Joseph eliminates the very boundary between prince and bishop in relation to their pastoral duties:

The Holy Apostles say about the tsars and the bishops who do not care about their patrials: a wicked tsar not caring about his patrials is not a tsar but a torturer; and an evil bishop not taking care of the flock is not a shepherd but a wolf [Иосиф: 549].

However, while the tsar is a shepherd to all the people, at the local level, pastoral ministry is provided by representatives of the Church hierarchy. Despite all his unity with the congregation in the medieval period, a priest was the only "institution member" (if medieval hierarchy may be called an "institution") who dealt with the rural population in the Middle Ages and Early Modern period. A priest is not only a churchman but also a manager who regulates a tremendous number of social processes. However, since the time of Peter I, this role of the priest was increasingly taken over by a civil administrator, with his distinctive but also "pastoral" model, as M. Foucault precisely described it in his lecture on 15 February 1978 [FOUCAULT 2004].

The first sign of the establishment of a "new pastorate" was the introduction of the capitation (or head) tax (in 1718, when a "person" became the unit of fiscal taxation) and the Table of Ranks (1722), which defined the framework for bureaucracy as a social phenomenon. These establishments made up a symbolic link between the "public shepherd" and the object of his attention—a "person." The establishment of the Ministry of National Education (1802) is an even more significant turning point in understanding the relationship between the sovereign and the Church hierarchy: at this point, the state (in the form of its officials) began to be involved in people's lives, performing some of the functions formerly held by priests. In other words, "public shepherds" began to take on the "pastoral" function of the Church priests, that is, to teach people. Of course, none of the above implies that an appeal to the monarch's pastorate suddenly disappeared from the Church's discourse. However, the unique bond between the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the monarch was broken by bureaucracy, and the subsequent discourse supplements an appeal to the monarch with an appeal to an abstract entity ascending directly to the figure of Christ, i.e., the Church.



## Emergence of the “Public Sphere”

In the late 18th and 19th centuries, the Church hierarchy faced a difficult and unusual situation—a space where knowledge distribution began to follow a new path untypical for the traditional society had appeared. “By ‘the public sphere’ we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which public opinion can be formed. Access is then guaranteed to all citizens” [HABERMAS ET AL. 1974]. With a certain amount of caution we can suggest that in the Russian Empire of the early 19th century (or even the late 18th century if Novikov’s circle is considered), subtle contours of the “public sphere” had emerged, as *views* of important political, religious, or social matters were formed and discussed, and they began to interact with each other in this new context. In addition, for some reason those views differed from those of the power authority. In fact, it was in the first quarter of the 19th century when the first manifestations of political opposition appeared in the Russian Empire. And it was this time which saw an extraordinary development of all sorts of mystical (intellectual) movements that became the most important challenge for the Church hierarchy, as formerly, they had conveyed their views from a single authoritarian position.

The largest of these movements, which contributed to the crystallization of ecclesiology and the development of discourse on the Church, was Russian Freemasonry. Its representatives in the late 18th and early 19th centuries challenged the correlation between “Christianity” and the institutional Church, putting forward the concept of the “Interior Church,” or the true Church, which, in fact, corresponded to the framework of the Masonic community [ЛОПУХИН 1798; ДАНИЛОВ 2010].

Thus, in the early 19th century, we can detect the first manifestation of the inter-confessional *discussion* (as a *public sphere* element) which replaces *polemics* with heterodoxy. The distinction between those terms is scarcely perceptible, and we once again turn to Foucault to explain it: “I insist on this difference [between discussion and polemics] as something essential: a whole morality is at stake, the one that concerns the search for truth and the relation to the other. In the serious play of questions and answers, in the work of reciprocal elucidation, the rights of each person are in some sense immanent in the discussion. They depend only on the dialogue situation” [FOUCAULT 1997: 111].

It seems that it was not by chance that at the origin of the inter-confessional discussion stood the same person who was among the first authors of church-historical writings—St. Philaret (Drozdov), a “pitchfork” for the theological thought of his era. His work, *Conversation between a Seeker and a Believer Concerning the Orthodoxy of the Eastern Greco-Russian Church* [ФИЛАРЕТ 1815], may be the first published work in which a member of the Church hierarchy was on a par with his opponent, and the interaction took place not between “the bearer of truth” and “the deluded” but between “a believer” and “a seeker.”

### National Identity Problem

The question of national identity in Russia in the early 19th century is complicated and controversial. Of course, when we talk about “national identity” and apply this term to the reality of the Russian Empire in the early 19th century, we should not think about, for example, the German national idea of the same period—they are barely comparable. The “nation” (*narod/natsija*) was a concept developed and complemented within the linguo-cultural community rather than defined by the borrowed terminology.

After the French Revolution, the concept of “nation” settled in the French lexicon of the Russian nobility denoting a “super-estate” community, as opposed to the concept of nation as an “estate corporation,” as it was understood back in the era of Catherine [МИЛЛЕР 2012: 7–10]. In such texts as *The History of the Russian State* by N. M. Karamzin and *Letters of a Russian Officer* by F. N. Glinka, the concepts of “fatherland” and “Russian people” become independent players in the historical narrative [ТИШКОВ 2007: 568; СТРОГАНОВ 2012: 175–212]—as “collective identities,” belonging to which is an essential characteristic for people of the Russian Empire. As L. Greenfeld provocatively concludes: “With the ‘discovery of the people’ the period of gestation of the Russian national consciousness ended. When the eighteenth century drew to a close, the matrix in which all the future Russians would base their identity was complete and the sense of nationality born. It was a troubled child, but the agony of birth was over, and the baby could not be pushed back. For the time to come, it would determine the course of Russian history” [GREENFELD 1992: 260].

After the War of 1812 this national identity claims to be of the ultimate, almost religious, value. However, the connecting element here is not *confession*, but belonging to the *ethnic* and *public community*. This fact, in turn, calls forth another discursive entity—the Church—where the crucial role is reserved for belonging to a confession.

### Theological Perspective

The hierarchy of the Russian Church in the early 19th century was in an ambiguous position: on the one hand, it represented the official religion of the vast empire, had an efficient mission, increased the number of believers each year, and had ambitious plans to heal the bleeding wound of the Old Believer schism. On the other hand, the modernization of the Russian Empire and Russian society placed Russian hierarchs in an increasingly rigid framework, and resulted in expected changes in the interpretation models extended to historical retrospection.

We identified a number of theoretical frameworks that seem to explain the emergence of a narrative concerning the history of the Church in Russian discourse. However, what meaning does this historical and ecclesiological

turn have for theology as a discursive framework for the Christian thought that is striving toward comprehension of reality?

Speaking of Western theology during the second millennium, G. KAUFMAN [1975] introduces the concept of the “orders of theology”: the first order is the natural representation of beliefs of the Christian community; the second is the representation of beliefs in the context of diversity of worldviews; the third emerges when the very possibility of religious truth appears to be, if not questionable, then related to the individual religious worldview and unable to have real social value and historical efficacy.

In the history of Western theology, the “second order” means the situation in which “bearers” of the Christian intellectual tradition face the need to confront themselves, first, with their own multiplicity (the Reformation), and second, with the revealed cultural diversity of the world (the great geographical discoveries). The second order theology is a reflection on the theological statement of the first order with respect to the introduced data—in our case, the fruits of the process of modernization [KAUFMAN 1975: 45; BEILBY 1999: 129].

Here we state that the beginning of the 19th century was the time when Orthodox theology took the shape of “second level theology.” In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, Russian hierarchy as a bearer of theological knowledge was in a position of similar “correlation” in a number of key aspects. First, with the bureaucracy, concerning the relationship with the monarch and the right to teach. Second, with the “flickering” public space, concerning the right to express the truth authoritatively and categorically without resorting to discussion and argumentation. Third, with the so-called national identity, in connection with the right to impose an ultimate value basis in order to determine the historical identity of the empire’s residents. And fourth, with other Christian confessions, representatives of which felt increasingly free in the state elite.

Thus, within the framework of such “correlation,” the discourse on the history of the Church is an argument to demonstrate the intellectual validity and competence of the hierarchy in all of the above matters. The history of the Church is a space (in both the historical past and social topology) where the hierarchy now stands in the list of the ever-increasing number of other social abstractions in the modernizing Russian Empire. The history of the Church is also the developmental locus of the “second level theology” based on the idea of correlation between Orthodox theology with non-Orthodox doctrines and secular knowledge, and designed to justify the “Orthodox ecclesiastical worldview” in correlation with them.

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