

Sergei Shtyrkov
European University at St Petersburg
6/1A Gagarinskaya Str., St Petersburg, Russia

Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera), Russian Academy of Sciences
3 Universitetskaya Emb., St Petersburg, Russia

Institute of Russian Literature (The Pushkin House), Russian Academy of Sciences
4 Makarova Emb., St Petersburg, Russia

shtyr@eu.spb.ru

Abstract: The new book by Victor Shnirelman is a very important contribution to the studies of current Russian political eschatology. The author proposes to discuss several very troublesome issues of the theory and methodology of researching discursive practices of Orthodox political radicals. The book should be regarded as an invitation to further analysis of this social field using new methods and new sources.

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The new book by Victor Shnirelman is a very important contribution to the studies of current Russian political eschatology. The author proposes to discuss several very troublesome issues of the theory and methodology of researching discursive practices of Orthodox political radicals. The book should be regarded as an invitation to further analysis of this social field using new methods and new sources.

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The Catechon as a Category of Orthodox Consciousness: Outlines of Russian Political Eschatology

Last year yet another magnum opus by Victor Shnirelman, the well-known Russian student of xenophobia and anti-Semitism, was published. This book, though not as voluminous as the previous one, still gives the impression of a substantial work, not only because of the number of pages, but also because of the range of questions considered. Indeed, the author constructs his exposition in such a way that there is room in it for a very wide range of people’s views on the nature of the Antichrist, from the early Christian theologian Irenaeus of Lyons to our contemporary Ioann Bereslavskiy, the ardent visionary and founder of one of the new religious movements. However, both the early centuries of Christianity and contemporary religious initiatives in the form of charismatic Orthodoxy are more of a background for the author’s fundamental research field. In this work he has decided to understand how anti-Semitism (and more rarely philo-Semitism) and eschatology are correlated in the Russian Orthodox tradition. The research is focused, moreover, on Orthodox life in post-Soviet Russia. To put it as simply as possible, it is a question of who, among the people who call themselves Orthodox, does not like Jews and Judaism, how and why.

Sergei Shtyrkov
European University at St Petersburg
6/1A Gagarinskaya Str.,
St Petersburg, Russia /
Peter the Great Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera),
Russian Academy of Sciences
3 Universitetskaya Emb.,
St Petersburg, Russia /
Institute of Russian Literature (The Pushkin House),
Russian Academy of Sciences
4 Makarova Emb.,
St Petersburg, Russia
shtyr@eu.spb.ru
Shnirelman suggests that this work should be seen as the third and final part of his trilogy about modern intellectual anti-Semitism, which also contains his books about two ‘myths’ — the Khazar myth [Shnirelman 2012] and the Aryan myth [Shnirelman 2015]. I must stress that this trilogy is about intellectuals (the less polite among us might call some of them lumpen-intellectuals) and the texts that they create for the public space. In *The Tribe of Dan*, obviously, we shall not learn about all Orthodox people nor about all their political eschatology, but about an important component of it. The ‘silent majority’ (which is not all that silent nowadays, thanks to social networks) remains out of play. This may be because of an equally tacit assumption that in its everyday discourse this majority reproduces simplified versions of the intellectuals’ opinions. We may doubt whether this is really the case, but one way or another Victor Shnirelman prefers to work with open written sources.

In other words, what is represented on the pages of this book is the discursive activity of the Orthodox elite and, to an even greater extent, counter-elite. That is, it is mostly about the leaders of the Russian Orthodox Church or the Orthodox historians, jurists, writers, publicists and political analysts who are actively writing in various publications and meeting at numerous conferences. Even in chapter 8, ‘The “Last Times” and the Mobilisation of the Masses’, in which we are promised an examination of ‘the mood and protest activity of “church folk” and the wider masses of believers as studied by specialists and journalists in the course of their personal observations, and also via sociological surveys’ (p. 488), we do not find all that much material about this topic. I understand that all research has its methodological limits and that the author’s basic method is to work with open sources: he has attained a well-deserved scholarly reputation on this basis. But, overall, Internet sources — social networks, and the numerous video recordings that are openly available — could have extended the source base for this part of his analysis. But let us leave that sort of research to others, and turn our attention to the results of this particular case.

The subject of Shnirelman’s discussion is extremely politically salient, even what one might call a plum topic in modern Russian politics. The main players in this field — I mean not the researchers, but the people who produce the texts that the author studies — have established themselves as steadfast warriors against the wiles of the Antichrist (steadfast in the sense that they are tireless in their search for new arguments to confirm their opinions). Therefore the reader who opens this book has a right to expect some entertaining reading. But this calculation will only be partly justified. It turns out that reading *The Tribe of Dan* demands serious intellectual effort, which will not necessarily be fully rewarded. I shall indicate
the four basic problems — which might at the same time be advantages — that characterise the author’s argumentation and rhetorical strategy.

Firstly, in his preface and introduction Shnirelman presents his research questions to us several times, approaching the problem from different angles. This gives volume to the problem posed, but disorients the reader somewhat, since (s)he gets lost in trying to work out what the book will be about and how the author understands his subject. I shall try to explain my objection a little further on. The book’s second great intellectual challenge is that its basic material (chapters 3–8) is set out in such detail and so scrupulously, that because of the multitude of intersections in the opinions of different people about world government, the Jews, and the ‘mystery of iniquity’, that ineluctable part of Russian apocalyptics, reading these hundreds of pages leaves the impression of travel through a dreary and monotonous desert. To put it more simply, these chapters are hard to read.

The third problem (which is also a merit) in the book is that the author has decided to assist the reader in determining the socio-historical context in which contemporary Russian eschatological anti-Semitism is situated, and moreover in both its synchronic and diachronic dimensions. Therefore the book contains several fragments, some of them in the form of separate chapters, explaining the state of eschatology — sometimes in its relation to the Jews — among the leadership of the Moscow Patriarchate of the Russian Orthodox Church, in various Russian new religious movements, and among conservative Protestants in America. But these parts are so insignificant in extent, so schematic in argumentation and, one might say, so provisional in terms of the material they draw on, that they resemble pilot fish and remoras accompanying a huge and dignified shark. Both the shark and its satellites, of course, come into the frame of the Discovery Channel cameraman, but the latter do so only on the strength of their proximity to the main object of interest of the man who is making the film.

The fourth problem (for me, at least) is the way the book’s conclusion is written. It contains so many fruitful and scintillating opinions, albeit somewhat perfunctorily expressed, that the reader who is pressed for time might be well advised to read only the conclusion in order to understand what the book is about. But in itself this conclusion exists independently of the basic contents and does not look like an organic part of the greater text. Usually authors make a greater effort to connect their empirical material with the general conclusions placed at the end of the work. In this case the material and the conclusions live separate lives, have their own value and, if one may so express it, their own aesthetics.
Let us now turn to more detailed considerations on various scales, following the logic of the overall narrative. As I have already said, the introductory parts of the book (the preface and introduction), give a many-sided, but at the same time somewhat disorientating idea of the object of the author’s interest. This may partly be explained by the discursive habits that have taken root in our academic establishment. One of these is the desire to show the reader the social significance of any research, and another is to present the alternative ways of interpreting our subject in dramatic opposition, almost in conflict, to demonstrate all the complexity of the intellectual voyage which the author is proposing to the reader. Thus Shnirelman says that there is ‘an urgent need to study the peculiarities of contemporary xenophobia’. And to do this one has to find out what ‘makes up its content, whether it is limited to fleeting everyday moods and popular stereotypes or appeals to complex mythological schemas’ (p. IX).

Let us leave aside the question of how effectively we can answer the acute challenges of our difficult age. But the problem of the correlation between passing discursive habits and stable interpretative structures is an important one for the social sciences and the answer to it is not so obvious. Will they prove to be mutually exclusive? It seems that the author himself considers that this is not the case, and everyday concerns are not able to find materials for their embodiment in actual social activity outside relatively stable systems for generating meaning (‘there is today a whole market of ideologemes and mythological schemes worked out in great detail at the service of anti-Semitic attitudes,’ p. X). But in any case the research question is formulated so broadly here that it is hard to imagine what research needs to be done in order to answer it.

Another judgment of a general character, which seems incontrovertible, but trips one up when one reads it, is to be found on the same page: ‘[Anti-Semitism] today can be viewed as an archetype which prepares the soil for all other forms of xenophobia and provides them with arguments’ (p. X). Anti-Semitism does indeed look archetypal nowadays, particularly since the West has assimilated the Holocaust as one of the key points in world history and uses its image as an ideal type in the interpretation of a series of other instances of the mass murder of people chosen for annihilation because of their ethnicity. But should we take anti-Semitism as our starting point for understanding other forms of xenophobia? It may be that anti-Semitism itself was in certain historical and national contexts transformed under the influence of the application to the Jews of stereotypes that had previously determined attitudes to other ethnic or religious groups. And it may be that it had almost no influence on some forms of the social imagination that stigmatised people for one or another reason. All this needs to be sorted out before one gives anti-Semitism the status of an ideal type.
On p. XII the reader finds a whole list of questions which, it seems, are research questions; but I am not entirely convinced of this, particularly considering the first of them: ‘Will the end of the world come in the near future? How do people understand the last times and what do they expect of them? Why does this period horrify people and what role do the ancient prophecies play in this? Why do certain tendencies in the evolution of the modern world — and which — cause eschatological anxiety?’, and so on. In the next part of the book, the introduction, we find yet another list of research questions (pp. 26–9). They are perfectly concrete, but there are so many of them, and they differ so much in scale, that it looks more like a project for a vast research programme than a list of what might be touched on in a single study, highly ambitious though it might be.

The introduction itself is in the main aimed at acquainting the reader with the problems of eschatology and its connection with Judaeophobia. Here the author touches on several questions which seem to me to be extremely important. The first of them is: To what extent do the contents of the texts that are represented in one or another religious institution as the basis for doctrine determine the emotional life and actual behaviour of believers? (p. 14). It seems that the author himself is sure that this factor is not a decisive one. Referring to the opinions of theologians, he notes that they find no grounds ‘for seeking the roots of anti-Semitism in the Scriptures’. But, as we know, there are references to the New Testament in the anti-Semitic arguments of a number of Orthodox writers. That is, it does not depend on the text itself, but on what people want to find (and of course do find) in it. The eye of an emotional interpreter of a sacred text, looking at it from a particular angle, concentrates on certain passages and sees in them the promise of a particular future and the confirmation of the ideas of the moment. This process, naturally, ignores a huge amount of material that is not relevant for the current agenda, which, moreover, may remain topical for decades.

Sometimes the outside observer cannot fail to be struck by this capacity for concentrating on the exegesis of a limited range of quotations from the Bible and the Fathers of the Church. Thus with a certain amount of exaggeration one might say that the whole doctrine of political eschatology, vast as it is in volume and diversity, of Orthodox writers on the apocalypse, from the time of Sergei Nilus to the present, is concentrated around a somewhat cloudy sentence from the Second Epistle to the Thessalonians (II Thess. 2:7): ‘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.’ This opaque verse from the New Testament has lodged itself firmly in Russian eschatological thought and, continually worrying the political
imagination of Orthodox statisticians, has been its cornerstone for many decades. Near to it is another fragment of the New Testament, as the final argument unmetaphorically treated as ontological invective addressed to all Hebrews (Jews): ‘Ye are of your father the devil, and the lusts of your father ye will do’ (John 8:44). All in all, this is the set of arguments from Scripture for the treatment of all world history and the current political (geopolitical) situation in this key. These are the passages from the New Testament on which the eschatological thought of ‘nationally thinking’ Orthodox writers expends its labours, leaving aside the Revelation of St John the Divine, in which, as we know, the Antichrist is not mentioned (see: I John 2:18–22, I John 4:3, II John 1:7).

Another important question which arises when reading the introduction concerns the modality in which we should receive the apocalyptic utterances that can be encountered in abundance on the pages of the works of political analysts who reveal the ‘spiritual meaning’ of the events that take place in the world. In this connection we can ask a simple question: Are the authors of such opinions really preparing for the coming of the end times, or do they merely want the reader to take their entirely earthly alarmism as seriously as possible? The question may seem unanswerable (one cannot make windows into men’s souls) and even pointless if we suppose that we should be interested in the meanings that readers get out of the texts, and not those that the authors put into them. It may nevertheless be important for the understanding of our subject whether we are dealing (in the case of such utterances) with the doctrine of the end of the world or with rhetorical lamentations over the current sociopolitical situation.

Victor Shnirelman leaves both variants of the treatment of such judgments open. On the one hand, he admits that eschatological anxieties do exist and give rise to an aggressive ideology of religious fundamentalism (we do not mean all cases of eschatologism, but specific statements of a number of contemporary Orthodox political analysts) (p. 26). On the other hand, remembering Damian Thompson’s book *Waiting for Antichrist* [Thompson 2005], he writes that ‘discussions of the end of the world may be perceived <…> as a language for describing the surrounding misery and injustice, but that does not mean that people seriously believe in the end of the world’ (p. 26). It seems that the material out of which the book is constructed suggests that practical politics uses the rhetoric of the Apocalypse in particular situations, and lays it aside without much regret when events make the authors change their alarmist warnings to triumphal discourses. Then expectations of a last battle with the forces of darkness recede into the background. However, the aggressive ideology does not disappear along with them. Thus after the beginning of the ‘Russian spring’ certain publicists of the
Orthodox-patriotic circle (such as Konstantin Dushenov) easily left behind their concern for the ultimate fate of a world that had fallen under the sway of Antichrist and began to celebrate the victory of the Russian State, so that it became more or less clear: they are more concerned about the fate of the empire, and dream of the return of that social order where they, Russian Orthodox statists, will have more power over their ideological opponents and supposed ethnic competitors in the struggle for the resources lost as a result of the events of 1991–3.

The next chapters of *The Tribe of Dan* are devoted to the exposition of the eschatological views and utterances of various authors. Some subjects are represented briefly, others in great detail. Thus there is a quite detailed description of the process of the formation of the ideology of new Orthodox monarchism during the last years of the USSR. Its proponents, having carefully acquainted themselves with the heritage of the political thought of prerevolutionary and émigré Orthodox fundamentalism, and interpreting the events of perestroika from this position, laid the foundations of modern political historio-sophy and eschatology (chapters 2, 3 and 4). The volume of the sources used, the care with which the material on the questions under examination is sifted, and the acuity of the author’s observations on the most diverse occasions are truly striking.

As for the interpretation of sources, I would like to remark that there is perhaps too little of it, as there is of an overall placing of highlights in the sea of data that threatens to overwhelm the reader. All the more valuable are those separate brief sententiae that reveal the meaning of what the main heroes of the book — the authors writing in the newspapers *Zemshchina*, *Russkiy vestnik* and *Den*, their friends and ideological allies — have been trying, stubbornly and unimaginatively, to bring home to their readers. For example, characterising the historiosophical treatment of the above-mentioned verse from St Paul’s epistles in *Zemshchina*, Shnirelman notes ‘It seems that it [*Zemshchina*] was prepared to allot the role of “him who letteth” not so much to the Tsar as to authoritarian political power. Therefore it argued that the Soviet state order partly retained the function of “him who letteth”’ (pp. 184–5). This statement could, in my view, be used as the fundamental characteristic of the vector along which Orthodox political eschatology has been evolving in Russia since the end of the 1980s.

In this context I will permit myself to make a small correction. It seems quite important from the point of view of the study of the genesis of certain commonplaces in the discursive practices of contemporary political eschatology. On p. 175 the author, following the opinion of Peter Duncan [Duncan 2000], writes: “The metaphor of the “Russian Golgotha”, which ascribes to Russia sufferings
comparable to the Passion of Christ, was first enunciated by Fr Dmitri Dudko as early as 1977.' In fact this is not so, and it would be hard to expect that this metaphor would not have been used before the end of the 1970s. And indeed, it appears in the context of the interpretation of the events of the years of revolution no later than 1918, when A. I. Verkhovskiy used images which are abundantly represented in the historical publicist writings of all the subsequent decades: ‘These dreadful years of the war and months of the revolution were a death agony, unbearable suffering for all who loved their native land. The Golgotha of the Russian army. The Golgotha of the Russian land. Through great suffering the people’s soul is being cleansed of its old sins’ [Verkhovskiy 1918: 141]. In 1919 a book of amateur verses by F. N. Kasatkin-Rostovskiy entitled *Golgota Rossii* ‘The Russian Golgotha’, the contents of which correspond fully with its title, was published in Rostov-on-Don [Kasatkin-Rostovskiy 1919]. From the very first years of the emigration the image of crucified Russia is ever present on the pages of émigré publications.¹ This topos did not perhaps at first receive any serious soteriological interpretation, but it certainly became one of the main means of describing, and to a certain extent analysing the events of the revolution and Civil War. For example, it was fundamental in the work of Sergey Bekhteev, a poet who did a great deal to develop the theme of the sufferings on the cross of Russia and the Emperor Nicholas II, a theme which was so important for émigré, and later also post-Soviet political eschatology.²

¹ See for example: ‘The last four years in the life of Russia were one continuous Golgotha. The great country has been crucified untiringly, unmercifully and unhesitatingly’ [Maslov 1922: 66].

² I shall quote a poem in which the image of the crucified Russia is one element of a more general and detailed picture of the Bolsheviks’ rise to power, represented as the beginning of the kingdom of Antichrist. It is a clear illustration of the sort of heritage the post-Soviet political apocalyptics had to do with.

**The Russian Golgotha**

The Jew and his qahal are just the same as a conspiracy against Russia. The Jews will ruin Russia.

F. M. Dostoevsky

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The Messiah’s prophecy is fulfilled
And ‘darkness’ has overcome ‘light’. Antichrist has appeared in Russia, The bloody tyrant Baphomet.
The whole empire is full of sedition, There is no end to disorders and conflicts;
Brother raises his hand against brother, Son raises his sword against father. Russian people are killing each other, And two camps of enemies are fighting;
People are overcome with tears Among little orphans and widows. The devil sleeps not nor slumbers, He is full of guile and wickedness; He will raise his hand against the Church,
In my opinion one of Victor Shnirelman’s most important observations on the workings of post-Soviet political eschatology is his indication of two fundamentally important aspects of its functioning. The first aspect is that it began to use interpretative schemes borrowed from émigré religious metahistory to interpret the change of the political and ideological regime in the USSR (true, the author reminds us several times about another tradition of native political thought which influenced the new Russian eschatology, namely that of late Soviet ‘anti-Zionism’ — see, for example, p. 265). The second aspect is that one of the basic methods of ‘working with empirical material’ in this context came to be the discovery of ‘spiritual meanings’, which, however, could be reduced to the idea that an authoritarian (ideally monarchical) form of governing Russia was seen as an instrument of God’s care for the salvation of the elect in conditions of the kingdom of Antichrist.

The return of Orthodoxy into the social discourse and the recourse had to it by the national-patriots was accompanied by a growth of interest in eschatology, which helped them to make sense of the phenomena of the crisis that were unfolding before their eyes [...]

They were conscious of it [this discourse], moreover, on two levels, the phenomenological and the metaphysical. On the first level it was a matter of current events and their discussion in political, social and economic terms. But on the second the traditional concept of involution came into play, describing an inevitable movement from the Golden Age to decline and dissolution, which Christian eschatology

And God’s throne will be overthrown.
The evildoer celebrates his holiday
Burning culture in the fire,
And the Jews prepare a new blow
For the land of Christ.
The people has turned to the lagoon,
It rushes on from the distant wilderness.
The Chinaman saves the commune,
Latvians feast in the Kremlin.
The dungeons are trembling with groaning,
Torture follows torture,
And the savage cry ‘Face the wall!’
Sounds from the maw of the devil.
Judas the Antichrist rejoices,
Happy with the success of his victories:
A universal marvel has happened:
The Christian empire is no more.
Satan is rattling his cudgels,
And dancing on a heap of coffins
He rewards his slaves
With a bloody star and horns.
And the soldiers with the ‘red star’,
Accepting the fatal seal,
With reviling nail to the cross
Their unhappy Mother Country.

explained as the activity of ‘Satanic forces’ clearing the way for the Antichrist. Only ‘he that now letteth’ could oppose these forces, and therefore, from this point of view, the basic conflict in the world was between him and the ‘forces of evil’, whoever they were (p. 264).

Certain other topics which are important for understanding contemporary political eschatology are mentioned in the main part of the book and perhaps deserve closer analysis. Thus, several times, when Jews and Jewishness in the social imagination of Orthodox metahistorians are described, there appears the idea that some of the Jews are the natural conductors of modernising tendencies in that society which these authors, when discussing these subjects, would like to keep in a premodern condition of Orthodox piety and patriarchal way of life. For example, the Ashkenazim in this capacity sometimes turn out to be the descendants of Turkic Khazars, that is, not altogether Jewish. It evidently results from this that they possess a particular inclination towards assimilation and are contrasted with the traditionalist Sephardim (p. 348). These qualities — an inclination towards assimilation and the capacity for being practically the main agents of the destruction of the established way of life of other peoples — seem to lie at the root of a significant number of theories about the Jews’ national specificity, both anti-Semitic and philo-Semitic. Being self-evident, this presupposition is rarely the subject of anthropological reflection, which cannot but produce a certain bewilderment, not to say regret. But we have no right at all to reproach the author of the book because this work has not been done.

However, the reproduction on the pages of this book of certain opinions in the spirit of everyday common sense does require commentary. On p. 350 we read: ‘The apocalyptic consciousness, like any sort of traditionalist consciousness, is a pessimistic consciousness. It inclines people towards a passive expectation of the decline and complete collapse of human civilisation, as if these were determined by God’s will.’ This is followed by a reference to the discussion by the well-known traditionalist Deacon Andrey Kuraev of the ‘ethics of defeat’, well known in certain circles. It seems to me that it is hard to acknowledge this idea, expressed as a general proposition, as correct. We know apocalyptics whose view of the approaching end of times is full of a striking optimism, and traditionalists who do not lapse into apathy but are, on the contrary, ready to set about bringing their ideals into existence with great energy.

Another stereotype that might possibly impede our understanding of the nature of what is happening is the opposition between the religious and the political as spheres of social experience, supposedly existing independently of each other (p. 365). I am sure that there
are many contexts where this opposition is a valuable tool for analysis, but the subjects examined in this book are not among them. Not only do the heroes of this book — contemporary Orthodox apocalyptics — themselves live in a world of political categories (in their consciousness and in ritual there are no other meanings besides the changing and affirmation of the power relationships between people, and therefore the murder of the imperial family must be a ritual murder, in order to have any value). But something else is important here: the background for the definition of our subject, political eschatology, is created by a thesis from the arsenal of everyday political philosophy, according to which in a normal society genuine religion is naturally separated from the sphere of politics, in the same way as the eternal is separated from the transient, and the things that are Caesar’s from the things that are God’s. Moreover, such a version of the normative approach, which has been dissected and controverted more than once [Asad 1983], is itself a political programme which is presented to the public by the leaders of the dominant religious institutions with the aim of gaining serious political power. The widespread thesis ‘The Church does not engage in politics,’ promoted, for example, by representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church, means, apart from anything else (and perhaps before anything else), that religious institutions, whose axiological foundations are fundamental and stable, should be the natural arbiters in any political battles.

One other important principle for the articulation of the space in which phenomena are observed, which determines our view of reality and, accordingly, our choice of means to analyse it, is also connected with the problem of the normative approach. I will say at once that overall the work under review cannot be accused of having a normative approach. But there are places where one may be glimpsed. For example, many students of religious life have to answer the question of where the boundaries of the religious group whose life interests them are, and where something else begins. Many of us will remember the discussions around the concept of ‘popular religion’ and the methodology behind it. In our case the concept that prompts us to define its boundaries is ‘Orthodoxy’. Let me give an example: ‘As E. Levkievskaya has shown, many of the interpretations of the Apocalypse analysed above are in fact a “mimicry” of Orthodoxy. For this reason some active members of the Russian Orthodox Church are doing their best to refute the rumours of the approach of the Antichrist and condemn the search for signs in contemporary reality’ (pp. 566–7).

Indeed, some of the authors who position themselves as Orthodox believers alarmed at the fate of the Russian people and state write about historical and current events in a manner which may be considered extremist. It is not in the interests of the Church establishment
for their institution to be associated in the eyes of the (secular) majority with calls to solve complex problems with simple coercive methods. Some of the faithful, who are remote from political eschatology, share this reluctance to appear brothers in religion of those whom outsiders regard as breakers of certain shared conventions on what can be said in public about members of other social groups. Furthermore, some people who are outside the Church may for one reason or another not wish for it to be stigmatised.

One way out of this image problem is to define those who are responsible for it as a kind of external force that is representing itself illegitimately as a natural part of the great social body. This is a perfectly comprehensible policy, but researchers are not obliged to follow its cultural logic. We know that the people who represent one group or another in the public space quite often strive to stress its unity and solidarity by glossing over the divisions within the group and excising (discursively at least, if not administratively) those members that discredit it. But this does not give them the right (automatically) to regard as a social pathology those phenomena that do not, from the point of view of the 'leadership', correspond to the norm, that is, to that image of the group that is being offered to the public at large.

Incidentally, it is by this tacit assumption that there is a certain correct knowledge of history, Orthodoxy, etc. that not everybody shares that one can explain those passages where the author decides to castigate his heroes for their lack of education or sufficient information on the questions about which they express opinions. Thus on p. 311 Shnirelman reproaches the authors of anti-Semitic compositions that they do not want to go into the details of history. One of them ‘has not even attempted either to discover the real meaning of the Talmud, or to understand the motives of mediaeval Jews, nor to sort out what the Talmud does in fact teach and how it is applied today.’ On pp. 432–3, in the context of a description of the ‘International Conference on Global Problems of World History’ (2002), the ‘global’ in the title already indicating the range of the participants, he remarks bitterly: ‘Positioning themselves as “the bearers of the truth”, many of them not only failed to understand what was happening in the modern world and had a poor knowledge of history, but had not even a grasp of the rudiments of that Christianity to which they were constantly appealing.’

It seems superfluous to rebuke nationalist historiosophists for not knowing the subject sufficiently. Their interest is in metahistory, which necessarily presupposes ‘a maximally general schematisation of the past and its links to the present’ [Pigalev 2013: 63]. Besides, the attitude of most of them towards Orthodoxy is utterly instrumental. Therefore Christian doctrine is in itself of no interest
but all to some of the orators who spoke at that forum. But something else is interesting here: the ‘literate’ Christians who also take part in such events are in no hurry to call out their fellow-travellers and their temporary (situational) allies in the struggle for the triumph of ‘a spiritual reading of history’. And in this they are pursuing their own ends.

It is also naïve to reproach Orthodox activists, who make no secret of their religious and political commitment, for interpreting history ‘only from a Christian viewpoint, that is taking account exclusively of Christian (and often above all Orthodox) interests and completely ignoring the history of other peoples or religious groups’ (p. 571).

From time to time the reader will discover penetrating sociological observations in the boundless space of the text-centred and on the whole descriptive narrative of this book. Thus, in determining the ideological roots of the views of the philosopher A. S. Panarin, Victor Shnirelman writes: ‘One had the impression that it was the disappearing Soviet middle class speaking through Panarin’s lips, discouraged by its unfulfilled hopes and the loss of its old positions. Cruel disillusion with the liberal reforms made these people look for salvation in identity and historico-cultural uniqueness’ (p. 390). This remark, like many others that I have come across in the book, requires further argumentation, but in its lapidary form it indicates the direction in which the social origins of modern political eschatology should be sought. And, on the subject of the author’s tendency to express important opinions and leave them without extensive argumentation, one must pay special attention to the conclusion.

The conclusion begins by noting the variety of opinions on the questions that we refer to the sphere of political eschatology.

[T]o serve the needs of the faithful a whole market of ideas evolved in which everyone could find a version that was useful to him. In other words, interpretations of the Apocalypse are by no means condemned to Judaeophobia, and if it is the Judaeophobic version that particular ideologues and propagandists choose, there must be reasons for this which are to be sought not in the tradition, but in specific historical circumstances (p. 581).

Further on, on pp. 583–4, the continuity between Soviet and post-Soviet anti-Semitic ideology is described: ‘[T]he old struggle against “international Zionism” <…> was transformed in the speech of the new Orthodox into a struggle against “Talmudists” and “Freemasons”, who were supposed to be clearing the way for the Antichrist; ‘It was from this position that it was possible to represent Russia as the last bulwark of “true Christianity”, and thus as “him who now letteth” with the vocation of deferring the end of the world and saving
humanity from the advent of the Antichrist.’ We find another important observation on p. 586:

_Today the Apocalypse is treated by some authors as the ideology of a marginal group which has not found a fitting place for itself in society and is therefore experiencing frustration_ <…> _The notions [of the people who belong to this group] of a fitting existence are at sharp variance with stern reality. This produces the hope of miraculous changes which could change the world radically._

I would have put it differently: the hopes that the world would stop changing and return to its natural condition, where these people could expect the fitting existence promised to them by the logic of the existence of the former order. These hopes do not even look like hopes, since they are not the anticipation of a new, just world, but an explanation for why the old, just world was destroyed, and a fear that it will continue to disintegrate under pressure from globalisation and the liberal axiological system.

In defining the limits of the social group in which such attitudes gained ground, the author points to the ‘former Soviet middle class’ which had lost its position at the beginning of the 1990s. More specifically, it is a matter of military personnel and engineers: ‘the former lost the respect and status that they had enjoyed, and the latter their employment at the vast works of the military-industrial complex;’ ‘In democracy they saw anarchy, undermining the order to which they were accustomed’ (p. 587). This led them to a protective conservative ideology and a desire to return to an authoritarian political system, and also, naturally, to the creation (or recreation) of explanations for all the major upheavals in the history of Russia by looking for a group the interests of which would be served by these dramatic changes.

On p. 589 the author points out the similarity between the confrontational ideology of Soviet foreign policy propaganda (strictly speaking the propaganda itself was internal, but it offered an interpretation of foreign policy) and contemporary religious political eschatology. There is no doubt that ex-Soviet citizens brought up in an atmosphere of suspicion if not hatred towards the West habitually reproduce the image of the ‘natural enemy’ of the motherland and the nation and expect misfortunes to come from the same quarter from which they expected them for the several decades after the war. But, it seems, here is the answer (or part of the answer) to another important question: why many Russian (post)communists end up as effectively allies of the Orthodox monarchists [Moroz 1992: 84–5]. It is obvious that both of them see in the USSR the same ‘him that letteth’ — the power that prevented America and its allies from introducing their own system everywhere in the world. When Soviet citizens evaluated the
competition between the two systems on the world arena, they did not so much care about the wellbeing of the inhabitants of one or another country on the road to the building of socialism, as enjoy another defeat of the imperialist policies of the USA. Therefore the crusades of a conservative Christian American president against the Soviet system were perceived by some Russian patriots as the same in principle as attempts to disseminate the principle of the primacy of human rights over the interests of the state by the much more liberal administrations that governed the same country in the following decades.

Another important element which has been left in the form of a short thesis but perhaps deserves a more detailed discussion in view of its importance for understanding the situation is fear of globalisation. The book mentions several times that according to contemporary eschatological alarmists, the villains of the apocalypse are setting in motion projects to create a single humanity in order to destroy nation-states. This is also mentioned in the conclusion (p. 589). For a social imagination founded on the proposition that nations exist naturally, are formed on ethnic-genetic principles and as a result are the fundamental movers of the historical process, such menaces threaten to destroy the basic classificatory schemes (and how can we help thinking of Durkheim’s categories of the collective consciousness here?). It is worth remarking that the fear of the neoliberal gender order is similar in character. The question of the blurring of gender roles is, after all, not so much a problem of affirming social justice, as of the destruction of a social classification that has existed from time immemorial.

In this connection one may compare the eschatological opinions of certain contemporary Orthodox political activists with the traditional peasant accounts of the decay of the world, to take note of one important (genetic?) similarity between them. The principle of conceptualisation in village eschatology is often simple: the world, characterised by the presence of clear boundaries between phenomena, is threatened by chaos. Once, in answer to my naïve question on a demonological topic, an elderly peasant woman from Novgorod spoke for a long time and with animation about how ‘people have become like devils’ (cf. [Bessonov 2014: 131]), and then about how nowadays you could not tell where the village was, and where the forest, and in the end about the impossibility of determining from the outward appearance of the young people of today ‘who they are — lads or lasses’. In conclusion to this part of her reply I was referred to the Scriptures: ‘It’s all going like it says in the Bible!’ It seems that many people who share this sort of logic, but with regard to the present political world order, understand the expression ‘the mystery of iniquity’ as meaning ‘the destruction of the accustomed social order’.
Returning to the conclusion of *The Tribe of Dan*, and continuing to be surprised at the abundance of highly interesting observations to which so little space is given, I shall point to the classification of elements of the lexical arsenal of contemporary Russian conspiracy theorists. These last are much given to euphemisms and allegories (and, it seems, not only from fear of prosecution, as the author believes, but also because of some other discursive habits), and also to New Testament phraseology and the use of the names of the powerful institutions that rule the world. The peculiarity of the use of these lexemes and expressions (and not only their bare presence in the spoken and written language of modern critics of the New World Order) is that the modality of expression is consistently ‘stuck’ between the literal and metaphorical meaning of a given lexeme, collocation or idiom. This peculiarity is a characteristic feature of speech about some sort of covert activities which should be unmasked by the very act of speaking about them, but which at the same time, even after having been unmasked, retain the status of phenomena which have not entirely lost their mysteriousness, and, therefore, cannot be understood by the uninitiated. Of course, not all religious conspiracy theorists consistently avoid direct accusations against specific groups and structures, but it is impossible not to notice a certain reluctance to name names in their discursive behaviour.

As I end this review, I wish to state again that Victor Shnirelman’s new book is an exceptionally important step in the study of contemporary Russian political eschatology. It is the work of an experienced professional and deserves the highest estimation. At the same time it should be seen as an invitation to further research on the subject, using new methods and new materials, but certainly continuing the discussion of those complex conceptual questions of theory and methodology that have been raised or touched upon by Victor Shnirelman in his analysis of the discursive practices of Russian apocalyptics in these our, perhaps, last times.

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Sources


**References**


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