

*Sergey Horujy*  
**The Misfortune of Tradition**  
**Why Tradition Needs to Be**  
**Protected from Traditionalists**\*

*Alle solche Urteile, wie diejenigen von der Art, wie meine Seele den Körper bewegt oder mit andern Wesen ihrer Art jetzt oder künftig im Verhältnis steht, können niemals etwas mehr als Erdichtungen sein und zwar bei weitem nicht einmal von demjenigen Werte als die in der Naturwissenschaft, welche man Hypothesen nennt, bei welchen man keine Grundkräfte ersinnt, sondern diejenige, welche man durch Erfahrung schon kennt, nur auf eine der Erscheinungen angemessene Art verbindet, und deren Möglichkeit haben kann und also nur schöpferisch oder chimärisch, wie man es nennen will, dichtet.*<sup>1</sup>

*I. Kant, Träume eines Geistersehers,  
erläutert durch Träume der Metaphysik*

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- 1 "All such opinions, as those concerning the manner in which the soul moves my body, or is related to other beings, now, or in future, can never be anything more than fictions. And they are far from having even that value which fictions of science, called hypotheses, have. For with these no fundamental powers are invented; only those known already by experience are connected according to the phenomena; their possibility, therefore, must be provable at any moment" (Immanuel Kant, *Dreams of a Spirit-Seer Illustrated by Dreams of Metaphysics*, translated by Emanuel F. Goerwitz [New York.: The Macmillan Co., 1900], 118).

Since the beginning of the third millennium Russian politics, the church sphere, public life, and mass media have increasingly been dominated by conservative trends and sentiments. The all-embracing conservative trend and atmosphere are asserting themselves aggressively, but it can readily be seen that as distinct from the Soviet period, the prevalent course – “the general line” – is not informed with any complete ideology and does not have a robust ideological or philosophical foundation. Its intellectual support and theoretical basis represent disparate religious, philosophical, historical, or political constructs, journalistic musings, ideological schemes that tend to be unprovable, para-scientific, archaic, and downright fantastic. This chaotic body of ideas and attitudes may appear to have a kind of ideological cohesion because it has a common element, a *sui generis* common denominator in the shape of *tradition*. “Adherence to tradition,” “reliance on tradition,” “preserving and protecting tradition (or traditions)” – these and similar formulas are heard constantly and everywhere like an incantation, a cloying commonplace in Russian public discourse. On closer inspection, however, this commonplace is an empty place. In nearly all contexts – official, journalistic, and even academic – the meaning of the cure-all called tradition remains fuzzy and it is unclear what concrete traditions are meant.

Moreover, we discover that in the majority of contexts there is no sign of an attempt to clarify the mysterious concept and identify exactly what traditions we should draw on. More often than not this question is sidestepped by substituting the term “tradition” with the still vaguer term “traditional values.” Today the traditional values discourse holds sway everywhere in Russia, while the content of this formula is expressed in a vague and declarative form through such notions as “family,” “morality,” and “social order.” This is in striking contrast with unambiguous and powerful old slogans such as *Blut und Boden* [Blood and soil] or “world revolution.” So, it would be wrong to say that the traditional values discourse performs the function of a state ideology or even the much-touted “national idea.” Rather, it is a palliative, a Band-Aid.

However, there is a plethora of varying marginal, exotic, and extremist ideas on the topic of tradition advocated by small groups and subcultures. An odd picture emerges. The dominant conservative-traditionalist idea manifests itself in the ideological field in such a way that the center

of this space, which should be occupied by concepts shared by the majority or imposed by the authorities, is essentially vacant, while the periphery is replete with a multitude of traditionalist theories, concepts, and schemes of varying (but never totally scientific) standard, marginal and radical to varying degrees. The feature that they all have in common is cavalier treatment of tradition: they all promote a biased and distorted treatment of traditions – ideologized, stylized, mystified, etc. – and often describe imagined “ancient traditions” as the basis for their para-scientific theories. In other words, the authors do not immerse themselves in tradition and its experience, but highjack tradition, producing various kinds of distortions and simulacra.

The aim of this text is to provide a concise analytical description, classification, and assessment of the phenomena that crowd the field of present-day Russian traditionalism. Let us start with a brief catalog of the main phenomena in this field.

## Exposition

Obviously, conservative thought in Russia draws above all on the religious tradition of Orthodoxy and the secular tradition of the monarchy. In Russian culture both have had a long and controversial history that defies a straightforward and unambiguous assessment. The relations between the two have seen many twists and turns. Present-day traditionalism, too, offers various interpretations, but they all share the view that there must be a close alliance, a unity of the two traditions. Such a union has been the rule throughout the history of the Orthodox world until the 20th century, including the Russian Empire. The most salient example, however, is the Byzantine Empire, the first Orthodox kingdom that lasted a thousand years. For the Russian conservative consciousness this example has acquired the status of a paradigm and an archetype, so that the modern concepts and platforms that advocate a marriage of Orthodoxy and monarchy can be considered to be part of the general current of *Byzantinism*. The term is polysemantic, its conceptualization going back to two antip-

odes, Ivan Gagarin<sup>2</sup> and Konstantin Leontiev. For the purpose of this study I chose to focus on the narrow interpretation of Byzantinism as a trend in modern Russian ideological life.

There is no doubt that Byzantinism is the mainstream of Russian traditionalism today. But the trend is not monolithic, it has various subdivisions. The divisions, however, are not sharp and do not rule out important unifying factors: thus, all the Byzantinist theories represent the Byzantine Empire as a positive example for Russia and the West as a dangerous and hostile entity. Nevertheless these theories are very different in terms of their main thrust, their emphasis and goals, and in many other ways. The most visible division is between the more pragmatic, political, and geopolitical Byzantinism and the more mystical and eschatological Byzantinism. The first variety uses relatively moderate and rational discourse and clearly seeks to gain the recognition of the authorities and become the state ideology. A perfect example of such Byzantinism is the well-known television film *The Lesson of Byzantium* by archimandrite, now bishop, Tikhon (Shevkunov). These strivings have had some success: Byzantinist

“empire-building ideologies advocating a vertical integration [...] of various peoples and states around Moscow and Russia [...] are used by the Russian political regime. [...] For a long time the Byzantinist narrative appealed mainly to marginal patriotic intellectual circles. However, in the early 2000s it caught the eye of the people in the corridors of power where the mobilizing potential of this ideologeme was appreciated. The concepts of the Orthodox civilization, post-Byzantine space, ‘the Russian World,’ the Third Rome, etc., came to be discussed.”<sup>3</sup>

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2 On the role of Gagarin in the history of the concept of Byzantinism, see N.V. Sinitsyna, *Tretii Rim: Istoki i evoliutsiia russkoi srednevekovoi kontseptsii (XV–XVI vv.)* (Moscow: Indrik, 1998), 29.

3 A.N. Okara, “Novaia Vostochnaia Evropa v XXI veke: Sposobno li vizantiiskoe nasledie izmenit’ Rossiiu i ves’ mir?” *Razvitie i ekonomika* 4 (2012): 136.

All these concepts, which are included in the sphere of political Byzantinism, have become part of the official discourse.

The second variety has from the outset developed outside the limits of scientific critique: it is the discourse that blends real and sacral history and refuses to distinguish authentic sources, hagiographic narrative, apocrypha, and legends. These tools are used to build mystical and fantastic schemes of history, and mainly of the end of history complete with the advent of “the last time” and the enthronement of the Antichrist. These two varieties occupy different places in the public domain: while the former, as has been said, looks to the center, which it seeks to gain control of, the latter has long been consigned to the fringe zone although it leaps into prominence from time to time (as in our day). However, the differences between them are more external than internal: at the end of the day political Byzantinism rests on the same religious and historical foundations and ideas, though it prefers not to discuss them owing to their exotic character. I will consider these foundations below.

Along with Byzantinism, *Eurasianism* is undoubtedly among the most influential ideological trends in Russia today. Its relevance to our theme, i. e., traditionalism, is not immediately apparent. Typologically, the early Eurasianism of the Russian émigrés in the 1920s was clearly an avant-garde and not a traditionalist trend, which is why its proponents were described as “Slavophiles of the Futurist era” (Fyodor Stepun). However, today’s Eurasianism, or neo-Eurasianism, is a different phenomenon. It is still more heterogeneous than Byzantinism, comprising a whole spectrum of versions. But the important thing is that it is clearly evolving in the direction of traditionalism. With the exception of “left Eurasianism,” oriented toward leftist philosophical trends,<sup>4</sup> the discourse of tradition and the principle of reliance on tradition are present in all the main varieties of modern neo-Eurasianism. However, unlike Byzantinism, Eurasianism cannot link its basic idea of Eurasia as a distinct type of civilization and culture with any tradition that has ever existed. Therefore if

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4 See, for example, R. Vakhitov: “Modern followers of the left-Eurasian paradigm seek to find similarities of the theories of the civilizational approach [...] and Western neo-Marxism, notably in the philosophy of Antonio Gramsci and, to a lesser extent, the Frankfurt School thinkers.” Vakhitov, “Klassicheskoe levoe evraziistvo,” in *Evraziistvo: Issledovaniia i publikatsii* (Moscow: Parad, 2014), 291.

neo-Eurasianism is to gravitate toward the traditionalist discourse, tradition has to be interpreted in a special way.

Traditionalism in the narrow sense – associated primarily with the names of René Guénon and Julius Evola – provides a suitable interpretation. The core of this theory is a special approach to tradition: it proceeds from the premise that the whole spectrum of world religions, cultures, and civilizations has its source in a single “primordial,” “pristine,” or proto-tradition, the ancient sacred tradition that is still unknown to science. “The traditionalists claim that all sacred knowledge has a single source in the original tradition.”<sup>5</sup> Each of the theories within this kind of traditionalism propounds its own version of what the proto-tradition was, seeking to represent it as a reconstruction of genuine prehistorical tradition and find convincing arguments to explain why this tradition is unknown to science.

It is clear that all this is outside the sphere of scientific cognition and belongs to some para-scientific or non-scientific paradigm. We will consider this in more detail below, but at this point let us just note that this extrascientific paradigm, which simulates scientific discourse and method, opens broad opportunities – proposes a matrix, if you like, for producing constructs distanced from science to varying degrees, based on all sorts of imagined “traditions” that may serve various ideological, political, religious, and other purposes. There is great demand for these opportunities in the current Russian (and world) situation. As a result, *traditionalism in the narrow sense* is a highly visible and influential phenomenon in Russian culture, ideology, and to some extent in politics. Content-wise, it is divided into separate conceptions each asserting the existence of some proto-tradition that it uses as the basis for historical, historiosophic, religious, or political schemes and constructs. To evaluate these concepts it would make sense to distinguish among them, above all in terms of how far they are removed from reality and how much fantasy has gone into them: a “tradition” may be the one hundred percent invention of an arm-chair historian or a modification of some real tradition, leavened with varying degrees of arbitrariness, distortions, and additions.

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5 G. Dzhemal, “Prorocheskaia eskhatologiya i traditsionnaia doktrina tsiklov,” in *Eskhatologicheskii sbornik* (St. Petersburg: Aleteia, 2006), 476.

Let us use this principle to compile a brief catalog of the main present-day traditionalist concepts, starting with moderate ones and moving gradually to those that blatantly disregard reality and science.

(1) The spectrum of neo-Eurasian concepts contains a relatively moderate version whose authors, while taking liberties with historical and cultural data, still avoid undisguised additions and distortions. Such moderate traditionalism has produced the widely known theories of Lev Gumilyov and, among modern authors, of Aleksandr Panarin, who claimed the existence of “a single tradition that is archetypically common to the peoples of Eurasia,”<sup>6</sup> but did not venture to describe it, saying that such reconstruction would be a task for the future.

(2) Evgeny Shiffers (1934–1997), a brilliant film and stage master, came up with a very original version of traditionalism. His spiritual quests led him to a syncretic mystery-like fantasy that blends Tibetan Buddhism and mystical Orthodoxy.<sup>7</sup> Shiffers had and still has a small but staunch following and his extraordinary sensitivity to the spiritual tradition puts him in the category of traditionalists and not simply New Age–style dilettantes. He puts forward his own version of Eurasianism connected with the idea of the “Eurasian proto-motherland.” However, Shiffers does not introduce the concept of the primordial tradition, so in our classification his concept is in between traditionalism in the narrow and in the broad sense.

(3) In the broad sense it can be said that Eurasianism is close to *Tengrism*, another post-Soviet branch of traditionalism. Tengrism claims that the proto-tradition is the cult of the god of heaven Tengri, and this cult is the most ancient monotheistic proto-religion, which is supposed to have been practiced by all the peoples of Central Asia long before Buddhism and Islam. According to the radical version of Murad Adzhayev (Murad Adzhi), Tengrism, which sprang up among the Turkic peoples in Altai, was the source of all the cultures and religions of India, the Middle and Near East, North Africa, and Europe, where it turned into Christianity. In the Asian regions of Russia and the former Soviet republics Tengrism

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6 A.S. Panarin, *Rossiiia v sotsiokul'turnom prostranstve Evrazii* (Moscow: Parad, 2014), 463.

7 E.L. Shiffers, *Religiozno-filosofskie proizvedeniia* (Moscow: Russkii Institut, 2005).

is widely recognized and is included in textbooks in some places; there are many organized groups of its followers.

(4) A Russian analog of Tengrism, albeit on a smaller scale, attempts to present the paganism of the ancient Slavs as a proto-tradition often covered by the blanket term *Rodnoverie* (Slavic native faith). Similar attempts are made by a number of small neo-Pagan movements such as *Velesov krug* (The circle of Veles), *Bayanova tropa* (The path of Bayan), and others, which preach the revival of the pantheon, myths, rituals, and customs of Pagan Slavs. They have no unity or any coherent construct of a proto-tradition. However, they often have a political orientation, which usually gravitates toward Russian nationalism.

(5) Traditionalism in the narrow sense should also include the well-known *Salafiyah* trend in modern radical Islam (*salaf* means “forefathers” in Arabic), which advocates a return to the original Islam of the time of Mohammed. Salafi trends and groups are active today all over the Islamic world, including Islamic regions in Russia. The proto-tradition here is the Islam of the early Muslim preachers, about which infinitesimally little is known, so that, like in other traditionalist trends, it is not so much about reconstruction as about arbitrary construction of the basic tradition. While it is common practice to include Salafis in traditionalism in the broad sense it has also been noted that by its nature the movement meets the definition of traditionalism in the narrow sense. The typological kinship of the Salafi ideology with the doctrine of the Aryan Nordic proto-tradition in German Nazism has been noted.

What exactly was it like – the world of nascent initial Islam? [...] Various attempts have been made to reconstruct it [...] The end product turned out to be a utopia that had never existed in reality. An extreme manifestation of Muslim reaction is today represented by people like Osama bin Laden. [...] These groups are sometimes called Salafite movements. [...] They create an imaginary world [...] and we discover a striking similarity between the imaginary world of ultra-reactionary Muslim movements and the reconstruction of imaginary German Aryanism [...] German Aryanism was an ultra-reactionary reconstruction of the past that never was. [...] It was argued that if the Germans had acted

like their Teutonic ancestors they would again control Europe. Here we discover an analogy with the ultra-reactionary Muslims who claim that if the Muslims of the world had acted like their righteous and devout ancestors they would again be in control of the Middle East.”<sup>8</sup>

Here we see yet another important feature of proto-tradition projects: the ultimate driving motives of these projects are usually political, geopolitical, and ideological goals and plans. From the outset, they separate these projects from the task of impartial research, of establishing the true historical and spiritual reality. As we shall see below, a natural correlation arises: the more radical and extremist the external motivations, the more blatantly unscientific and remote from the truth and reality the imagined “traditions” tend to become.

(6) The resemblance of Islamic and Aryan-Nordic traditionalist projects may appear to be formal and artificial. But this is not so. Russia today has at least one more example of such a resemblance. It is the traditionalism of Geydar Dzhemal. Dzhemal, a Shiite Islamist also known as “the metaphysician of Tradition,” in his treatise *Orientation-North* (1997) presents a philosophical transcription or parallel of the Nazi theosophy of Herman Wirth (1885–1981) with its theory of the northern land, Arctogeia, a land of superhumans called Hyperboreans. According to Dzhemal, the north is “the point where Cosmos ends,” “the last frontier of reality,” “the pole of the impossible,” and the orientation toward the north means the orientation toward getting rid of the “plague of being,” the cult of death, apocalypse and chaos. The universe is cyclic, ruled by the principle of “cosmic fire,” “titanic will” – this is the set of motives that resonate with the Teutonic mythology in the Nazi edition. An important feature of Dzhemal’s traditionalism is political activism of a markedly extremist kind; he was a government member of one of the warring Islamic groups in Tajikistan. The basic premises of Shia extremism have much in common with Salafism; thus, in an interview he proclaims the aim of Islamic

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8 Z. Kogan, “Dialog avraamicheskikh religii,” *Mirovoi Obshchestvennyi Forum “Dialog Tsivilizatsii” Vestnik 1* (2006): 195–96.

policy to be “people’s self-government corresponding to the democratic spirit of the original Islam.”<sup>9</sup>

(7) Extreme features of radial traditionalism are highlighted by the multifarious activities of Alexander Dugin, a noted political figure, journalist, and author of numerous books. Characteristically, he refers to his version of traditionalism as “total traditionalism.” It is a compilation, a hodgepodge of elements of many traditions and teachings obviously prompted by the exigencies of Russian politics. Let us look at its main components. The main content of “total traditionalism” is the Nazi Hyperborean geosophy of Wirth (Dugin and Dzhemal come from the same Moscow intellectual or occult underground circle), which is now presented in an upfront and detailed way; most of Dugin’s books were published by Arktogetia, a publishing house he founded. Dugin mostly presents his theories on the conceptual and methodological platform of René Guénon (1886–1951), who introduced substantial changes in the traditionalist discourse, generalizing it and shaping it into a coherent system. Added to this basis are new elements that adapt it to the modern Russian context. Chief of them are Turanism,<sup>10</sup> due to which “total traditionalism” includes Eurasianism in its orbit (Dugin’s position is often described as neo-Eurasian) and Russian Orthodoxy.

The author chose to give prominence to the last element exactly at the time when he emerged on the Russian political scene: he had concluded that “Trinitary Orthodox metaphysics,” “which provides a full and perfect expression of all the most valuable revelatory vectors,” is the highest point of the development of tradition.<sup>11</sup> But his concept of Orthodoxy is somewhat peculiar: Dugin reveals a “strikingly literal, even totally structural [...] coincidence between the Christian tradition [...] and the paradigms of Hyperborean sacrality so brilliantly unpicked and restored by

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9 See G. Dzhemal, *Osvobozhdenie Islama* (Moscow: Ummah, 2004).

10 Turanism is “a late 19th- and early 20th-century movement to unite politically and culturally all the Turkic, Tatar, and Uralic peoples living in Turkey and across Eurasia from Hungary to the Pacific. Its name is derived from *Tūrān*, the Persian word for Turkistan (i.e., the land to the north of Iran).” Encyclopedia Britannica, accessed 11 December 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Pan-Turanianism>.

11 A. G. Dugin, *Absoliutnaia rodina* (Moscow: Arktogetia, 1999), 153.

Wirth.”<sup>12</sup> Dugin has not contributed anything new to the body of fundamental ideas of traditionalism, nor has he discovered any new proto-tradition. However, his derivative and eclectic constructs are skillfully presented and appeal to the masses, attracting a following. They bolster his political activities, which peaked during the war in Donbass. Today Dugin is undoubtedly the most influential figure in Russian traditionalism, both in the narrow and broad senses.

## Anatomy

The above impressive list of traditionalist concepts and movements clearly shows that traditionalism in Russia today is a significant element of the ideological and political situation. In starting to analyze and assess it, it has to be acknowledged that for all its heterogeneity and diversity, it has an important common feature: all these elements treat tradition as an instrument, a tool and means of achieving political and ideological goals that are extraneous to tradition. Traditionalism as such cannot set as its goal the simple and unbiased scientific study of tradition. Likewise, it does not seek to simply take part in tradition and become immersed in its living experience. Traditionalism is by no means the same as life within a tradition and faithfulness to tradition, and those who live in tradition are anything but traditionalists. Traditionalism either produces a certain construct that it bills as proto-tradition (traditionalism in the narrow sense) or manipulates some real tradition to fit some political, ideological, or religious project (traditionalism in the broad sense). For traditionalism is always a certain project, and tradition has to provide its foundation, and to this end it is fitted into a corresponding Procrustean bed inevitably distorting and twisting and subjecting it to vivisection. Or it is simply invented on somebody's commission.

Hence any traditionalism fulfils an assignment involving methodological or epistemological arbitrariness or plain subterfuge by passing off

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12 Ibid., 745.

a fresh-baked construct as an ancient tradition or interpreting some real tradition, taken off the shelf for some extraneous reason, in an arbitrary way. And of course it seeks to present its concepts not as a loose hypothesis or a literary composition, but as a scientific truth. Thus, fulfilling an assignment presents a problem that different traditionalist trends tackle in their own way. However, it is easy to see some common principles and methods behind these solutions. By revealing them we may gain an insight into the way traditionalism works and peer into its secret laboratory.

One approach to solving the problem readily suggests itself: the required concepts, theories, and views should be presented in a way that is impeccable from the scientific point of view. To this end they should be given a science-like form, which is not a major challenge; but in addition, and most importantly, the substance of these concepts should be unassailable. On that key point intuition again comes to the rescue: the concepts should be taken from outside of the domain of standard scientific discourse with its norms and rules and the requirement of being in accord with the existing foundation of scientific principles and data, of being provable and verifiable, etc. In other words, one should find some *vacant space*, some discursive *Lebensraum* or Wild West, a space that is out of reach of existing science and in which anything can be declared to be a science. There are actually ample opportunities for finding such space. I will now name the two main strategies used by traditionalism before taking a closer look at how they are implemented.

The simplest and most obvious way is manipulating the chronotope. Academic science has yet to provide a detailed and authentic study of all the remote epochs while the body of sources and testimony in written and material culture shrinks dramatically as we go further back in time. Beyond a certain point in historical time lie areas of the global chronotope about which infinitesimally little is known – the space of the “pre-historic” or “proto-historical” existence of man; so, given the will, it is quite possible to colonize these spaces, filling them with the kind of content that is required for a traditionalist project, populating it with ethnic groups and races, and ascribing to them a suitable culture and most importantly, “a tradition.”

It will readily be seen that the majority of the abovementioned trends in modern Russian traditionalism – projects meeting the definition of

“traditionalism in the narrow sense” – follow the simple model of finding “vacant space” that can be filled arbitrarily. They differ only in the choice of the “vacant space” and the thoroughness in elaborating their teachings. As regards the choice of space, the body of trends mentioned here offers the following options:

- Proto-North (Hyperborea, Arktogeia) + proto-Russia (Dugin);
- Proto-North + proto-Islam (Dzhemal);
- Proto-Islam (Salafites);
- Proto-Slavdom (Slavic native faith, or *Rodnoverie*);
- Proto-religion of Central Asia (Tengrism).

The claim to belonging to such special (fictional!) space is usually established by the prefixes “proto-” and “paleo-.” Attaching these symbolic prefixes to categories of standard historical, ethnological, cultural-civilizational discourse has been a standard method of traditionalism since the times of Guénon, and one of the main methods of colonizing “vacant space.” This is how a traditionalist teaching is created: “proto-civilization,” “proto-language,” “paleo-continent,” etc., may be introduced in the vacant space and with a certain amount of effort a coherent alternative world history can be fabricated. To build such theories their authors even introduce traditionalist imitations of the main human sciences, which are called “sacral” or “symbolic” disciplines: thus sacral history, sacral geography, linguistics, and ethnology appear, corresponding to the proto-tradition and its space. However, only some projects attain such a global scale: among the Russian teachings it is the Dugin project and outside Russia the classic traditionalist projects of Guénon, Evola, and Wirth.

Another widespread strategy of gaining “vacant space” does not claim to present a newly discovered “ancient tradition” and is in that sense less radical. The main tool of this strategy is not the chronotope, but discourse, its key method being a mixing of totally different types of discourse. If discourses with diametrically opposite rules are mixed together, the result will be a free-for-all kind of discourse without any rules of rigor or correctness, so that any arbitrary propositions can claim to be true. This is the kind of strategy cultivated by traditionalism in the broad sense, which in

Russia is above all represented by Byzantinism. We have already pointed out its two varieties: the moderate one, leaning toward politics, and the radical one with a mystical-eschatological thrust. I will now proceed to explain their methodological and epistemological principles, which are, for our purpose, pretty much the same, only modern Byzantinism uses them with caution whereas radical Byzantinism goes to extremes.

As pointed out above, any traditionalism seeks to implement a certain project. The nucleus of the Byzantinist project is a blend of Orthodox and monarchic or imperial principles. Such a blend should be presented in a form that the broad popular consciousness, especially political circles and the educated part of society, find convincing. This calls for a scientific discourse; but, as I have stressed, no traditionalist project can be justified from the scientific standpoint, which makes it imperative to go beyond scientific discourse.

The concepts of Byzantinism are linked with Orthodoxy and draw mainly on the discourses of Holy Scripture and holy history and less frequently on the discourses of dogmatics, hagiography, etc. These are specialized discourses belonging to the sacral sphere in Christianity, and by borrowing elements thereof and drawing on their data Byzantinism is included in the category of *confessional discourses* (unlike traditionalism in the narrow sense, which presents its proto-tradition discourse as a discourse of scientific truth unconnected with confessional limitations). Such discourses combine sacred and secular elements. Because they follow different rules, how they are combined is crucial. Correct confessional discourses take into account the fact that sacral discourses call for special hermeneutics and special methodologies of reading, and use rules that are rooted in the foundations of the corresponding religion. Because of this the assertions and conclusions of sacral discourses have a different sphere of validity than secular discourses, and this difference is scrupulously taken into account in correct confessional discourses, as exemplified by Christian theology. Considering the nature of the discourses is particularly and vitally important in the case of mystical-eschatological discourses. This is a special kind of sacral discourse whose subject is real or supposed events of the direct encounter of man with sacral reality, such as visions, revelations, and transformations of systems of percep-

tion. Their organization, logic, and epistemology are far removed from and diametrically opposed to the characteristics of scientific discourse and require a special kind of treatment.

However, there are a host of incorrect confessional discourses in which secular and sacred discourses are mixed and blended indiscriminately. In such cases discourses of the sacred are exploited without taking into account their special nature on a par with secular and scientific discourses, which leads to various errors and false assertions. Going back to Byzantinism, I maintain that it has to be categorized as incorrect discourse. Indeed, the most actively used discourse here is apocalyptic, one of the most radical and offbeat mystical-eschatological discourses, in which incorrectness is taken to an extreme. By combining incompatibles, blending together opposite discourses into something that looks like science, Byzantinism ends up with a discourse that is “vacant space” or, to use an earlier expression, free-for-all discourse that follows no rules, is open to arbitrary statements, and makes it possible to “prove” anything. We can readily see it by taking a closer look at the notion of *katechon*, which forms the ideological nucleus of modern Russian Byzantinism.

The term “katechon” (Greek τὸ κατέχον “that which withholds” or ὁ κατέχων “the one who withholds”) goes back to the New Testament (2 Thessalonians 2:2–3,6-7:

“the day [of Christ] shall not come, except there come a falling away first, and that man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition. [...] And now ye know what withholdeth that he might be revealed in his time. For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth [ὁ κατέχων] will let, until he be taken out of the way.”<sup>13</sup>

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13 Quoted from the New King James Version, <https://azbyka.ru/bibliia/?2Thes.2&acgr>. Compare a different translation from the New International Version: “the day of the Lord [...] will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction[...]. And now you know what is holding him back, so that he may be revealed at the proper time. For the secret power of lawlessness is already at work; but the one who now holds it back will continue to do so till he is taken out of the way.”

This is one of the principal texts of an apocalyptic and prophetic character that says that the coming of the Antichrist (“the son of perdition,” “the mystery of iniquity”) and his freedom of action are restrained by “ὁ κατέχων.” Since ancient times interpretations of the text have sought above all to guess what exactly St. Paul meant by the cryptonym “that which withholds,” or “katechon.” Various versions were put forward, with the main and long-established version of St. John Chrysostom identifying katechon with the Roman state. His argument goes as follows:

“When the Roman Empire is taken out of the way, then he [the Antichrist] shall come. And naturally. For as long as the fear of this empire lasts, no one willingly submits himself to the Antichrist.”<sup>14</sup>

The identification of katechon with the power of Rome, and the claim that Rome prevented the coming of the Antichrist, contributed to the positive (re)assessment of the Roman Empire in Orthodox thought (and indeed in general Christian thought because this identification was characteristic of the Western Church Fathers as well – Irenaeus of Lyon, Tertullian, Augustine). Along with other factors the idea of empire as katechon also contributed to the emerging Byzantine ideology of the sacralization of power.

Later the so-called *Apocalypse* of Pseudo-Methodius of Patara (7th–8th centuries) linked “the one that withholds” in 2 Thessalonians 2:6–7 not with the Roman Empire, but with Byzantium (the Greek kingdom). This early Byzantine prophetic text exerted a considerable impact on historical thought in Muscovite Rus. For example, Philotheus of Pskov transfers some of the theses of Pseudo-Methodius concerning the Greek kingdom to the Moscow tsardom in his writings elaborating the idea of the Third Rome.<sup>15</sup> However, neither Philotheus nor other authors treat

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14 St. John Chrysostom, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v 12 tt.*, vol. 11, book 2 (Moscow: Respublika, 2003), quoted from “Early Church Fathers on the Timing of the Rise of Antichrist,” Biblelight.net, <http://biblelight.net/fathers-on-antichrist.htm> <http://newadvent.org/fathers/23054.htm>.

15 For text and translation of the *Apocalypse*, see V.M. Istrin, *Otkrovenie Mefodiia Patarskogo i apokrificheskie videniia Daniila v vizantiiskoi i slavianorusskoi literaturakh: Issledovanie i teksty* (Moscow, 1897). For an interpretation of “one who withholds” by Pseudo-Methodius, see Sinitsyna, *Tretii Rim*, 265–66.

the katechon as implying such a transition to Rus. Nowhere – neither in Russia, nor in Byzantium, nor in the West – is the text of 2 Thessalonians 2:3, 6–7 and its concept of “the one who withholds” used as the basis for any historiosophic or political-state concepts. They are confined entirely to eschatology, remaining within the special genre of apocalyptic prophecies and its main theme, i. e., the Antichrist. This genre is typically highly marginal, its authors are isolated figures and its audience is formed by ill-educated circles who tend to trust fantasies and easily fall prey to the spirit of alarmism and fanaticism. Its content can be described as “concrete eschatologism” and an authoritative Orthodox historian claiming to be “an apologist for Byzantinism” cannot help issuing this warning: “Concrete eschatologism has always easily degenerated into superstition.”<sup>16</sup>

In calm epochs the audience for this genre is small. But there are periods when apocalyptic discourse, talk about the Antichrist, “the last times,” and “the last kingdom” gain greater prominence, moving from the periphery closer to the center of public attention. The cataclysms of Russian history in the 20th century inevitably served as a catalyst for the interest in apocalyptic discourse. Present-day Russian Byzantinism is one of its manifestations and the form it has assumed is centered on the idea of the katechon. The idea is elaborated further to link it directly to Russia. This “Russian edition” is attributed to Sergey Nilus: part 3 of his well-known book *The Great in the Small* (1905/1911) presents, next to the notorious *Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, a modernized scheme or matrix of apocalyptic discourse totally oriented toward Russia as the key actor in the final act of world history that is already upon us.

The pattern is canonical: immediately before the end of world history the Christian Scriptures predict the coming of the Antichrist, “the son of perdition,” and his enthronement; the coming is already approaching (“the mystery of iniquity doth already work”), but it cannot occur as long as there is a katechon in the world. The new element is that this katechon can only be provided by Russia. “Russia is the last bulwark.[...] If Russia [...] becomes remiss in piety then what is predicted in the Apocalypse is sure to happen.” Apocalypticism is concrete and, according to

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16 A. V. Kartashev, *Vossozhdanie Sviatoi Rusi* (Moscow: Stolitsa, 1991).

Nilus, the katechon is embodied in the leaders of Russian autocracy and Orthodoxy. Thus the Antichrist failed to triumph during the European troubles in 1848 because

“autocracy was in the strong hands of Emperor Nicholas I; Orthodoxy was safeguarded by the two Filarets, ‘the holy and the wise,’ and a cloud of hierarchs like stars in the firmament. St. Paul’s ‘the one who withholds’, ὁ κατέχων (2 Thessalonians 2:7), had not yet been taken out of the way.”

Emperor Alexander III was an equally strong katechon: “Russia and its peacemaker tsar were for the whole world what St. Paul designated by the word ὁ κατέχων (“the one who withholds”). [...] Such is the world significance of the reign of Alexander III.” Thereafter the need for the Russian katechon and its world importance continued to grow because “all the efforts of covert and overt, conscious and unconscious servants and workers of the Antichrist [...] are now directed toward Russia.” In the political and state sphere the Antichrist’s servants “strenuously propagate liberalism”: according to the *Protocols*, the Zion Elders state that “we have infected state bodies with liberalism, a lethal poison.”<sup>17</sup>

It is worth noting that although Nilus is extremely focused on Russia, his matrix records universal features of a certain type of consciousness: fanatical extremism fueled by an eschatological itch and building schemes of the end of the world. This type has since been very much in evidence. The anti-Semitic part of Nilus’s scheme was taken on board by Nazi doctrine and was actively used by Nazi propaganda. Today Nilus’s matrix is given a new lease on life by Islamic extremism, based entirely on the Muslim substratum in the framework of the latest traditionalist ideology of the Islamic State (IS). The gist of this ideology was thus summed up by an IS militant: “This revolution is [...] the end of the world preceded, according to Hadiths,<sup>18</sup> by the victory over the West in Syria, the revival of the

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17 S.A. Nilus, *Velikoe v malom* (Novosibirsk: Blagovest, 1994), 373, 365, 386–87, 396, 487.

18 The Hadiths are the collected sayings and deeds of the Prophet Muhammad.

Caliphate and the advent of the Prophet Isa [Jesus].”<sup>19</sup> This is an excellent example of the translation of ideological matrices across epochs and cultures: the Nilus matrix has traveled from the Christian to the Islamic context, from the conservative to the revolutionary discourse, while preserving intact its readily recognizable apocalyptic nucleus.

Today’s Russian Byzantinism faithfully follows the Nilus matrix in reviving the idea of an Orthodox empire. Only two or three undesirable details have been dropped such as overt anti-Semitism and lurid pictures of the Serpent creeping over the map of Europe and “eating away and devouring all non-Jewish forces.” On the whole, “the idea of the gracious katechon became a commonplace in the milieu of Russian monarchists in the 20th century.”<sup>20</sup> A century after the publication of Nilus’s book new links have been added to the chain of Russian katechons and – take note – this includes even the theomachist Bolshevik regime. V. I. Karpets notes that

“the Soviet Union was heir to the Russian Empire, the Russian Empire was heir to the Kingdom of Muscovy and the Kingdom of Muscovy to three political-historical entities – the Kievan-Novgorodian Rus of the Ryurikovichi, the Byzantine Orthodox Empire and the Eurasian Golden Horde”;<sup>21</sup>

the author stresses that inheritance of the katechonic mission “came with the territory.” Some Byzantinist texts openly claim that Stalin was also a katechon. Stalin’s empire turns out to be even closer to Byzantium than the Petersburg one because the Bolshevik “social experiment brought into politics and public life” masses of new people who “carried a powerful charge of traditional Moscow Byzantinism.”<sup>22</sup> There the idea of katechon merges with the current strong nationalistic apologia of Stalinism

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19 M. Efimova, “Konturnaia karta,” *Kommersant Vlast*, 29 June 2015, no. 25, p. 9, available at: <https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/2753304>.

20 V. Tsimbursky, “Apokalipsis na segodnia,” in *Eskhatologicheskii sbornik* (St. Petersburg: Aleteia, 2006), 515.

21 V. I. Karpets, “Imperiia neizbezhna,” in *Eskhatologicheskii sbornik* (St. Petersburg: Aleteia, 2006), 491.

22 A. V. Efremov, “Dukh surovyy vizantiistva,” *Razvitie i ekonomika* 4 (2012): 50.

and the “Red Orthodox project,” which, among other things, is part of the motley ideological baggage of today’s Donbass separatists.

The geopolitical configuration is also changing. Needless to say, the servants and workers of the Antichrist still come from the West, but while for Nilus their center was “France, the Jewish-dominated nest of the Freemason Conspiracy,” today the main spawning ground is America. It has already occupied Russia:

“Russia is directly ruled from America. [...] We are an occupied territory. [...] The system of occupation includes the government directed from outside, the agents of influence, grant recipients, traitors on various levels and the propaganda machine.”<sup>23</sup>

Its link with the “son of perdition” is obvious:

“The sinister country on the other side of the ocean [...] is asserting its planetary dominance [...] over all the Earth’s peoples. Over us. [...] This is strikingly reminiscent of the prophecies of the advent of the Antichrist.”<sup>24</sup>

Furthermore, today’s version of the Nilus matrix aspires to a much higher theoretical level. While Nilus wrote religious essays for the public, the authors of modern Byzantinism for the most part belong to the scientific community and their articles (monographs are few and far between) often promote far-reaching conceptual constructions in history, the philosophy of history, and political philosophy. The main subjects are Russian and Byzantine history; the link between Byzantium and Russia; modern geopolitics; apologia of imperial principles, monarchy, and autocracy; and criticism of Western liberalism. In particular, the case for autocracy is made by positing a link between the tsar-autocrat and the katechon, “the one who withholds.”

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23 E.A. Fedorov “Esli Rossiia osvoboditsia ot vneshnego upravleniia, to ona avtomaticheskii stanet derzhavoi nomer odin,” *Razvitie i ekonomika* 9 (2014): 94, 93, 91.

24 A.G. Dugin, *Absoliutnaia rodina* (Moscow: Arktogetia, 1999), 657–58.

As for the theme of empire, its treatment is usually based on a leit-motif that is often expressed in Tyutchev's words: "Empires do not die." This is the underlying intuition of Byzantinist imperial thinking that is best expressed and justified exactly through the idea of the katechon, and today, of the Russian katechon. This line of thinking represents a continuous logical chain: the world is threatened by the Antichrist who is already at work, ergo to preserve the world and the course of history "that which withholds" is needed, the one who withholds can be only an empire that is supported by faith in Christ (and also the Roman Empire because, according to Luke 2:1–3, it included Christ in its population census. "Our Lord was written into Roman power" is the argument of Kosma Indikoplov (6th century), which was taken up by Philotheus), therefore, the existence of the Russian Orthodox Empire in our day guarantees the existence of the world and history. If history is to continue this empire has to be. This is the innermost nerve of Russian Byzantinism.

Alas, this does not rule out the fact that the nerve is but a phantom or sick nerve, a disease of social consciousness. Quite obviously, the above logical chain consists of patently unprovable propositions in all its links and all its implications. The majority of them hark back to long-familiar stereotypes that form part of the peculiar discourse of end-of-the-world prophecies, a prophetic and eschatological discourse of an utterly cryptic, illogical, and obscure nature. This discourse stands apart even in the circle of sacral discourses as a direct opposite not only of scientific discourse, but of any discourse that is epistemologically clear and transparent. Meanwhile traditionalists try to make it the basis of their concepts of the philosophy of history and political philosophy and develop an ambitious project to determine Russia's geopolitical strategies. In the process, of course, they mix together absolutely incompatible discourses and end up with a no-holds-barred free-for-all discourse that provides them with the coveted "vacant space."

The Antichrist takes on a new role, that of a broad discursive opportunity. What embodies his threat, from where it may strike, who and what contribute to it – all this is totally unknown and unknowable, but traditionalists discuss it all in a scientific guise and in great detail. In determining the salutary katechon and pointing a finger at the servants of the Antichrist, in executing and pardoning, they comfortably deploy under

the screen of Orthodox eschatology their own likes and dislikes, complexes and idiosyncrasies. It is hard to disagree with a critic's judgment: "Modern Byzantine fantasies [...] are the narrative of a medical case."<sup>25</sup>

Just one more thing can be added. Without any eschatology, which should not be mentioned needlessly, the Antichrist is a fixture of modern Russian discourse. Traditionalists trumpet his successes, ascribing to him a great role and power in the modern world. In this way they undoubtedly inflate his significance and advertise him. But does it not mean that they are the servants of the Antichrist in the sphere of public relations?

## Conclusions

As we have seen, anatomizing traditionalism supports our preliminary assessments. No version of today's Russian traditionalism and Byzantinism is conducive to genuine insight into tradition and immersion in its living experience. They all speculate on tradition in various ways, mainly in the field of history and politics, with history leaning toward historiography and politics leaning toward geopolitics, i. e., areas long favored by the authors of way-out para-scientific theories. These speculations have certain basic elements. The main method of traditionalism is creating a "vacant space" in which it is free to develop its unprovable theories. As a rule, the "vacant space" is created by clearing up chunks of historical time, past and/or future. A model example is the concept of "primordial tradition" that underpins all of "traditionalism in the narrow sense." It adds to the real historical past an imaginary prehistoric stretch its authors fill *ad libitum*, however they like, and using this filling, in light of their imagined tradition, the whole picture of the real past is cardinally changed and reformatted. In other words, proto-tradition is used to supplant or even to *steal the past*. Thus, in traditionalism-Byzantinism apocalyptic and eschatological schemes create a "vacant space" that defies critical reason, while interpretations of the Apocalypse are a special genre in

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25 A. Lyusyi, "Vizantiiskii narrative," *Razvitie i ekonomika* 4 (2012): 235.

which fantasies and speculations have always thrived. Modern Byzantinism translates these speculations into a quasi-scientific discourse spawning futurological concepts and strategies and creating an image or model of the future in accordance with a certain apocalyptic scheme. In other words, apocalyptic schemes are used to *hijack the future*. One can argue that *stealing the past and hijacking the future are the two main operational techniques of traditionalism*.

Bearing in mind the assessments given above we can conclude that modern traditionalism is a profoundly false form of ideological life. It is similar to faking antiquities – faking paintings by old masters, and pieces of furniture and artifacts of ancient cultures has long been practiced in the world of art and antiquities. One cannot but see that consciousness engaged in faking tradition or stylizing as tradition is diametrically opposite to consciousness that has a tradition and is based on tradition. Therefore traditionalism poses a threat to tradition and tradition needs to be protected against traditionalists.

Lack of intellectual scruple, faking, stylization, mystification, and often obscure roots and total fantasy – all this likens traditionalism typologically and epistemologically to such phenomena as occultism, theosophy, anthroposophy, and the New Age subculture. They all share a common quality – lack of disciplined thought and cognition, lack of elementary methodological culture and, as a consequence, intellectual second-ratism. Mikhail Bakhtin in his time noted that such phenomena cannot be first-rate in principle. One might have thought that one variation of traditionalism stands apart from all others and has nothing to do with the criticized features. Moderate Byzantinism focused on political-state aspects shies away from fantastic theories, be it proto-tradition or the symbolic Serpent with its heads devouring Russia. But on closer inspection that version is not much different from the others. As has been said, it is best represented by the film *The Lesson of Byzantium*. This is the comment it has drawn from Viktor Zhivov, a world authority on links between Russia and Byzantium:

“People who are ignorant of history should refrain from making comments on it [history – *S.H.*] being aware of their igno-

rance. These words fully apply to [...] the film about Byzantium. The paradigm its authors construct does not exist in reality.”<sup>26</sup>

So, that too is a fake, the only difference being that this time around it is a politically commissioned piece of work without a shadow of mystique. The effect is the same: traditionalism invariably brings ignorance and inferiority to Russian culture.

Yet, in spite of all this, traditionalism, and especially Byzantinism, is growing stronger and stronger. Its champions are full of confidence: “The ideological and socio-political practices of today’s Russia [...] will forever fall back on Great Russian Byzantinism.”<sup>27</sup> “Byzantinism is emerging as a kind of unofficial ideology, an inner metaphysical dimension of the church and state life of Russia.”<sup>28</sup> Current Russian reality provides ample grounds for such confidence. Pompous celebrations have just been held of the millennium of the Russian monastic presence on Mount Athos, and this event sent a wave of enthusiastic wishes of “*Many Years to Basileos Vladimir!*”<sup>29</sup> over the Internet. This gives cause for concern. Marginal shoddy thinking that spawns pseudo-scientific and pseudo-mystical theories and sees enemies everywhere is coming to the surface and claims to occupy the high ground in the country’s ideological life. This is certainly a symptom of an unhealthy atmosphere and unhealthy processes in society, a sign of a dangerous downgrading of intellectual culture.

The issue of how to counter this trend is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it has to be stressed that modern Orthodox thought is fully equipped to answer the challenge of traditionalism. A correct understanding of tradition and the art of living inside tradition has been handed down from century to century. Today it can be found in the theology of culture of Father Georgy Florovsky and in the synergic anthropology that develops it today. It consolidates again the old Orthodox paradigm of the

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26 V. M. Zhivov, “Issledovanie togo, kak Rossiia svyazana s Vizantie, dolzhno byt’ tonkim i niuansirovannym”: Interv’iu V. M. Zhivova,” *Razvitie i ekonomika* 4 (2012): 170.

27 A. V. Efremov, “Dukh surovyyi vizantiistva,” *Razvitie i ekonomika* 4 (2012): 51.

28 I. L. Brazhnikov, “Vizantizm: stilizatsiia ili faktor identichnosti?” *Razvitie i ekonomika* 4 (2012): 85.

29 This is a clear reference to Vladimir Putin’s rule.

Living Tradition: the spiritual tradition is the preservation and passing on of the living experience of the Christian's communion with Christ. It is a school of personal spiritual experience, and not an ideology, be it imperial, apocalyptic, or any other. It draws on the spiritual practice of Orthodox hesychasm, and preserving this invigorating and directing link is a reliable counterweight to all the manipulations and speculations about tradition, all attempts to create ideological fakes, of which modern traditionalism is one example. Adequate treatment of tradition contrasts with traditionalism on yet another important point. Traditionalism is fully in the framework of the old philosophical and political thinking based on binary oppositions, above all the opposition of tradition and modernity. But seeing tradition as a school of living experience that does not make an absolute of any entities and institutions prompts an interpretation of tradition as creativity, thus paving the way to resolving these oppositions. As leading authorities on philosophy and sociology admit, resolving the tradition-modernity opposition is a prerequisite for the development of society today. Alain Badiou writes: "A situation has to be created that escapes this alternative... [the tradition-modernity alternative. – *S.H.*] you must not let yourself be structured by this opposition."<sup>30</sup> This means that unlike the strategies of traditionalism, strategies based on true loyalty to the spiritual tradition do not structure new situations of conflict and do not increase global threats and risks.

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