The remarkable renaissance of Russian art, literature, religion, and philosophy in the first decade of the twentieth century owed much to a small group of religious rebels who drew their inspiration from neither of the two great reservoirs of earlier Russian culture, the radical intelligentsia and the Orthodox church. Their secular guide was not Nikolai Chernyshevskii but Friedrich Nietzsche, who showed them the sanctities of paganism and classical antiquity. Their religious inspiration came not from the established church but from Vladimir Solov'ev, in whose mystical Christianity the spiritual took on sensuous, earthly form. The earthly and the heavenly, long divorced in Russian cultural life, began to come together for these thinkers in a strange blend of paganism and Christianity. They read of the twice-born Dionysus, and were reminded of the resurrected Christ; they studied the Christian scriptures, and found a Dionysian, fleshly spectacle, the Apocalypse. The result was an intoxicating new vision of the world — a “new religious consciousness” which not only made body the equal of spirit but prophesied an imminent golden age in which that equality would transfigure the earth.

A number of talented writers contributed to the formation of the New Religious Consciousness, among them Viacheslav Ivanov, V. Ternavtsev, Zinaida Hippius, Nikolai Berdiaev, and, more important still, the eccentric genius Vasilii Rozanov — the “Russian Nietzsche” whose scandalous religion of sexuality and propagation stimulated furious discussion. But the highpriest of the new faith, its chief codifier and most tireless champion, was Dmitrii Merezhkovskii.

Already a famous poet, critic, and translator of the classics in the 1890’s, Merezhkovskii began to demonstrate an interest in the history of Christianity in 1896 with the publication of his novel based

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on the life of Julian the Apostate, the first part of the trilogy *Christ and Antichrist*. It was an unorthodox interest: in the historical contest between Christianity and paganism, the author's sympathies evidently lay at least as much with the latter as with the former. The "wholeness of truth," he has one of his characters say, is composed of "two truths," equal in validity — the truth of God and the truth of Lucifer.¹

At the turn of the century this heretical suggestion became a thesis in Merezhkovskii's most powerful work, *Tolstoi and Dostoevskii* — a brilliant study of the two novelists not only as writers and men but as religious thinkers. Christianity, Merezhkovskii proclaimed, is a historical failure. Through its excessive spiritualism it has rejected the vital values of the flesh and hence grown impotent. What the modern world needs is a second Renaissance to reassert the divinity of the body, a "second coming" in which a transfigured church will celebrate "the mystical unity, the equal value, and the equal sanctity of Spirit and Flesh."² This work was the manifesto of the New Religious Consciousness, and its impact was so great that it has been considered a turning point in Russian cultural evolution.³ Its ideas were repeated and deepened by Merezhkovskii throughout the ensuing decade in a great many articles and essays.⁴

The New Religious Consciousness, as Merezhkovskii expounds it in these works, is primarily a philosophy of history set upon a metaphysical foundation. In its simplest terms the metaphysics asserts that "flesh" and "spirit," seemingly opposed, are in fact mystically united; they are "two mystical poles of sanctity," joined "in their ultimate, otherworldly essence."⁵ This mystical unity, however, is revealed only historically, in a dialectical movement in which paganism (or pre-Christian religion generally) has represented the thesis and Christianity the antithesis.

Paganism exalted the flesh at the expense of spirit; the spiritual dimension of reality was not yet manifest. Paganism was a primitive monism in which the demands of spirit were still submerged in the depths of matter.

With the coming of Christ the spiritual dimension appeared and the seeming opposition of spirit and flesh was established. Christ

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¹ The Death of the Gods, trans. Herbert French (New York and London, 1901), pp. 89-91. First published in St. Petersburg in 1896, this novel was followed in 1901 by the second part of the trilogy, on Leonardo da Vinci, and in 1905 by the third part, on Peter the Great and his son Alexis.

² L. Tolstoi i Dostoevskii, 2 vols., 2nd ed. (St. Petersburg, 1901-1903), II, xix. This work was first published in the journal Mir iskusstva in 1900 and 1901.


⁴ Principally the essays collected in the two volumes Griadushchii kham and Ne mir, no mech published in St. Petersburg in 1906 and 1908 respectively.

⁵ L. Tolstoi i Dostoevskii, II, xi-xii; I, 127.