NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

STUDIES IN RUSSIAN PHILOSOPHY, LITERATURE, AND RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

Volume 2 (2025)

ISSN 3065-0755

Northwestern
UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES

The Democratic Christian Vision of Aleksandr Stepanovich Prokhanov

by J. Eugene Clay

This article analyzes the democratic Christian vision of Aleksandr Stepanovich Prokhanov (1871–1912), a Russian Molokan physician, publicist, and advocate of religious freedom. Rejecting both Orthodox ecclesiastical authority and Western Protestant dogmatism, Prokhanov articulated a rational, ecumenical Christianity grounded in freedom of conscience and the primacy of love over doctrine. Through his journal *Dukhovnyi khristianin* and his public activism, he fostered open theological debate, defended minority rights, and sought to unite diverse religious communities within a non-hierarchical Christian framework. Prokhanov's project illuminates the role of religious dissent in early twentieth-century Russian debates over democracy, conscience, and human rights.

Keywords: Molokans, Spiritual Christianity, Religious freedom, Sectarianism, Aleksandr Prokhanov

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY STUDIES IN RUSSIAN
PHILOSOPHY, LITERATURE, AND RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

Volume 2 (2025): 25–43
10.71521/xhzn-n102

The Democratic Christian Vision of Aleksandr Stepanovich Prokhanov

J. Eugene Clay

Introduction

Over the past twenty years, scholars including Samuel Moyn, John Witte, Jr., and Michael Gillespie have argued for the significance of religion in the development of human rights discourse, taking issue with the dominant historiography that ignores or discounts religion.[1] In Russia, too, religious minorities have played an outsized role in the struggle to secure human rights, especially freedom of conscience. At the beginning of the twentieth century, a prime example of a leader in this struggle was the physician and publicist Aleksandr Stepanovich Prokhanov (1871–1912). Born into a family of Spiritual Christian Molokans—dissenters who rejected the icons, sacraments, and hierarchy of the established Russian Orthodox Church in favor of a biblical faith that sought to worship God "in spirit and in truth"—Prokhanov deliberately embraced the religion of his ancestors, even as his father and brothers abandoned it for Western Protestantism.[2] However, Prokhanov's version of Spiritual Christianity was not simply a mindless adoption of family tradition. Instead, he offered a utopian vision: a rationalized, ecumenical Christianity of the Russian people, without a Synod or episcopal authority, that practiced an "internal freedom of conscience" and was united not by a creed but by love expressed in good works.[3] Consciously rejecting Western Protestantism, with its proclamation of salvation through grace alone by faith alone, Prokhanov created the journal *The Spiritual Christian* (*Dukhovnyi khristianin*) in 1905—the revolutionary year when the czar issued a decree on religious toleration—to be an arena for open debate, where a truly popular (*narodnyi*) Christianity could emerge.

1. Michael Allen Gillespie, *The Theological Origins of Modernity* (University of Chicago Press, 2008); Samuel Moyn, *Christian Human Rights* (University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015); John Witte, *The Reformation of Rights: Law, Religion, and Human Rights in Early Modern Calvinism* (Cambridge University Press, 2007).

2. According to an official census taken in 1912 by the Department of Spiritual Affairs of the Ministry of the Interior, the number of Molokans who observed Sunday as their day of worship numbered 133,935. In addition, there were 4,423 Molokan Sabbatarians and 4,844 Spiritual Christian Jumpers [*pryguny*], so called because they jumped in their worship gatherings at the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. See *Statisticheskie svedeniia o sektantakh (k 1 ianvaria 1912 g.)*, Izdanie Departamenta dukhovnykh del (St. Petersburg: Tipografiia, 1914), 33–35, 47, 51. Molokans themselves considered these figures to be a gross undercount; for example, V. I. Savchenko, a Spiritual Christian of Vladikavkaz, claimed that the true official figures showed that there were 930,000 of his co-religionists in Russia as of 1 January 1910. See V. I. Savchenkov, "Svedeniia o chisle sektantov v Rossii," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 6, no. 1 (January 1911): 52.

3. Aleksandr Stepanovich Prokhanov, "Stoletnii molokanskii iubilei," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 1, no. 2 (January 1906): 20

To achieve this result, Prokhanov adopted a radically democratic approach to the development of doctrine and practice. Is God a trinity of three persons? Is Christ fully human and fully God? Should Christians pray for the dead? Is the Old Testament still relevant for followers of Jesus? Would Christ's Second Coming be an observable physical event or an invisible spiritual reality? To answer these and similar dogmatic questions, Russian Orthodox Christians relied on the authority of their creeds and ecumenical councils while Baptists turned to their infallible scriptures. By contrast, Prokhanov encouraged believers to decide for themselves which teachings and rituals were true and right. Rather than impose his own theological views on others (as did the state-supported Orthodox Church with its edicts of excommunication, monastery prisons, and network of missionaries who worked closely with local police to identify and prosecute heretics), Prokhanov sought to discover and publicize what Spiritual Christians actually believed and practiced. When they disagreed, as they often did, Prokhanov invited reasoned debate and dialogue. In Prokhanov's democratic vision of Christianity, rules of faith and practice were not to be dictated and enforced from above, but rather to bubble up from below. No doctrine, no ritual was as important as love, which could unite into a single community even those with radically different understandings of faith. Such a Christianity, which placed love above dogma, would create a free society "of the sons of liberty who worship God in spirit and truth."[4] Firmly committed to a progressive theology, Prokhanov believed that the orthodoxies and orthopraxies of today would inevitably change as humanity advanced toward truth. In Prokhanov's assembly of saints, there were no dogmas, no heretics, no excommunications: the Chalcedonian Christian who held that Christ was fully God and fully human lived in loving fellowship with the docetic Molokan elder who taught that Jesus had the body of an angel. To achieve such unity, free believers did not need the external force of pope, priest, creed, or sacred scripture. They needed only the Christian virtue of love.

Beyond his attempts to unify and reform the fractured Molokan community to which he was heir, Prokhanov also lobbied for religious freedom, petitioned state officials for the right to publish, organized Spiritual Christian congresses, and helped congregations navigate the complex process of registration so that they could enjoy the benefits of juridical personhood. He provided tools, drawn partly from his theological education at the Protestant Faculty of the University of Paris, to help Molokan elders compose sermons and cultivate the faith of their children and youth.

In his religious project, Prokhanov also engaged prominent members of the secular intelligentsia. He was a passionate participant in sessions of the Ethnographic Section of the Imperial Russian Geographical Society that focused on the so-called "sectarians," a disparaging epithet that included Spiritual Christianity. At such sessions, he exchanged his views with the writer and diarist Mikhail Mikhailovich Prishvin (1873–1954), the avant-garde novelist Dmitrii Sergeevich Merezhkovskii (1865–1941), the Bolshevik revolutionary Vladimir Dmitrievich Bonch-Bruevich (1873–1955), and the Populist journalist Aleksandr Stepanovich Prugavin (1850–1920), who authored several books on popular religion. He also participated in the Religious-Philosophical Society that met

4. *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 7, no. 1 (January 1912): 1.

in the home of Merezhkovskii and his wife, Zinaida Nikolaevna Gippius (1869–1945).[5] Seeking to expand the discussion about true religion, Prokhanov invited non-Molokans, including vegetarians, followers of Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), and former revolutionaries to publish articles in his journal.

To be sure, Prokhanov's expansive understanding of Spiritual Christianity was not widely shared even among his fellow Molokans, many of whom held tightly to their own traditions, doctrines, and rituals. In fact, his critical approach to the biblical text provoked strongly negative reactions from some of his co-religionists. As his friend and collaborator David Vasil'evich Zaitsev noted upon Prokhanov's death, "Only a small group of conscientious Molokan youth and some of the Tolstoyan intelligentsia supported him."[6] Nevertheless, by creating the most successful of all the Molokan journals, Prokhanov created an important legacy for the generations of Spiritual Christians who lived under atheistic Communism; in the 1960s and 1970s, Soviet ethnographers investigating contemporary Molokans found handwritten copies of articles from Prokhanov's journal, *Dukhovnyi khristianin*.[7]

On April 2, 1912, Prokhanov's tragic death at the age of 41 from typhus, contracted from a patient he was treating in St. Michael's Hospital in Tiflis, put an end to his personal participation in the Molokan revival. His two-year-old son Andrei (1910–1943), who would later perish at the Battle of Stalingrad, was left an orphan. Deprived of the opportunity to raise his son, Prokhanov could not transmit his religious values to his descendants. Likewise, the Stalinist antireligious campaigns of the 1930s undid much of his work as a champion of religious freedom. Ironically, today Prokhanov is remembered primarily not for his religious views or for his struggle for freedom of conscience, but as the grandfather of the ultranationalist, antisemitic Russian Orthodox journalist and novelist Aleksandr Andreevich Prokhanov (b. 1938), a founder of the reactionary newspaper *Zavtra*.[8] Nevertheless, the elder Prokhanov's legacy survives in his journal, *Dukhovnyi khristianin*, whose issues have been carefully collected, digitized, and made available on the internet by contemporary Molokans.[9]

---

5. "Zhurnal zasedaniia Otdeleniia etnografii I.R.G.O. 13 fevralia 1909 g.," *Izvestiia Vsesoiuznogo geograficheskogo obshchestva* (1909): 33–34; Mikhail Mikhaĭlovich Prishvin, *Sobranie sochinenii v vos'mi tomakh* (Moscow: Khudozh. lit-ra, 1986), vol. 8: 34.

6. D. Zaitsev, "Nad bezvremennoi mogiloi (Pamiati A. S. Prokhanova)," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 7, no. 6/7 (June/July 1912): 8.

7. A. I. Klibanov, *Iz mira religioznogo sektantstva: Vstrechi, besedy, nabliudeniia* (Moscow: Politizdat, 1974), 221–22.

8. Lev Danilkin, *Chelovek s iaitsom: Zhizn´ i mneniia Aleksandra Prokhanova* (Moscow: Ad Marginem, 2007); Juliette Faure, "A Russian Version of Reactionary Modernism: Aleksandr Prokhanov's 'Spiritualization of Technology,'" *Journal of Political Ideologies* 26, no. 3 (2021): 356–79; Juliette Faure, *The Rise of the Russian Hawks: Ideology and Politics from the Late Soviet Union to Putin's Russia* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2025).

9. For example, Sergei Petrov, "Dukhovnye khristiane molokane: Gazety, zhurnaly," https://molokanin.ru/gztjur/?n=n5_7; "Dukhovnye khristiane-molokane: Materialy k istorii," http://molokans.ru/bibliography/periodicals

Molokanism: Aleksandr Prokhanov's Spiritual Heritage

Prokhanov's heritage of religious dissent stretched back to the 1760s when hundreds of people in southern Russia's black-earth provinces of Tambov and Voronezh openly rejected the fasts, hierarchies, temples, priesthood, sacraments, and icons of the Russian Orthodox Church and instead embraced the worship of God "in spirit and in truth" (John 4:23-24). Relying on their interpretations of the Slavonic Bible, these rebels, who later became known as Spiritual Christians, declared that "God dwells in temples that are not made by hand and does not take pleasure in the works of human hands. ... The image of God is the human soul; one day true worshipers will worship the Father in Spirit and Truth, for the Lord seeks such worshipers. ... God did not ordain salvation to come from soulless things made by human hands."[10] Rather than venerate icons, these believers venerated one another, for humans were made in God's image.[11] Sacraments such as baptism and communion were internal spiritual experiences rather than physical rites. The true church was the community of the faithful gathered in the open air, not specially sanctified buildings. It was a church made up of people, "not of boards, but of ribs" [*ne v brevnakh, a v rebrakh*].[12] Believing that Christ would soon return, the Spiritual Christians took the bold step of sending delegations to Empress Catherine to have their faith recognized and protected from the abuses of local officials.[13]

Unsurprisingly, this bold appeal to the empress failed. The Spiritual Christians were disappointed in both their political and their eschatological expectations. Christ did not return, and in 1769 the Russian government not only rejected their pleas for toleration but actively repressed their faith, seizing their children and property and sending their leaders into military service on the imperial frontiers. Others were publicly beaten and exiled to hard labor. In the face of such persecution, Spiritual Christians went underground, forming secret support networks and coded passwords to maintain their community, even as they were forcibly separated from one another.[14]

During the next decades, these religious rebels split into two major movements: the Dukhobors (spirit-wrestlers, named by learned Orthodox heresiologists after the unrelated fourth-century heresy, the *pneumatomachi*) and the Spiritual Christian Molokans, so called because they drank milk (*moloko*) during the Orthodox fasts when the con-

10. Nikolai Gavrilovich Vysotskii, ed., *Materialy iz istorii dukhoborcheskoi sekty* (Sergiev Posad: Tipografiia I. I. Ivanova, 1914), 14.

11. Pavel Grigor'evich Ryndziunskii, "Antitserkovnoe dvizhenie v Tambovskom krae v 60-kh godakh XVIII veka," *Voprosy istorii religii i ateizma* 4 (1954): 174.

12. Vladimir Ivanovich Dal', "Poslovitsy russkogo naroda: sbornik poslovits, pogovorok, rechenii, prislovii, chistogovorok, pribautok, zagadok, poverii i proch.," *Chteniia v Imperatorskom obshchestve istorii i drevnostei rossiiskikh pri Moskovskom universitete* kn. 2, chast' II: Materialy otechestvennye (1861): 14.

13. Svetlana Aleksandrovna Inikova, "Tambovskie dukhobortsy v 60-e gody XVIII veka," *Vestnik Tambovskogo universiteta.* Series: *Gumanitarnye nauki* 2, no. 1 (1997): 39–53; Svetlana Aleksandrovna Inikova, "The Tambov Dukhobors in the 1760s," *Russian Studies in History* 46, no. 3 (2007): 10–39; Svetlana Georgievna Tambovtseva, "Dukhobortsy XVIII veka kak tekstual'noe soobshchestvo: Nekotorye istochniki chetyrekh rannikh dukhoborcheskikh psalmov," *Russkaia literatura*, no. 2 (2019): 25–37.

14. J. Eugene Clay, "Russian Spiritual Christianity and the Closing of the Black-Earth Frontier: The First Heresy Trials of the Dukhobors in the 1760s," *Russian History* 40, no. 2 (2013): 221–43; Inikova, "Tambovskie dukhobortsy"; Inikova, "Tambov Dukhobors"; Elena Borisovna Smilianskaia, *Volshebniki, bogokhul'niki, eretiki: narodnaia religioznost' i "dukhovnye prestupleniia" v Rossii XVIII v.* (Moscow: Indrik, 2002), 310–13.

sumption of dairy products was forbidden.[15] In contrast to the Dukhobors, who created a relatively closed community that emphasized their own oral tradition and the inner illumination of the Holy Spirit, the Molokans stressed the authority of the Slavonic Bible, which included the deutero-canonical books. Molokans also proselytized more actively, spreading their spiritual vision to the sparsely populated steppe frontiers of Saratov and Astrakhan provinces, where the institutions of the official church were less developed.[16]

Prokhanov's parents and grandparents were Spiritual Christian Molokans from Atkarskii district in Saratov province, where the energetic popular preachers Semen Matveev Uklein (1733–1809) of Tambov province and Akinfii Semenov Popov (fl. 1790s–1800s), a townsman of Dubovskii posad on the Volga River, helped to spread this biblical, aniconic faith. In 1806, the Molokans of Atkarskii district delivered an explanation of their faith to the local police chief (*ispravnik*). In thirteen paragraphs, filled with references to the Slavonic Bible, the Molokans explained their spiritual understanding of the sacraments. For example, they observed baptism not by a ritual immersion but by repenting of their sins, maintaining their faith, hearing the word of God, and holding to Christ's teachings. Likewise, by obeying the commandments of God—and not by participating in a ritual meal—the Molokans partook of the Eucharist. The church was not a sanctified building but an assembly of people, as the Apostle Paul explained in I Corinthians 6:16, "You are the church of the living God."[17] They confessed their sins not to a priest, but to one another and to their elders. They did not observe the schedule of fasts set by the official church, but instead, in imitation of the biblical prophets, they fasted individually and voluntarily. They also prayed for the czar and for the civil authorities "in accordance with the Apostle's testimony."[18]

Although the Spiritual Christian Molokans received grudging toleration from the government of Alexander I (r. 1801–1825), his younger brother and successor Nicholas I (r. 1825–1855) instituted much harsher policies toward all forms of dissent, both religious and political. In 1830, Nicholas ordered the mass deportation of Dukhobors and Molokans to the unpacified Caucasian frontier. This policy had three goals: (1) to establish ethnic Russian colonies in recently conquered territories; (2) to separate heretics (and their baleful influence) from the Orthodox population; and (3) to discourage the pacifist tendencies of the Spiritual Christians by deliberately placing them in a war zone where they would have to defend themselves. Over the next quarter century, thousands of Molokans were forcibly removed from their homes in southern Russia and sent hundreds of miles away to present-day Georgia, Armenia, and Ossetia. These transplanted

15. Petr Ivanovich Bogdanovich, *Istoricheskoe izvestie o raskol'nikakh*, 2nd ed. (St. Petersburg: Tip. Geka, 1787), 45. On the *pneumatomachi*, see Michael A. G. Haykin, *The Spirit of God: The Exegesis of 1 and 2 Corinthians in the Pneumatomachian Controversy of the Fourth Century* (New York: Brill, 1994); Wolf-Dieter Hauschild, *Die Pneumatomachen: Eine Untersuchung zur Dogmengeschichte des vierten Jahrhunderts* (Hamburg: Hauschild, 1967).

16. [Grigorii Pokrovskii], "Istoricheskie svedeniia o molokanskoi sekte," *Pravoslavnyi sobesednik* (September 1858): 50, 62; Dmitrii Igorevich Frolov, "Religioznoe dvizhenie dukhovnykh khristian molokan v Rossiiskoi imperii v 1905–1917 godakh" (kandidat diss., Moscow State University, 2024), 36–40.

17. Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv (RGIA), *fond* (f.) 1286 (Departament politsii ispolnitel'noi Ministerstva vnutrennikh del), *opis'* (op.) 1, 1806 *god* (g.), *delo* (d.) 122, *list* (l.) 5ob.

18. RGIA, f. 1286, op. 1, 1806 g., d.122, l. 7.

Spiritual Christians founded new Molokan villages such as Vorontsovka (now Tashir) and Nikitino (Fioletovo) in Armenia and Ivanovka in present-day Azerbaijan.[19]

Some Molokans voluntarily made the trip to the Caucasus. In the 1830s, prophecies that Christ would return and establish his millennial, terrestrial kingdom on Mount Ararat encouraged those more apocalyptically-minded among the Molokans to move to Armenia. Others, in hope of obtaining greater freedom to practice their faith, decided to leave the regions where they remained a sometimes persecuted minority and join their co-religionists in the Caucasus. With this hope, in 1862 Aleksandr Prokhanov's grandmother and his parents, Stepan and Agrafena, moved their families from Saratov Province to Vladikavkaz, a growing settlement that had just achieved official status as a town [*gorod*] and would soon become the administrative center of the Terek Region (Terskaia *oblast'*).[20]

In their new home, the Prokhanovs flourished. They owned and operated several large mills, and, in Russia's highly stratified society, earned enough money to join the second guild of the merchant estate.[21] Their three sons distinguished themselves professionally and educationally. The oldest, Ivan (1869–1935), graduated as an engineer from the Technological Institute in St. Petersburg and became a leader of the nascent Evangelical Christian movement; forced into exile by the atheistic Soviet authorities in 1928, he spent his final years abroad.[22] The youngest, Vasilii (1878–1941), inherited the family business upon the death of his father in 1910 and suffered expropriation eight years later under the Soviet government, ultimately emigrating to the United States.[23] Aleksandr, the second son, devoted his life to medicine and to reviving and reforming the faith of his grandparents until his untimely death from typhus in 1912.

Prokhanov's Spiritual Quest

Unlike his father and brothers, Aleksandr consciously chose to live as a Russian Spiritual Christian Molokan, the religion of his ancestors, rather than as a Baptist or Evangelical Christian, the Western movements that became increasingly popular and widespread among the peasantry after the abolition of serfdom in 1861. Although he had migrated from Saratov to Vladikavkaz to preserve his Molokan faith, Stepan Prokhanov, Aleksandr's father, converted to Baptism in 1876, won over by the testimony of a visiting church member from Tiflis. Only five years of age when his father converted, Aleksandr was raised for most of his childhood as a Baptist, which was also the religion

19. Nicholas B. Breyfogle, *Heretics and Colonizers: Forging Russia's Empire in the South Caucasus* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005), 92, 132; I. Ia. Semenov, *Russkie v istorii Armenii* (Erevan: Lusabats, 2009), 75.

20. Ivan Stepanovich Prokhanov, *In the Cauldron of Russia, 1869–1933* (New York: All-Russian Evangelical Christian Union, 1933), 29.

21. RGIA, fond 776 (Otdelenie kantseliarii Glavnogo upravleniia po delam pechati), op. 8, d. 2015 (Ob izdanii v gor. SPb zhurnala "Dukhovnyi khristianin"), l. 9.

22. Heather J. Coleman, *Russian Baptists and Spiritual Revolution, 1905–1929* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005), 218–22; Prokhanov, *In the Cauldron of Russia*, 252.

23. Amir Aleksandrovich Khisamutdinov, *O russkikh amerikantsakh, kotorye sdelali Ameriku bogatoi: Materialy k slovar'iu* (Vladivostok: Izd-vo VGUES, 2008), 180.

listed in his internal passport as late as 1905.[24] He witnessed the spiritual struggles of his older brother, Ivan, who ultimately decided to commit his life to Christ in November 1886. On 17 January 1887—the day that Aleksandr turned 16—Ivan joined the local Vladikavkaz Baptist congregation by immersion baptism in the Terek River. In the summer of 1890, Aleksandr helped Ivan to publish an illegal, clandestine Christian journal *Beseda* (*The Conversation*), which the brothers hectographed and sent by mail to their evangelical subscribers.[25] Despite his participation in this illegal enterprise, Aleksandr was no extremist. Unlike the most radical pacifists who rejected all military service, he fulfilled his obligation as a non-commissioned officer of the Terek Corps of Engineers, shortened from six years to a few months thanks to the education he received in the Vladikavkaz Realschule. Honorably discharged in 1890, he began his medical studies in Dorpat (present-day Tartu).

Political repression in Russia encouraged him to study abroad. In 1894, the Committee of Ministers declared the nascent Russian Baptist movement a "most harmful" sect. As a direct result of the new laws, Aleksandr's father, Stepan, was exiled to Geriusy (present-day Goris, Armenia) in Elizavetpol' province. To escape the persecution, Aleksandr's older brother Ivan fled abroad in 1895.[26] Aleksandr moved to Paris to continue his medical education; he also attended courses at the liberal state-supported Protestant Theological Faculty. He then spent a year at London Hospital Medical College. By 1899, he had returned to Russia to study medicine at the University of Moscow, graduating in December 1900 as a district physician.[27]

The Society of Educated Molokans

Prokhanov's theological studies in Paris shaped his understanding of Christianity and his project to revive and reform his ancestral religion. In 1899, soon after returning to Russia, he tried to create a Society of Educated Molokans that would reconcile science and faith, a major preoccupation of his French professors. Later, as the editor and publisher of *Dukhovnyi khristianin*, he proudly highlighted his status as an auditor of the "Paris Theological Faculty," a qualification that puzzled at least one Russian Orthodox reviewer.[28]

Much of Prokhanov's thinking was influenced by the liberal unitarian Amy Gaston Charles Auguste Bonet-Maury (1842–1919), a theologian who championed freedom of

24. RGIA, f. 776, op. 8, d. 2015, l. 4.

25. Prokhanov, *In the Cauldron of Russia*, 48, 67–69, 160.

26. Prokhanov, *In the Cauldron of Russia*, 89, 115–16, 160–61; Coleman, *Russian Baptists and Spiritual Revolution*, 21–22.

27. RGIA, f. 776, op. 8, d. 2015, l. 3; Werner Benecke, "Die Allgemeine Wehrpflicht in Russland: Zwischen militärischem Anspruch und zivilen Interessen," *Journal of Modern European History* 5, no. 2 (2007): 250–51; Pavel Ivanov, "A. S. Prokhanov," *Sovremennoe slovo* (April 6, 1912).

28. Aleksandr Stepanovich Prokhanov, ed., *Dukhovnyi khristianin*: *Molokanskii religiozno-ekonomicheskii zhurnal* 1, no. 1 (Tiflis: Tipografiia Metekhskogo Tiflisskogo zamka, 1905), 47. "Tserkovno-obshchestvennaia zhizn': Molokanskii religiozno-ekonomicheskii zhurnal," *Tserkovnyia vedomosti, Pribavleniia* 19, no. 3 (1906): 134–37.

conscience, ecumenicism, and the integration of theology with science.[29] As a historian of religious liberty, Bonet-Maury was especially sympathetic to the persecuted Russian Protestants he met in his classes. Aleksandr and Ivan Prokhanov provided him with extensive information about the religious situation of Baptists in Russia.[30] Bonet-Maury admired Leo Tolstoy's religious thought; in 1896, he made a pilgrimage to the Russian novelist's estate in Iasnaia Poliana to present a personal invitation to a congress of religions to be held in Paris in 1900—an invitation Tolstoy politely declined.[31]

Bonet-Maury was also a noted ecumenicist. When Prokhanov arrived in Paris, Bonet-Maury had recently returned from the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions in Chicago, which he celebrated as a sign of progress toward religious liberty and harmony. "Men from twenty races, priests of sixteen different religions, came from five parts of the world, many dressed in their sacred vestments," Bonet-Maury wrote enthusiastically to the *Journal des débats*.[32] Comparing the Parliament to the ecumenical projects of the Roman emperor Alexander Severus and the Mughal emperor Akbar, the French theologian triumphantly concluded that "the world was ripe for a peaceful conference of the great religions of the earth." All particular religions, Bonet-Maury declared, were simply derivations of the one universal religion.[33] Some of Bonet-Maury's ecumenical spirit seems to have influenced Aleksandr Prokhanov. In articles that outlined his conception of true religion, Prokhanov also drew upon speeches given at the Parliament.[34]

Bonet-Maury was also a strong believer in the compatibility of religion and science, a conviction that Prokhanov shared. In 1899, after he had returned from France, Prokhanov attempted to organize a Society of Educated Molokans that included believers across the empire, from the Amur River to the Volga to the Caucasus—wherever Molokans had settled. He sent a copy of the society's proposed charter to Vladimir Prokof'evich Efremov, a Molokan from Siberia who was studying medicine in St. Petersburg, and asked whether there were any "intellectual sectarian youth, who were interested in and loved their sectarianism" among the Molokans on the Amur.[35] Prokhanov was also in contact with another potential member of the society, Grigorii Korotkov, a Molokan from Saratov Province studying in the Mining Institute in St. Petersburg. Yet in a letter to his older brother Ivan, Aleksandr expressed deep misgivings about

29. Gaston Bonet-Maury, *Histoire de la liberté de conscience en France depuis l'édit de Nantes jusqu'à Juillet 1870* (Paris: F. Alcan, 1900); Gaston Bonet-Maury, *Le Congrès des religions à Chicago en 1893* (Paris: Hachette, 1895); Theodore Stanton, "Professor Gaston Bonet-Maury," *Open Court*, no. 10 (1898): 630–34; "Prof. G. Bonet-Maury," *Forty Portraits and Biographical Sketches for the Fourth International Congress of Religious Liberals, Held at Boston, U.S.A., September 22–28, 1907* (n.p., 1907), 4–5.

30. Prokhanov, *In the Cauldron of Russia*, 102

31. Lev Nikolaevich Tolstoi, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii,* 90 vols. (Moscow: Gos. izd-vo khudozh. lit-ry, 1928–1958), 69: 198–201.

32. Quoted in Gustave de Molinari, *Science et religion* (Paris: Guillaumin, 1894), 238.

33. Quoted in Molinari, *Science et religion*, 255.

34. Aleksandr Stepanovich Prokhanov, "Fundament nashego molokanstva," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 1, no. 2 (1906): 1–4; Aleksandr Stepanovich Prokhanov, "Fundament upovaniia dukhovnykh khristian (O priiatii i otluchenii za veru)," *Dukhovnyi khristianin*, no. 7 (June 1906): 9–15. See below for a fuller discussion of these articles.

35. Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (GARF), f. 102, Departament politsii Osobyi otdel (DPOO), 1898 g., op. 226, d. 12, *chast'* 2, l. 3

his hope for the Molokan community, which he regarded as crippled by ignorance, fanaticism, and superstition: "I asked myself, can I live and do something among the sectarians in the Caucasus? Is some compromise possible between me and this superstitious, fanatical milieu? Can any work be done among them? Could there be a society there where I could feel at home?"[36]

Unfortunately for Prokhanov, the czarist police, increasingly fearful of radical sectarian religion, perlustrated his correspondence and passed on their intelligence to the overprocurator of the Holy Synod, who immediately turned it over to the Synodal missionary Vasilii Mikhailovich Skvortsov (1859–1932). First in a speech to the Tauride Missionary Congress of May 1899 and then on the pages of his journal *Missionerskoe obozrenie* (*Missionary Survey*), Skvortsov publicly critiqued Aleksandr's attempt to reconcile science and religion. Quoting tendentiously from the organization's charter, Skvortsov presented the new association as godless and nihilistic, even though it simply reflected the rationalistic, liberal Protestantism of the French theological faculty.[37] Prokhanov's charter called for "the transformation of traditional ... sectarianism with the help of a scientific, but religious worldview."[38] In particular, the charter rejected "the literal inspiration and authority of the Bible" in scientific questions such as "the origin of our solar system" and of humanity. While affirming the existence and unity of God, the charter denied the Trinity, the deity of Christ, original sin, the devil, and the eternity of hell. At the same time, it affirmed that human beings possessed free will, moral responsibility, immortal souls, and a natural sense of right and wrong.

Much to Prokhanov's bewilderment, Skvortsov's attack was picked up by right-wing newspapers, such as the nationalistic St. Petersburg daily *Svet* [*The Light*]. Dismayed by the way his society was mischaracterized, Aleksandr wrote his younger brother, Vasilii, on February 2, 1900, asking how a newspaper could have learned about the society and published its founding document. He asked Vasilii to burn the letter after reading it, to no avail; by the time it reached Vladikavkaz, the letter had already been intercepted. A copy remains in the police archive to this day.[39]

The 1905 Revolution and the Struggle for Religious Freedom

His hopes for a Society of Educated Molokans stifled by the authorities, Prokhanov continued his medical studies, moving to St. Petersburg to enroll in the Imperial Military Medical Academy, where he defended his doctoral dissertation in histology in 1910.[40] During these eventful years, he witnessed the 1905 revolution from his seat in the capital. Mass political and social protest forced Nicholas II (r. 1894–1917) to reform

36. GARF, f. 102 DPOO, 1898 g., op. 226, d. 12 *chast'* 2, l. 15.

37. Vasilii Mikhailovich Skvortsov, "O starykh sobytiiakh i novykh iavleniiakh v oblasti sektantstva i missionerskogo dela (Rech' pri otkrytii Tavricheskogo missionerskogo s"ezda 24 maia 1899)," *Missionerskoe obozrenie*, no. 10 (October 1899): 312.

38. Skvortsov, "O starykh sobytiiakh," 310.

39. GARF f. 102, DPOO 1898, op. 226 d. 12 ch. 2, l. 19.

40. Aleksandr Stepanovich Prokhanov, *K voprosu o patologo-anamoticheskikh izmeneniiakh miokarda pri ostrom i khronicheskom oteke serdtsa*, Seriia doktorskikh dissertatsii dopushchennykh k zashchite v Voenno-meditsinskoi akademii v 1909–1910 uchebnom godu, vol. 27 (St. Petersburg: Tip. I. V. Leont'eva, 1910).

his autocratic system, expand religious toleration, and introduce a legislative assembly. On 17 April 1905, the czar issued a manifesto of religious toleration, providing a legal foundation for nonconformist associations, publications, congresses, and conferences.[41] One month later, on May 18, Prokhanov petitioned the Interior Ministry for permission to establish a monthly periodical called *Dukhovnyi khristianin* (*The Spiritual Christian*), which would serve as a thick journal both for the faith of his ancestral community and for the radical Christian vision that he hoped to propagate. The journal's twelve-point program envisioned historical, theological, and legal articles related to the Molokans, as well as short stories, literary essays, debates, and book reviews. The journal would also cover "other Russian and foreign sects and confessions," especially "the English sect called the Quakers," hinting at Prokhanov's aspirations for his own movement: the Society of Friends might serve as a model for the kind of Christianity he hoped to nurture in Russia.[42]

Permission from the St. Petersburg authorities, who had to check with the police and the governors, took several months—too long for an impatient Prokhanov, who traveled back to Tiflis so that he could make his appeal directly to the newly appointed viceroy of the Caucasus, Illarion Vorontsov-Dashkov (1837–1916, r. 1905–1916). Mass political unrest had led the Senate to reestablish the viceroyalty in February 1905. In early September, the viceroy met a delegation of Molokan elders, led by Prokhanov, and allowed them to launch the journal, as long as it was subject to preliminary censorship.[43] A few weeks later, on 3 November, Prokhanov also finally received permission to publish his journal from the Main Directorate of the Press in St. Petersburg.[44]

The Legendary Decree of 1805

With the very first issue of his journal, Prokhanov faced the challenge of reconciling his commitment to scientific truth with his desire to revive and strengthen Russian Spiritual Christianity. For decades, Russian Molokans had treasured the conviction that in 1805, Emperor Alexander I had issued a decree granting them the liberty to practice their faith. By the late 19th century, Molokans were circulating many manuscript copies of this mythical decree and the petition to which it responded.[45] Over the summer of 1905, Molokans immediately took advantage of the April declaration of toleration to organize congresses celebrating the centenary of the decree in the villages of

41. *Polnoe sobranie zakonov Rossiiskoi imperii*, sobranie 3-e, vol. XXV (1905) (St. Petersburg: Gosudarstvennaia tipografiia, 1908), 257–58; Paul W. Werth, *The Tsar's Foreign Faiths: Toleration and the Fate of Religious Freedom in Imperial Russia*, Oxford Studies in Modern European History (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 201–06; Coleman, *Russian Baptists*, 22–26.

42. RGIA, f. 776 , op. 8, d. 2015, l. 15.

43. Prokhanov 1905 Nov-Dec: 4–6. An imperial decree in November removed the requirement for preliminary censorship.

44. RGIA, f. 776, op. 8, d. 2015.

45. Nikolai Dingel′shtedt, *Zakavkazskie sektanty v ikh semeinom i religioznom bytu* (Tipografiia M. M. Stasiulevicha, 1885), 93–94; Frolov, "Religioznoe dvizhenie dukhovnykh khristian Molokan," 41; Aleksei L'vovich Vysotskii, "K voprosu o polozhenii molokan v tsarstvovanie imperatora Aleksandra I (Proshenie na vysochaishee imia molokan Tambovskoi i Voronezhskoi gubernii ot 22 iiunia 1805 g., s prilozhennym k nemu molokanskim obriadnikom)," *Izvestiia Tavricheskoi uchenoi arkhivnoi komissii* 32/33 (1902): 18–46.

Vorontsovka (present-day Tashir, Armenia) in July and Astrakhanka, Tauride Province (today in Zaporizhia Oblast', Ukraine) in early September.[46] These congresses celebrated the centenary of the decree, which established a venerable pedigree for official recognition of Spiritual Christianity.

Prokhanov fully supported these congresses. At the same time, he was also aware of the many flaws in the documentary evidence for the legendary ukase, which was extant only in Molokan manuscripts. According to these sources, three Molokan representatives—the townsman Petr Zhuravtsov of Tambov Province and the peasants Maksim Losev and Matvei Motylev of Voronezh Province—appeared before the emperor in July 1805 with a written request that they and their co-religionists receive permission to worship God in their own way. "Free us from the yoke of slavery of the Orthodox religion and from the tortures and slanders against us by the priests...free us from the demands of the lords and the torments of the chief officials and from the parish priests.... Forbid them from entering our homes with their demands so that they might never be able to burden us with slanders through false denunciations."[47]

The manuscripts then offer a mythologized account of the emperor's response to the petition. Alexander convokes a committee of his advisors, including Metropolitan Amvrosii (Andrei Ivanovich Podobedov, 1742–1818) of St. Petersburg (incorrectly identified as archbishop); the overprocurator of the Holy Synod Aleksandr Nikolaevich Golitsyn (1773–1844); the interior minister Viktor Pavlovich Kochubei (1768–1834); the future field marshal (and hero of the Napoleonic wars) Mikhail Illarionovich Kutuzov (1745–1813), the minister of justice Petr Vasil'evich Lopukhin (1753–1827), the prominent landowner Count Sergei Vasil'evich Sheremetev (1792–1866) (whose serfs included many Molokans), and Mikhail Mikhailovich Speranskii (1772–1839), the author of much of Alexander I's reformist legislation. Except for Sheremetev, all of the royal counselors —even the Orthodox archbishop—support the Molokans' petition, noting the impossibility of preventing them from reading the Word of God. For his own venal motives, Sheremetev, the owner of Molokan serfs, opposes the czar's merciful decision: the law should recognize only ancient faith traditions, not "those who have fallen away from the Orthodox Church and its law."[48] Over Sheremetev's objections, the czar decides in favor of the Molokans, who "are not to be hindered in the thoughts of their faith nor to be constrained in the hope that they uphold."[49]

Although no copy of this petition has been found outside of the Molokan manuscript tradition, it may well have a historical basis. On several different occasions, Molokans did petition Emperor Alexander for relief from the pressures put upon them by lo-

46. "Stoletnii molokanskii iubilei," *Dukhovnyi khristianin*, no. 1 (December 1905): 6–38.; Ivan Fedos'evich Kolesnikov, "Iubileinyi s"ezd v Vorontsovke," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 1, no. 3 (February 1906): 31–33; Daniil Evteevich Aver'ianov, "S"ezd v Astrakhanke," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 1, no. 3 (February 1906): 33–40.

47. A. V. Loskutov, M. I. Bletkin, and M. M. Maksimov, eds., *Otchet o Vserossiiskom s"ezde dukhovnykh khristian (molokan), sostoiavshemsia 22-go iiulia 1905 g. v selenii Vorontsovke, Tiflisskoi gubernii, Borchalinskogo uezda, po povodu 100-letnego iubileia samostoiatelnogo ikh religioznogo sushchestvovaniia v Rossii so dnia opublikovaniia vysochaishego ukaza blazhennnoi pamiati blagoslovennogo monarkha Aleksandra Pavlovicha, ot 22-go iiulia 1805 g. 1805–1905 gg.* (Tip. Gub. pravl., 1907), 20; Vysotskii, "K voprosu o polozhenii Molokan," 28–29; "Stoletnii molokanskii iubilei," 13.

48. "Stoletnii molokanskii iubilei," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 1, no. 1 (December 1905): 16.

49. "Stoletnii molokanskii iubilei," 16

cal officials.[50] However, the Molokan record of Alexander's response has clearly been mythologized. The text contains several anachronisms that reveal it as a forgery. For example, Kutuzov is identified as a field marshal and holds the honorific "Smolenskii," titles that he received only in 1812 during the war against Napoleon. Although he never served in the military, Speranskii is given the rank of cavalry general. Vasilii Sheremetev, the greedy landowner, was only twelve years old in July 1805, and so could not have participated in an imperial council.[51]

For his part, Prokhanov was perfectly aware that the 1805 decree of religious freedom was a fiction, albeit a useful one. In the first issue of his journal, he published a critical analysis of the manuscript by an author (probably Prokhanov himself) who used the pseudonym Zealot. Zealot declared that "no educated person in the world" would accept the Molokan manuscripts as genuine records of a czarist ukase. Not only did these manuscripts contain many orthographic and grammatical errors, but they also incorporated the internal debates of the czar's advisors—something that no official decree would include. The Molokan manuscripts recorded only a story [*rasskaz*], but a story that did have some basis in the truth. After all, Alexander I was characterized by remarkable religiosity and tolerance, showed interest in Russian sectarianism, and even conversed readily with the leaders of minority religious movements, including even the infamous Castrates [*skoptsy*]. One could not entirely preclude the possibility that Alexander had decreed freedom of religious confession for the Molokans, Zealot concluded, even if the version preserved by the Molokan community was not authentic. Molokans now had a duty to show the world that such a decree really did exist by scouring the archives and gathering oral traditions from the oldest members of the communities where the descendants of the petitioners still lived. Zealot ended his critique by hinting that the petitioners' surnames, which were each derived from the names of animals, might belong to folklore rather than history: Zhuravtsev came from the Russian word for crane (*zhuravl'*); Losev, from elk (*los'*); and Motylev, from butterfly (*motylek*).[52] Later, Prokhanov argued that the legendary decree had a historical basis in Alexander I's efforts to mitigate persecution of religious dissenters through specific edicts issued in 1800, 1801, and 1803.[53]

Authentic or not, the legend of the czar who graciously responded to the humble request of his dissenting subjects was valuable for the Molokans who were seeking to expand religious liberty and obtain a more respectable position in Russian society during a period of revolutionary upheaval. The story, with dates amenable to commemoration, offered a convenient rallying point to unite the theologically and politically disparate Molokan movement that included both wealthy monarchist merchants and

50. Frolov, "Religioznoe dvizhenie dukhovnykh khristian molokan," 97–99; Vysotskii, "K voprosu o polozhenii Molokan," 20–22.

51. "Stoletnii molokanskii iubilei," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 1, no. 1 (November-December 1905): 14.

52. Revnitel', "Kriticheskii razbor dokumenta," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 1, no. 1 (November-December 1905): 20–22.

53. Aleksandr Stepanovich Prokhanov, "Podlinnyi ukaz tsaria Aleksandra I-go naiden," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 1, no. 3 (February 1906): 28–30; Aleksandr Stepanovich Prokhanov, "Kak my napali na sled startsa Zhuravtsova," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 1, no. 5 (April 1906): 64–70.

revolutionary apocalyptic prophets. Molokans of all persuasions continued to celebrate anniversaries of the decree through the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.[54]

Prokhanov's Vision: A Rational Religion of Love

Through his journal, Prokhanov sought to shape a new kind of Russian Christianity, an alternative to both the established Orthodox Church and the Western evangelical Protestantism propounded by his father and brothers. His vision called for a popular (*narodnoe*) and democratic Christianity, characterized by a love that could overcome doctrinal division. At the same time, he hoped to bring Molokanism into dialogue with Western biblical scholarship and with the global ecumenical movement. On the pages of his journal, he brought Molokan elders and leaders into conversation with each other, with other sectarians, and even with members of the revolutionary intelligentsia.

Prokhanov celebrated the unique contribution of Spiritual Christians, whose approach to faith, ethics, and scriptural interpretation was distinct from Western Protestantism. In an article titled, "We Must Return to Our Own Originality," Prokhanov warned of a "silent struggle ... between our original Spiritual Christian theology and a foreign theology, planted in our Zion with unusual zeal and energy by an entire special organization!"[55] Molokans were too quick to give up their theology and practice. In too many congregations, "the former patriarchal order of worship, consisting of mutual discussions while seated," had been replaced by a single preacher who alone had the right to speak. Likewise, Spiritual Christians also abandoned their own theology, developed consensually over many years of respectful dialogue. "And our theological views! All of them, beginning with baptism and ending with the dogmas of the Trinity, the Second Coming, and the resurrection of the dead—all of our original Spiritual Christian concepts have been transformed by the thirty-year influence of foreign doctrines!"[56] Unlike Baptism, which was committed to the literal interpretation of the canonical scriptures, Russian Spiritual Christianity was marked by "freedom of spirit ... which is the essence of our hope and without which we will turn into dead slaves of the letter, of ritual, and of an iron presbyterian bureaucracy."[57]

Progressive theology was not to be found abroad, but within the Molokan tradition itself. In particular, Prokhanov lionized the mid-nineteenth-century Spiritual Christian elder Ivan Andreevich Pashatskii (fl. 1860s) as a model for his religious project.[58] A

54. San Francisco Obshchina dukhovnykh khristian molokan postoiannykh, *Otchet Dukhovnykh khristian molokan (postoiannykh) po povodu 150-ti letniago iubileia samostoiatel'nago ikh religioznago sushchestvovaniia so dnia opublikovaniia vysochaishago ukaza gosudaria rossiiskago prestola Aleksandra Pavlovicha ot 22-go iiulia, 1805 goda i 50-letniago iubileia so dnia pereseleniia ... iz Rossii v Soed. shtaty Ameriki, sostoiavshagosia 22-23 i 24-go iiulia, 1955 goda v gorode San-Frantsisko* ([Obshchina], 1955); Ivan Aleksandrov, "'Vozliubivshie slovesnoe moloko': Molokane otprazdnovali iubilei darovaniia svobody veroispovedaniia," *NG-Religii*, October 5, 2005; Arkadii Sosnov, "Poslanie ot molokan," *Poisk*, August 26, 2016.

55. Aleksandr Stepanovich Prokhanov, "My dolzhny vozvratit'sia k svoei samobytnosti," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 1, no. 6 (May 1906): 47.

56. Prokhanov, "My dolzhny vozvratit'sia," 47.

57. Prokhanov, "My dolzhny vozvratit'sia," 48.

58. "Molokanskaia bogoslovskaia shkola dlia podgotovleniia nastavnikov i uchitelei molokanskogo veroucheniia imeni Ivana Andreevicha Pashatskogo, nezabvennogo Saratovskogo nastavnika i pervogo nashego bogoslova," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 1, no. 2 (January 1906): 33–56.

wealthy Molokan merchant in Saratov Province, Pashatskii wrote a defense of his faith in 1862, which was smuggled out of Russia and published three years later by Alexander Herzen's Free Russian Typography in Geneva. Fully committed to progressive revelation, Pashatskii expressed the conviction that future generations would advance in their knowledge of divine truth: "As for our religious confession, we wait and hope for the day when understanding of the infinite truth will be explained even more by our descendants who will have the zeal to penetrate even deeper into the sense of the divine revelation, and therefore we do not pile anathemas on such people, but on the contrary, we tell them, 'rejoice.'"[59] In this spirit, Pashatskii interpreted Adam and Eve's exile from Paradise (Genesis 3) as a necessary step in humanity's spiritual evolution, not as a punishment for original sin. Adam's innocence was no better than that of brute beasts; to advance spiritually, he had to eat of the tree of knowledge of good and evil. Driven from Paradise, humanity must now "by their own efforts gain the blessing of union with God."[60] Convinced that Molokans needed their own version of the Bible, independent of the Orthodox Church, Pashatskii financed a translation of the scriptures, which was never completed. One of the translators was arrested and exiled to Siberia, his work confiscated and destroyed. All that remained of Pashatskii's project was a partial translation of the psalms kept in the personal possession of a Molokan elder.[61]

Despite his expressed suspicion of Protestantism, Prokhanov also drew on his training at the University of Paris to help Molokan presbyters prepare edifying discourses on scriptural passages. In a series of articles, Prokhanov translated and paraphrased many of the homiletical anecdotes collected by the German Methodist preacher August Rodemeyer (1837–1899).[62] Prokhanov published biblical criticism and theological essays in an effort to introduce these tools to Spiritual Christian leaders. In his lectures and writings, Prokhanov consistently defended the Septuagint and the Slavonic Bible, with their inclusion of deutero-canonical books such as Tobit, against the Protestant preference for the Masoretic text. In the year before his death, Prokhanov published an introductory textbook on the Old Testament for Molokan families and schools that deliberately undermined the doctrine of biblical inerrancy by carefully unveiling the contingent nature of the process of canonization and by surveying the many apocryphal and lost works that had failed to become part of the Bible. He attacked literal readings of scripture, preferring freer and more figurative interpretations. He also emphasized the inferiority of the Old Testament, with its burdensome ritual prescriptions and prohibitions, to the New Testament, the covenant of the Spirit, which had replaced it.[63]

---

59. [Ivan Andreevich Pashatskii], *Veroispovedanie dukhovnykh khristian, obyknovenno nazyvaemykh molokanami* (Geneva: Vol'naia russkaia tipogragiia, 1865), xv–xvi.

60. [Pashatskii], *Veroispovedanie*, 9.

61. "Molokanskaia bogoslovskaia shkola," 37–38.

62. [August Rodemeyer], "Bud'te gotovy," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 1, no. 4 (1906): 3–6; [August Rodemeyer], "Iskry Bozhiia. Dushespasitel'nye khristiianskiia pritchi dlia besed i propovedei.," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 1, no. 4 (1906): 38–44.; A. S., "Tsarstvo Bozhie vnutri vas (pritcha)—iz Rodemeiera," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 1, no. 3 (1906): 6–8.

63. Aleksandr Stepanovich Prokhanov, *Zakon Bozhii Vetkhogo zaveta ili vvedenie v Vetkhii zavet* (Tipografiia I. V. Leont'eva, 1911).

Prokhanov did not live long enough to complete supplementary volumes introducing the New Testament and his approach to philosophy.

In a series of articles published in the first years of his journal, Prokhanov set out his understanding of the foundation of Molokanism, drawing several of his illustrations from the 1893 World's Parliament of Religions held in Chicago. For example, Prokhanov used a story recounted at the Parliament by the Jain teacher Virachand Raghavji Gandhi (1864–1901) about a group of blind men who argue over the nature of an elephant that they have encountered. One, who touched only the animal's leg, believes it to be similar to a big, round post; another, who felt only the ear, imagines it to be a winnowing fan; a third, who came into contact with the tail, thinks of it as a tapering stick. Only when a bystander points out that each man has but a partial understanding do they recognize the necessity of examining all viewpoints before coming to a definite conclusion.[64]

In another article, to demonstrate the superiority of Molokanism as a religion of love, Prokhanov cited a Russian folktale that the art critic Prince Sergei Mikhailovich Volkonskii (1860–1937) had recounted at the Parliament—a slightly different version of the tale incorporated by Fedor Dostoevskii into his last novel, *The Brothers Karamazov* (1879–80). A wicked woman, damned to eternal torment, almost escapes from hell thanks to the single good deed that she performed during her life. Because she had once given a carrot (an onion in Dostoevskii's rendering) to a hungry beggar, God instructs an angel to use that carrot to pull her out of hell. But as the angel lifts her up, another sinner grabs tightly to her legs so that he, too, might be carried to heaven. Then a third clings to the second, and a fourth to the third until an endless chain of humanity stretches from the tiny carrot to the fiery abyss. Afraid that the carrot would not withstand the weight of so many people, the woman cries out, "Leave me alone! Get your hands off me! After all, the carrot is mine!" As soon as she pronounced the word "mine," the carrot suddenly breaks in two, plunging all the sinners back into the pit.[65]

Curiously, neither Volkonskii nor Prokhanov showed any awareness of Dostoevskii's use of the folktale. As Gary Saul Morson has pointed out, Dostoevskii employed the story to illustrate his vision of the Christian life as consisting of small, practical acts of

64. Prokhanov, "Fundament upovaniia," 9–11. Prokhanov cites the work of the Moscow Theological Academy professor Vasilii Aleksandrovich Sokolov (1851–1918), *Parlament religii v Chikago* (Sergiev Posad: A. I. Snegirevoi, 1894).

65. Aleksandr Stepanovich Prokhanov, "Fundament nashego molokanstva," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 1, no. 2 (1906): 1–4. Prokhanov quoted the story from V. A. Sokolov, "Parlament religii v Chikago," *Bogoslovskii vestnik* 1, no. 3 (1894): 502–4. The original can be found in Serge Wolkonsky, *Addresses* (J.C. Winship & Co., 1893), 68–70. Fedor Mikhailovich Dostoevskii's version is in *Brat'ia Karamazovy*, *Sobranie sochinenii v 15-ii tomakh* (Leningrad: Nauka, Leningradskoe otdelenie, 1991), 9: 394, 685–86. In a letter of 16 September 1879 to his editor Nikolai Liubimov, Dostoevskii explained that he had recorded his version of the tale directly from a peasant woman. George Gibian, "Dostoevskij's Use of Russian Folklore," *The Journal of American Folklore* 69, no. 273 (1956): 248–49. N. K. Piksanov, "Dostoevskii i fol'klor," *Sovetskaia etnografiia*, no. 1–2 (1934): 161–62. Although Dostoevskii claimed that he was the first to put this oral tale into written form, other folklorists had already published similar versions. See "Stranstvovanie po tomu svetu," in *Zapiski o iuzhnoi Rusi*, ed. Panteleimon Oleksandrovych Kulish (St. Petersburg: A. Iakobson, 1856), 307–8; "Sankt Peters Mutter," in *Anmerkungen zu den Kinder-u. Hausmarchen der Bruder Grimm*, ed. Johannes Bolte and Jiří Polívka, vol. 3 (Leipzig: Dieterich′sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1918).

kindness rather than dramatic, ostentatious miracles.[66] By contrast, for Volkonskii, the lesson of the tale was that every religion had a portion of the truth and that everyone should share the portion of the truth that they possessed: "If any individual, any community, any congregation, any church, possesses a portion of truth and of good, let that truth shine for everybody, let that good become the property of everyone. The substitution of the word 'mine' by the word 'ours,' and that of 'ours' by the word 'everyone's,' this is what will secure a fruitful result to our collective efforts as well as to our individual activities."[67]

The lesson that Prokhanov drew was quite different and it pointed to the superiority of Spiritual Christianity over its rivals. Molokans, unlike other Christian groups, emphasized love over dogma and allowed for major doctrinal disagreements within their spiritual family. Whereas other groups demanded creedal purity even in relatively minor matters, Molokans could disagree over basic elements of the faith and still love one another and embrace each other in Christian fellowship. For Prokhanov, the folktale offered a way of vaunting his own natal Molokanism over other movements, especially the Baptism of his brother and father. "We Molokans recognize the deep truth in the words of the Apostle Paul that love is the highest of the Christian virtues."[68] Clearly pointing the finger at the Baptist movement, Aleksandr Prokhanov went on to criticize the classical Protestant emphasis on faith, which, in his view, contradicted Paul's teaching. "There are people who place faith higher than love and on this foundation construct their salvation and their ecclesiastical and social life."[69] Such Christians associated only with those who shared their dogmas and excluded all those who, for reasons of conscience, understood dogmatic questions (baptism, communion) differently. They preached "nothing other than self-love (*my* carrot), fanaticism, intolerance, and contempt for the others who have, in their opinion, gone astray."[70]

Under Prokhanov's philosophy, *The Spiritual Christian* became a lively venue for opposing views on many doctrinal and ritual questions. Should the text of the New Testament be the final, infallible rule of faith for Christians? Or did the Holy Spirit continue to provide new guidance and revelation?[71] Molokan elders debated whether the prophecies of Christ's Second Coming should be taken literally or metaphorically.[72] Likewise, they argued about the resurrection of the dead, with many denying the possibility of any physical resuscitation. Molokans were divided over the Apostle Paul's command to "greet one another with a holy kiss" (Romans 16:16). Some exchanged holy kisses as an essential part of their weekly assemblies; others considered the practice to be

66. Gary Saul Morson, "The God of Onions: *The Brothers Karamazov* and the Mythic Prosaic," in *A New Word on the Brothers Karamazov* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 107–24.

67. Wolkonsky, *Addresses*, 70.

68. Prokhanov, "Fundament nashego molokanstva," 2.

69. Prokhanov, "Fundament nashego molokanstva," 2

70. Prokhanov, "Fundament nashego molokanstva," 2.

71. Nikifor Vasil'evich Rakhmanov and Dukhovnyi uchenik Gospoda, "Ob istochnikakh verouchenii" *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 1, no. 9 (August 1906), 4–15.

72. Dukhovnyi uchenik Gospoda, "Besedy startsev o vtorom prishestvii," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 1, no. 9 (August 1906), 34–40.

a form of debauchery. Although most Molokans held funerary repasts and prayed for their dead, many rejected these practices as pagan.

The nature of the Godhead also provoked debates on the pages of *The Spiritual Christian.* Although many Molokan statements of faith, dating back to the early nineteenth century, affirmed the Trinity, many Molokan elders rejected traditional Trinitarianism. For example, in his 1862 confession of faith, Pashatskii dismissed the idea of a three-person Godhead as "the absurd doctrine" of the Greco-Russian Church. "God is one and indivisible," Pashatskii firmly declared, anticipating Prokhanov's own unitarianism. Father, Son, and Holy Spirit were simply different names for the same being.[73] Likewise, many Spiritual Christians rejected the idea that Jesus Christ, as the Son of God, could have had a human body. Instead, they reasoned, his body was like that of the angel Raphael in the deutero-canonical book of Tobit; consisting of spirit, it only seemed to be physical.

Dukhovnyi khristianin published many articles to help congregations with legal problems, especially the complex process of registration established in 1906.[74] It also welcomed writers from outside the community of Spiritual Christians. Baptists and Russian Orthodox missionaries also contributed to the journal, participating in debates about immersion baptism, the authority of scripture, and the necessity of temples. Such articles were invariably paired with Spiritual Christians offering a different point of view. Tolstoyans, vegetarians, and revolutionaries also participated in the ongoing conversation about true religion. Viktor Aleksandrovich Danilov (1851–1916), a Populist who had been exiled to Siberia for his participation in the 1874 "Going to the People" movement, expounded on his own vision of a rational religion, criticizing Leo Tolstoy for failing to live up fully to his ideals.[75] Iurii Osipovich Iakubovskii (1857–1929), a Tolstoyan in Turkestan, made his case for ethical vegetarianism.[76] The politically engaged Pavel Vasil'evich Ivanov (who later used the name Ivanov-Klyshnikov, 1885?–1937), the son of a prominent Baptist missionary and a future leader of the Baptist movement, also enjoyed close ties to the Socialist Revolutionaries; he regularly contributed a column on contemporary politics for the journal.[77]

---

73. [Pashatskii], *Veroispovedanie*, 5.

74. T. G. Pankratov, "Bez registratsii obshchiny," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 6, no. 10 (1911): 67–69; Il'ia Kishko, "Registratsiia obshchin v Rossii. Iz sela Ivanovki, Novouzen. u. Samar. Gub.," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 6, no. 1 (1911): 38–45; Mikhail Kursiakov, "Registratsiia obshchin," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 6, no. 4 (1906): 39–40.

75. Viktor Aleksandrovich Danilov, "Chelovek bez shapki," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 5, no. 12 (1910): 25–36; Viktor Aleksandrovich Danilov, "Otvet na 50 voprosov cheloveka religii-znaniia," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 5, no. 11 (1910): 3–27; V Danilov, "Zhivoi 'Ikonostas,'" *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 10, no. 1 (1915): 31–43; Viktor Aleksandrovich Danilov, "Sushchnost' i znachenie religii v zhizni chelovechestva," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 5, no. 11 (1910): 27–33.

76. Iu. O. Iakubovskii, "Chem pitat'sia razumnym sushchestvam," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 5, no. 12 (December 1910): 63–71; Peter Brang, *Ein unbekanntes Russland: Kulturgeschichte vegetarischer Lebensweisen von den Anfängen bis zur Gegenwart* (Cologne, Germany: Böhlau, 2002), 210.

77. A. Dolotov, "Nutro religii," *Sibirskie ogni*, no. 1 (February 1929): 139; Coleman, *Russian Baptists*, 253, n. 3; 254, n. 27.

Conclusion

Aleksandr Prokhanov's tragic death on April 2, 1912, from typhus contracted from a patient whom he was treating in the Tiflis hospital, put an end to his personal participation in the Molokan revival of the early twentieth century. He was unable to realize his dream of a pure religion of love, where doctrine, ritual, hierarchy, and institutions yielded to spiritual freedom (*svoboda dukha*).

Prokhanov's wife, Anastasiia Titovna (née Fefelova), the daughter of a prominent Molokan who had joined the Baptist movement, took over the editorship of the journal, with help from a circle of like-minded supporters. *Dukhovnyi khristianin* continued to be published until the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Prokhanov's democratic vision of Christianity animated the journal throughout its existence. It published verses and stories written by Spiritual Christians from across the empire. It also published debates among Spiritual Christians over theology and ritual, including such questions as the Second Coming of Christ, the nature of conversion, the place of works in salvation, the place of the Old Testament, and the appropriateness of praying for the dead. Prokhanov and his successors actively solicited essays on the history and practices of Spiritual Christianity throughout the empire. The journal gave space to widely differing visions of Spiritual Christianity. On the one hand, it included missives from the apocalyptic and radically pacifist followers of the Molokan prophet Maksim Rudometkin (1818–1877), who fled to the United States to escape persecution and military service. On the other hand, the journal celebrated the service of Molokan soldiers fighting in the Caucasus during World War I. The journal joyfully greeted the February Revolution of 1917, which led to Nicholas II's abdication. However, the *Spiritual Christian* did not limit itself to Molokan voices alone. It included debates between Molokans and Baptists, Molokans and Orthodox missionaries. It published accounts from other religious minorities, including the followers of Leo Tolstoy, the community of "New Israel" who were led by the Voronezh peasant Vasilii Semenovich Lubkov (1869–1937?), and the charismatic teetotaling peasant preachers Ivan Alekseevich Churikov (1861–1933) and Ivan Koloskov, who, though Orthodox, were suspected of heresy by the church hierarchy.[78] Ultimately, the journal succumbed to a lack of funds and the repression of the Bolshevik Revolution. Molokans continued to publish in the 1920s, but these publications represented the work of the official Molokan religious denomination, dissolved in the first five-year plan. The democratic and utopian vision of Christians united in spirit, perhaps always unrealistic, did not long survive the Russian empire, with its much different understanding of democracy, citizenship, and the church-state relationship.

78. Semen Antonovich Sushkov, "Golos Novogo Izrailia: Put' k poznaniiu Boga i Tsarstviia Boga na zemle," *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 6, no. 4 (1911): 54–57; I. M. Vel'mozhin, "Sredi izrail'tian (molitvennye sobraniia molodezhi i ikh prepony)." *Dukhovnyi khristianin* 10, no. 9 (September 1915): 78–82; Page Herrlinger, *Holy Sobriety in Modern Russia: A Faith Healer and His Followers* (Ithaca, NY: NIU Series in Slavic, East European, and Eurasian Studies, Cornell University Press, 2023). Unfortunately, Herrlinger's work is marred by its uncritical use of the fraudulent memoir *I Was Stalin's Bodyguard* (London: F. Muller, 1952) by the notorious serial forger Grigorii Zinov'evich Besedovskii (1896–1951), writing under the pseudonym "Achmed Amba." On Besedovskii, see François Kersaudy, "Quelques faux ouvrages remarquables sur l'URSS," *Communisme: Revue d'etudes pluridisciplinaires*, no. 29–31 (1992): 6–25.; N. Galay, "Atomzaren-Geflunker," *Ost-Probleme* 23 (1955): 934–35; Paul W. Blackstock, "'Books for Idiots': False Soviet 'Memoirs,'" *Russian Review* 25, no. 3 (1966): 285–96.

J. Eugene Clay is associate professor of religious studies at Arizona State University, where he writes and lectures about religious movements in Russia and Eurasia, the relationship between religion and nationalism, and the encounters of the world religions. He is the editor of *Beasts, Humans, and Transhumans in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance* (Brepols 2020). His research has been published in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, the *Journal of Church and State*, *Church History, Folklorica*, *Nova Religio*, and other scholarly journals.