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**“FROM GREAT CONTEMPLATION – TO GREAT ACTION,
FROM WORD TO DEED”: THE ROLE OF RELIGION IN CULTURE
(DMITRY MEREZHKOVSKY'S CONCEPT)¹**

The article examines the concept of culture of one of the initiators of Russian symbolism and a prominent representative of the Russian religious culture of the Silver Age. It is shown that the specificity of his concept is the issue of the relationship and correlation of Culture and Religion. Recognizing religion as the source and foundation of culture and creativity, the thinker emphasized its decisive role in culture and social processes.

Keywords: symbol, symbolism, God-seekers, theurgy, culture, Dmitry Merezhkovsky.

**“ОТ ВЕЛИКОГО СОЗЕРЦАНИЯ – К ВЕЛИКОМУ ДЕЙСТВИЮ,
ОТ СЛОВА К ДЕЛУ”: РОЛЬ РЕЛИГИИ В КУЛЬТУРЕ
(КОНЦЕПЦИЯ ДМИТРИЯ МЕРЕЖКОВСКОГО)**

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В статье рассматривается концепция культуры одного из инициаторов русского символизма и видного представителя русской религиозной культуры Серебряного века. Показано, что спецификой его концепции является вопрос взаимосвязи и соотношения культуры и религии. Признав религию источником и основанием культуры и творчества, мыслитель подчеркнул ее определяющую роль в культуре и общественных процессах.

Ключевые слова: символ, символизм, богоискатели, теургия, культура, Дмитрий Мережковский.

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Introduction. Dmitry Merezhkovsky (1865 – 1941) is an iconic figure of the Russian religious renaissance, a symbolist, poet, novelist, writer, literary critic, religious philosopher and thinker, who played an important part in the revival of religious-philosophical interests among the Russian intelligentsia.

Merezhkovsky's contemporaries described him as one of the best-educated people in Saint Petersburg of the first quarter of the 20th century. Thomas Mann wrote about Merezhkovsky as a “genius critic and specialist in world psychology, second only to Nietzsche”. No less influential were Merezhkovsky's philosophical and religious ideas. Merezhkovsky's followers were Russian poets Belyi, Blok and some others. Psychologists Freud, Jung, philosophers Berdyaev, Rickert, Stepun, lawyer Kovalevsky were all deeply interested in philosophical, psychological, cultural and religious ideas of the thinker. Merezhkovsky was a nine times nominee for the Nobel Prize in literature in 1914 through 1933. He was one of the founders of the St. Petersburg Religious-Philosophical Society early 20th century (1901 – 1903). The formation of this movement was caused by the increased public interest in religion; it was a dialogue of the clergy and intellectuals to exchange views on the matters of faith and social problems. Describing the period of Russian religious or spiritual renaissance, Russian philosopher Nikolai Berdyaev mentioned the issue of the religious meaning of Russian culture as the main subject, put special emphasis on its specific character – the mystical atmosphere, religious anxiety and religious quest – and called D.S. Merezhkovsky a “literary source” of this process. So, the problem of the religious meaning of culture became fundamental in Merezhkovsky's concept of culture.

Main part. The philosopher began his career as a symbolist who represented the first wave of St. Petersburg Symbolist school. Merezhkovsky's point “art – for the sake of life and, of course, life for art's sake” expressed his credo and became one of the fundamental ideas of his concept of symbolism. His article “O Prichinakh Upadka i o Novykh Techeniyakh Sovremennoy Russkoy Literatuy” was the first manifesto of Russian symbolism, a significant landmark of Russian modernism, and the year of

1892 was the time of the foundation of national Russian symbolism.

The question was the substantiation of “the new ideal art”, which was symbolic and divine. According to Merezhkovsky, all literature schools and movements are bitten with a single impulse of “a premonition of the divine idealism”, connected with the need for “religious reconciliation with the incognizable” [1, p. 554].

Dmitry Merezhkovsky identified three main elements of symbolism: “mystical content, symbols and the extension of artistic impressibility” [1, p. 538]. These elements were the basis for his symbolist concept. Merezhkovsky sees the aim of modern generation in conscious artistic expression of the Divine (or the religious).

Dmitry Merezhkovsky became known as the advocate of a “new religious consciousness” and “God-seeker”. According to him, symbolism should pass beyond art and become the integral part of a social life. A symbol is the leitmotif of the creative legacy of Merezhkovsky, and his interpretation of symbolism is connected with the religious justification of culture. In this sense, the contribution of Merezhkovsky in the development of symbolism acquires critical importance.

On the one hand, Russian symbolism was a literary movement, and, on the other hand, it developed philosophical, cultural, religious ideas and claimed to perform ideological functions in the social and cultural life of Russia. Russian symbolism, which steeped in the Eastern Orthodoxy, was unique and original and had little in common with the European style of the same name. For Russian symbolism it was specific to reflect religious mysticism, apocalyptic premonitions, eschatology and theurgy. Creativity was interpreted as the creation of “new being”. Russian symbolism claimed to create a new philosophy of culture, a new universal outlook. Russian symbolists raised the questions of the social role of the artist, personalistic creativity and art in general.

D. Merezhkovsky interpreted “a symbol” as the image and language of religion, as the bridge connecting that world and this world. The symbol for Merezhkovsky is “the revelation of the divine side of our spirit” and “of the ideal human culture”. D. Merezhkovsky looked for the traces of symbolism in history, religion,

philosophy and culture. “God came to the world and left His traces in it which are the symbols”, – said the philosopher. This approach explains why the language of symbols was understood by the thinker as the language of religion, and the sign was endowed with the sacred meaning.

Merezhkovsky’s symbolist concept contains various interpretations of symbols, and I’d like to mention those with the religious meaning:

- a symbol is “the language of Gods”;
- a symbol is the image of “other worlds”;
- a symbol is a religious principle of creativity;
- a symbol is mystery and its comprehension;
- a symbol is silence: “The whole world is in the word and God is in silence”;
- a symbol is a myth;
- a symbol is the “rites, ordinances and rituals”;
- symbol is a prayer;
- a symbol is a personality, the image and likeness of God, uniqueness and originality;
- a symbol is the harmony, synthesis of “spirit and body”, it is the harmonic unity of material and spiritual nature, culture and civilization, knowledge and faith – “the mind rejects, and the heart seeks God”;
- a symbol is the ideal, “Holy flesh”, which represents the world, society and culture;
- a symbol is the project, the society of the future – the Reign of Spirit;
- a symbol is the unity, “religious community”, conciliarism.

Merezhkovsky claims that the aim of mankind is the ability to unravel and decode the symbols and signs, and achieve the harmony of “unearthly” and “earthly” worlds. For this purpose, the thinker encourages to grasp the language of “Jesus’s Parables”, the most deep, transparent and symbolic human language: “People, plants, animals, stars <...> – the hieroglyphs, sacred writings, inscribed by the finger of God”.

Dmitry Merezhkovsky interpreted symbolism on a large scale, associated this movement with culture and understood it as “the world revolution in culture, which will return art to religion” [2, p. 258].

In this sense his concept of culture can be called symbolic: symbolism became a method, a

symbol was the tool of spiritual and practical exploration of reality, culture became the field of creativity and human being.

According to Merezhkovsky, the way of culture is a religious way – from mystery to revelation, perceived in the creative process together with God’s actions. Thus, D.S. Merezhkovsky’s way led from symbolism to mysticism, from culture to religion. So, the thinker, again, came to the subject of Theurgy, but this time in the concept of culture.

Considering the priority of Culture and Religion, Merezhkovsky solves it in favor of religion. Having recognized religion as the “head” of culture, he stressed the decisive role of religion in culture: “religion is not culture, but there is no culture without religion” [3, p. 263].

Considering culture and religion as a single entity, Dmitry Merezhkovsky put forward the provision that culture “will not supersede religion, but will only *replace* religion, take its place and become religion itself” [4, p. 85].

Exploring the origin of the term ‘culture’, Merezhkovsky emphasizes that the word ‘culture’ contains the Latin root ‘cultus’ which means worshipping Gods. Developing this idea, Merezhkovsky claims that “all historical cultures have spiritual, devoted “kernel”, the foundation of a new religious cult, the new relation of the human heart with the divine and the infinite” [5, p. 174].

Merezhkovsky draws attention to the fact that the Romans formed the word ‘religio’ from ‘relegare’, which meant a ‘link’: “Religion is <...> a link <...> that connects, puts people together” [5, p. 174].

Studying the cultural heritage of Ancient Egypt, Dmitry Merezhkovsky emphasizes its religious basis as well: “Art is more than art, and even larger than life: the source of life is religion. This is the most religious art of all” [6, p. 192].

According to Merezhkovsky, the disconnection of art and religion was the main reason for the decline of Hellenic and Egyptian cultures.

Analyzing the Middle Ages, Merezhkovsky notes the recovery of the lost connections with the Divine: Culture was perceived as a part of the sphere of the Divine. In this context, the philosopher interprets the works of Dante as a peerless example. In the novel “Dante” (1939) Merezhkovsky stresses the superiority of the

medieval poet over such word-painters as Homer, Shakespeare and Goethe. According to Merezhkovsky, this superiority is expressed in the following way:

Dante not only reflects something that exists, but also creates something that does not; he not only contemplates but acts. In this sense, he is the only one who reached the highest point of poetry (in the first and eternal meaning of the word poiein: to do, to act). "The aim of the human race is to perform all the absoluteness of contemplation, firstly, for contemplation itself and then for the action, prius ad speculandum, et secundum ad operandum" (De Monarchia). Dante also recognizes this common aim of the mankind as the supreme measure of life and creativity for himself: «Not contemplation but action is the purpose of the whole creation (of the "Comedy") – to bring people in this (earthly) life out of unhappy condition and to make them blissful. Since if contemplation prevails in some parts of the "Comedy", then it is not only for its own sake, but for action" (Epist. ad Cane Grande). The main intention of Dante is not to tell people something but to do something with them; to change their souls and destinies of the world. All artistic creativity of Dante and his contemplation is a gorgeous gold sheath with precious stones with a simple steel sword – action [7, p. 128].

As we can see, the message of Merezhkovsky "from great contemplation – to great action, from word to deed" to contemporary artists was formulated under the influence of Dante's works, contained a profound sacred meaning and became one of the most important principles of the development of Russian symbolism and the culture of the Silver Age. Thus, Dmitry Merezhkovsky interpreted the symbol-sign as a status of the "sense vector", which indicates the direction of the thoughts and feelings and determines culture as the continuation of world creation, and religious creativity as the consciousness of another being, when the creativity itself is a religion.

Merezhkovsky came to a conclusion that in their works the artists were not so much obsessed with the idea of deepening and strengthening the link between art and religion, as with the desire to combine art with the religion of the future.

An artist was recognized as the prophet of the culture to come. The Man of Renaissance,

Leonardo da Vinci becomes for Merezhkovsky another way to understand the relationship between culture and religion. The Italian artist proves to be a symbol of Renaissance and "God-man", the personification of the eternal craving for culture and its integrity.

Asking himself "who is Leonardo?" – "a Prophet or a demon, or a magician" – Merezhkovsky answers: "Oh, Leonardo, you are the harbinger of the day still unknown" ("Leonardo" 1895). In the novel "Resurrected Gods, or Leonardo da Vinci" (1900), Merezhkovsky explores Leonardo as the artist whose work could unify the dualities of paganism and Christianity, body and soul, the earthly and the celestial, religion and culture. Merezhkovsky's major question is whether the character of Leonardo is godlike or demonic. Merezhkovsky shows us how Leonardo da Vinci's revolutionary ambitions went hand in hand with his creative work. At the same time Leonardo made an attempt to realize the demonic and the divine dream of flying into the sky, performed anatomical experiments just out of a scientist's curiosity, created beautiful pictures and drafts of war machines and monstrous bombs with the same finesse as he painted his "Virgin Mary and the Christ child".

Under the influence of Nietzsche, Merezhkovsky admires Leonardo for his extraordinary accomplishments, despite the fact that he questions his morality. On the other hand, Merezhkovsky makes it clear that great knowledge brings the internal contradictions to the Creator. Merezhkovsky shows the creative powerlessness, which pursued Leonardo. It is known that Leonardo da Vinci's dream "to be God" was not realized and Merezhkovsky gives the explanation to the reason for Leonardo's spiritual crisis, as well as the tragedy of creative process which is a discrepancy between the creative idea and the result.

From the point of view of Merezhkovsky, the Italian artist was not able to make a choice between contemplation and action, God and Devil, and culture for him was "larger than Christianity". Leonardo da Vinci either remained indifferent, or did not want to know the name of Christ, and turned from "the prophet" into "a blind leader" [8, p. 402].

Comparing the work of Leonardo da Vinci and his "great brother" Dante, Merezhkovsky calls Dante "the prophet of a new religion", who

wanted “to return the lost humanity to the path of salvation, under the sign of the Three – God, his Son and Holy Spirit”. Through the opposition of the personalities of Leonardo da Vinci and Dante, Merezhkovsky highlighted different principles of creativity and philosophy of the ages, emphasizing the religious commitment of creativity and the sacral nature of the culture of the Middle Ages. He opposes the Renaissance to the epoch of Middle Ages, which was based on discipline and obedience to the highest values. That epoch didn't waste spiritual energy, created a great culture and gave rise to the flourishing of the next era.

Thus, in the crisis of the Renaissance Merezhkovsky and other Russian thinkers foresaw the beginning of the crisis of modern Europe, which reflected the spiritual crisis of the whole European culture.

Studying the relationship of culture and religion, recognizing religion as the source of and basis for culture and creativity, Merezhkovsky came to a philosophical synthesis of culture as a system. Culture was viewed from ontological, theurgic, axiological, anthropological and social aspects.

Focusing on the mystical connection between the human heart and the divine of the world, the eternal, the thinker is convinced that only this connection “with roots deep underground”, an unbreakable connection with religion, can save humanity and culture from degeneration and barbarism. Merezhkovsky established the fundamental part of religion in culture as the beginning, the foundation and the “head” of culture. According to Merezhkovsky, culture did not need such transformations as the replace or transition to religion, as culture itself initially “came out of the sacrament” and since its birth culture was religion, in religion and with religion: “Culture is not something contradictory, it only continues pre-human nature in the world of human consciousness” [9, p. 56]. “Culture is an organic unity of two sides – a material side, i.e. civilization, and a spiritual one” [5, p. 173]. “Nature is purity, culture is an evil” [10, p. 345]. “Culture is the creativity of values” [3, p. 265]. “Measurement, accumulation and preservation of these values” [9, p. 475]. “Faith and Knowledge, unlinkable in a small human mind, are linked in the great Divine Mind” [7, p. 163].

The above mentioned statements give reason to identify the final conclusion of Dmitry Merezhkovsky: the path of culture is a religious path from sacrament to revelation, which is grasped during the process of creative work, a joint action with God.

By understanding the religious essence of culture and creativity D. Merezhkovsky was looking for the ways out of the society crisis to cultural renewal and religious revival.

Similarly, under the influence of German composer Richard Wagner (I mean Wagner's essay “Art and Revolution” (1849) / original German title “Die Kunst und die Revolution”) Merezhkovsky interprets the relationship between culture and revolution and the development of culture in revolutionary situations, tried to look for the alternative forms of conjugation of art, culture and revolution. Merezhkovsky declares the guiding role of culture in revolution (he meant the religious culture). Merezhkovsky interprets revolution as the manifestation of the spirit of Antichrist, because he was against the violence in any form. D. Merezhkovsky declares the idea of the unity of revolutionary and religious tasks and dreams of the spiritual revolution.

A comparative analysis of the concept of “revolution and religion “in Merezhkovsky's work “The Coming Ham” (1905), Brusov's “The Coming Huns” (1904) and Lunacharsky's “About art and revolution” (1906) allows to interpret these works as the versions of the development of culture in revolutionary times: “culture above revolution”, “revolution for culture” and “revolution in culture”.

The idea of the religious revolution and the religious community, the criticism of passivism of the historical Christianity and a call for activism of the new Christianity is developed by Merezhkovsky in the context of “God-seeking”. These versions, largely and for a long time, determined the nature of the discussions between artists, advocates of the revolution, the clergy and the representatives of domestic and foreign philosophical thoughts.

Time and history showed that the union of culture and revolution did not take place since culture and politics live by different laws: in this case a union or a transformation was not only unsuccessful but also insolvent. Later, in emigration, Merezhkovsky creates the work “The Kingdom of Antichrist” (1922), reflecting

on the transformation of culture in revolutionary and totalitarian regimes and once again he focuses on the priority of religion in culture, revolution and social life. Merezhkovsky's conclusion about his basic opposition of Christ/Antichrist was: "Only the Coming Christ will conquer the Coming Ham".

We should note that interaction of culture and revolution has been and still remains one of the most topical and controversial issues of the Russian philosophical thought. Merezhkovsky was one of the first to identify this issue. It is this topic which determined the nature of the discussions between artists, advocates of revolution, the clergy and the representatives of domestic and foreign philosophical thoughts. In the end, all aspirations of Merezhkovsky to go beyond the sphere of art not only resulted in the search of the new original artistic forms or systems, but also provided favourable conditions for creative discussions and laid the foundation for the development of original cultural concepts and projects of the future society.

According to Merezhkovsky, his fundamental work "Jesus the Unknown" (1932) became the crown in his career and all his previous writings were only a stepping stone to that major work.

Historiosophical novels, written by Merezhkovsky during emigration, also continued to develop the direction, which he chose once and forever, - the primacy of religious culture over material civilization and revolution, conviction of the evil and military actions and the search of the future social order. Even the titles of novels reveal their religious and philosophical meaning: "The Mystery of the Three", "Messiah", "Napoleon", "Jeanne d'Arc and the Third Kingdom of Spirit", "Jesus the Unknown", "The Reformers (Luther, Calvin, Pascal)". In his novel about Dante, which was completed by Merezhkovsky in May, 1937 and was published shortly before the World War II, the author warned that "the second world war of tomorrow will senselessly destroy all cultural treasures, accumulated by mankind for ten thousand years" [7, p. 264].

"In the past I'm looking for the future", remarks Merezhkovsky and defines his career as a process of assembling "links in a chain" that connects "age, culture and religion". Dmitry Merezhkovsky was convinced that all historic cultures have a spiritual "core", the relationship

of the human heart with the divine world and with the eternity.

Conclusion. Modern Western researchers, who study the problems of reformation of Christianity in the West, note that the beginning of the XX century in Russia has given rise to religious and social quests, which evolved from a Russian political dialogue to a global one [9, p. 233].

We have all reasons to share the opinion of T. Pahnuss, who studied the late emigrant heritage of the thinker and kept his archives, that Merezhkovsky intended to "predict spiritual culture of the future of mankind" [11, p. 221].

As for historical development of society, Merezhkovsky claims the primacy of spiritual values of culture over material ones and the opportunity of a religious transformation of life as a way to achieve authentic being. According to the philosopher, authentic being will not be achieved in the first and second Christianity, in Orthodoxy and Catholicism, but "only in the Third Christianity", in the Third Testament. Merezhkovsky saw the future in the union between Russia and Europe and spoke about the Universal Church, which would unite all people thanks to a single spiritual ideal. An ideal of a free unity, "the new religious consciousness" had to perceive the fullness of a human life and to connect paganism with historic Christianity. Merezhkovsky was convinced that the whole life in the Third Testament would become communal; social inequality, the main evil of the century, would be eliminated as well as private property. For Merezhkovsky the Third Testament is a new commandment of love, which claims a worldwide union, based on love as the unity of personal and social; it is a fair society, which is the "Kingdom of God on Earth as in Heaven". Merezhkovsky's project of the future society reflected his symbolic, aesthetic, ethical and cultural concepts and synthesized all religious, historiosophic, cultural and social ideas of the philosopher.

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