CHAPTER FOUR

MYSTICAL ORTHODOXY, PROGRESSIVE PIETISM AND ESOTERIC SCIENCE: THE ECLECTIC WORLDVIEW OF FEOFAN PROKOPOVICH (1681–1736)

Introduction

Archbishop Feofan Prokopovich (1681–1736) was undoubtedly the most influential ecclesiastical figure in Petrine Russia and is rightly regarded as the chief ideologist of Peter the Great’s reforms of the Russian State.¹ Prokopovich only arrived in the Russian citadel of reform – St. Petersburg – in October 1716 after being summoned by the tsar from his post as Professor and Rector of the renowned Kiev Academy late in 1715. Thenceforth the Ukrainian cleric quickly established himself as Peter’s principal church ally; a process no doubt accelerated by a series of powerful panegyrics extolling the virtues of the tsar’s ideology of absolute rule. In 1718, Prokopovich was appointed Archbishop of Pskov and was commissioned by the tsar to formulate the *Dukhovnyi reglament* (Ecclesiastical Regulation), which was published and enacted in 1721. This seminal document provided the blueprint for the radical transformation of the Russian Church along the lines of the pre-existing administrative college system and outlined the manner in which a Holy Synod would replace the Patriarchy.

In addition to theology and oratory, Prokopovich’s abundant intellectual abilities were utilized by the tsar in many other branches of learning. He was the author, for example, of a historical account of the reign of Peter the Great up until the Battle of Poltava (*Istoriiia Imperatora Petra Velikago*, 1773) and in 1717 assembled a table of Russian rulers from the reign of Vladimir I. There is considerable evidence that he penned *Pravda voli Monarshei* (The Justice of the Monarch’s Right) in 1722, which drew extensively on the theories of Samuel Pufendorf and Hugo Grotius in order to justify Peter the Great’s right to absolute rule and he also made a


In this chapter, I will seek to challenge long-held attitudes regarding the belief-system underpinning Prokopovich’s espousal of progressive, ‘enlightened’ policies. This approach will seek to broaden our perception of the Ukrainian cleric by illustrating his eclectic worldview, which I argue drew heavily on elements of Christian mysticism, chiliasm and esotericism. In particular, I hope to suggest that the so-called ‘enlightened’ outlook of Prokopovich actually rested on three theological and philosophical pillars: 1) Pietist Protestantism; 2) an Orthodox faith based on the writings of Eastern Church Fathers and 3) an esoteric worldview that embraced eclectic elements of Aristotelianism, Christian Neo-Platonism and Hermeticism. Thus, I will argue that an embrace of modern, rational science did not fundamentally fuel the momentum for reform enacted by Prokopovich. Instead, one can see a uniquely Russian (or more accurately Ukrainian) Early Modern expression of eclecticism that incorporated Reformed Protestant chiliasm and Biblical exegesis, the distinct mysticism of early Eastern Church Fathers and a continuing belief in occult correspondences and powers.

Prokopovich’s staunch advocacy of state and church reform immediately courted controversy in Russia and undoubtedly contributed to subsequent polarised, clear-cut assessments of his legacy. Indeed, many of his ecclesiastic colleagues denounced him at the time as nothing less than a heretic. In 1726, for example, Markell Rodyshevskii wrote a tract, entitled *About the Life of the Heretic Feofan Prokopovich*, in which he charted incidences of Prokopovich’s heresy against the Orthodox Church.³ Rodyshevskii did not mince his words when elucidating his charges against Prokopovich:

With daring and great audacity he began to manifestly wrestle with the Holy Church and destroy and reduce all dogma and tradition, and godless Lutheranism and other heresies were introduced and inculcated, and this time was highly lamentable for the people.⁴

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⁴ Ibid., 3.