
ORTHODOXY AS A BASIS FOR PROTECTIVE CONSERVATISM OF K.P. POBEDONOSTSEV

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Abstract

The article examines the interrelation between K.P. Pobedonostsev's religious views and his political program from the original positions. Orthodoxy is understood by Pobedonostsev not only as a religion, but also as the basis of the traditional Russian political system. The preservation of the invariability of the Orthodox doctrine means for the thinker also eternalizing the state order. From this, as shown in the article, the protective conservatism of K.P. Pobedonostsev arises and is formed. The authors give a characteristic of this trend as understanding traditions from the finalistic positions, refusing to acquire new ideas, consonant with the spirit of the times. The article disputes the thesis that conservatism is a single trend. The authors distinguish different currents in it, to which an appraisal is given. The preservation and strengthening of the Orthodox faith and autocracy become the fundamental grounds for the views of K.P. Pobedonostsev. The authors dwell on the analysis of his program, implemented in the spheres of the church and politics, as well as in the sphere of culture. The central role of the Chief Procurator in determining the objectives of government policy in the late 19th – early 20th centuries is noted. However, despite the fight against dissent and strict censorship, the status quo in Russia could not be preserved.

Keywords: society, autocracy, liberalism, culture, politics

1. Introduction

In 2017, 190 years have passed since the birth and 110 years since the death of one of the most controversial figures of the Russian political elite of the last third of the 19th and early 20th centuries – Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev. Having received an excellent law education, he quickly makes both a scientific and an administrative career and at the age of 33 becomes a professor at Moscow University, and at the age of 36 – an Active State Councillor. The recognition of K.P. Pobedonostsev's high professionalism in the field of jurisprudence was his invitation as a law teacher of Tsar's children. Among his pupils were the future emperors Alexander III and Nicholas II, hence the enormous influence of Konstantin Petrovich on them. This influence especially intensified during the period of K.P. Pobedonostsev's tenure as the Chief Procurator of the Most Holy

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Governing Synod from 1880 to 1905, i.e. for 25 years he was one of the main actors of the Russian political system.

His activities were evaluated and still are being evaluated from diametrically opposite positions. Some emphasize his positive influence on Russian politics, since he “had a remarkable, lively and responsive mind” and because of this “could understand everything and judged a lot of things correctly” [1]. Others, on the contrary, believed that K.P. Pobedonostsev “caused burning hatred to himself”, because he was “the hope of the dark forces... the nightmare of Russian life” [2]. Foreign researchers also generally negatively assess his activity [3, 4].

Consequently, the analysis of the views of the Chief Procurator, especially in the today’s period of clashes between conservative and liberal attitudes, both in Church circles and in Russian society as a whole, is very relevant.

2. Transformation of K.P. Pobedonostsev’s views - from liberalism to conservatism

During the long life of the Chief Procurator, certain transformations in his world outlook and value orientations took place. In the late 1850s and 1860s, he shared liberal views, took part in the preparation of a radical judicial reform of 1860 and even collaborated with A.I. Herzen and N.P. Ogarev. In 1859, he published in the collection ‘Voices From Russia’ his article on the activities of the Minister of Justice Count V.N. Panin, actually analysing the entire epoch of Nicholas I [5].

The young scholar opposes the Nicholas’ order to the order of the 18th century, in which the government “boldly and frankly addresses the people, still lives with Peter’s ideas, eagerly seeks everything, requires enlightenment for themselves and for their people” [5]. During the reign of Nicholas I, the ‘living connection’ of the people with the government is torn, and its essence boils down to the formula ‘unconditional and irresponsible power’. Nikolai’s regime seeks to ‘reduce to the level of military discipline’ all content of social life, all manifestations of intellectual pursuits. Therefore, there is a ‘renunciation of science and enlightenment’; every attempt of ‘mental and moral independence’ is being persecuted. Even the idea of patriotism is being distorted, since the devotion to the state and serving its interests turns everywhere ‘into the service of the Chief’s person’.

The foregoing liberal views, the defence of the program for reforming the system of state administration, soon proved to be inappropriate for K.P. Pobedonostsev. As early as in 1879, he writes to the future Emperor Alexander III that “everywhere such a thought is ripening among the people: it is better to have a Russian revolution and a terrible revolt than a constitution”, since the first one can be overcome soon, and the latter is a poison “for the whole organism, eroding it with constant lies, which the Russian soul does not accept” [6]. It is interesting to note that the heir to the throne also shared these views. In a letter to Konstantin Petrovich, written in the same year of 1879, he invites him “to talk... about the

present sad and terrible situation” [7]. And it is no coincidence that a critical assessment of the liberal course intensified in the late 1870s, when the question of changes in Russia’s political system was seriously raised, and a liberal wing in Orthodox theology began to form.

In the literature, there are various approaches to explaining the evolution of K.P. Pobedonostsev’s views. Thus, N.N. Firsov believes that, as a mentor to Russian tsars, Konstantin Petrovich acted as “all careerists of the world acted before him and after him”, that is, he coordinated his own interests with the Tsar’s ones, becoming necessary for rulers, and so strengthened “his own position as the chief leader and inspirer of the government policy” [8]. A.I. Yakovlev argues that since the Chief Procurator “did not see the prospects for the development of both the people and the autocracy, and also did not see the prospects for development in the Church”, all his activity was reduced “only to the preservation of the present” [9]. Among the stimulating motives of K.P. Pobedonostsev’s reactionary activity, researchers name also the fear that prompted him “to some or other actions, especially when he was able to influence on taking important... decisions” [10]. Finally, in an interesting monograph by A.Y. Polunov it is noted that the evolution of Pobedonostsev’s views was due to the formation of a “special attitude, based on the idea of the deep strength of the existing way of life, clarity and certainty of the prospects for the development of the society” [11].

We think that all the above characteristics contain grains of truth, but truth is most fully expressed in the last thesis about the internal – ideological and value – motivation of the Chief Procurator.

For him, the thesis according to which in the state and in the Church “everything is kept on faith” [12] is axiomatic. Therefore, any attempt to build a secular society ends in failure: this was most clearly demonstrated by the French revolution of the late 18th century. It set itself the ‘goal of renewing society’, but as a result it achieved only its ‘demoralization’, leading to ‘a weakening of the political meaning of the goals of the nation’. In this example, according to K.P. Pobedonostsev, “the lie of the idea’ about the need to separate the church from the state is clearly visible. On the contrary, history convinces of the effectiveness of the ruling church, because ‘the state is the stronger and the more important, the more clearly it denotes the representation of the spiritual.’” [12, p. 203]

For the Chief Procurator, the position that links social transformations with ‘improvement’, or, ‘as they say, progress’, of society is unacceptable. With such aims, ‘there is a great delusion and deceit’, because the program of the Progressists seeks to ‘destroy old buildings and build new ones on their place’. As a result, the traditional regime is overthrown and “traditions and customs created by the national spirit and history” are rejected [12, p. 287]. Instead of developing organic ‘social principles’, ‘violence over real life’ occurs, and – most importantly – ‘people’s faith is undermined’. Hence it is clear that any phenomena that can weaken faith shake the devotion of the people to the Orthodox Church, should be excluded from the social sphere. In addition, one must always remember that the strength of the ‘state government’ in Russia is also based on the Orthodox faith. After the accession to the throne of Alexander

III, K.P. Pobedonostsev becomes the leader of the conservative and protective trend in Russia.

3. Protective conservatism - Orthodoxy as an instrument of strengthening the autocracy

It is characteristic that conservatism can include a variety of values, and therefore in this trend there can be different currents. The common for all currents within the framework of conservatism is a positive attitude to the tradition, but its very understanding can be different. Supporters of protective conservatism advocate the preservation of a certain 'eternal set' of ready-made truths both in the socio-political sphere and in the sphere of ideological relations. This current is actually out-of-history, it preserves the ready and from the principled positions refuses to 'acquire the new', consonant with the spirit of the times. The very tradition is understood from the finalistic positions as a once and for all formulated, completed teaching or certain unchangeable positions. The task of supporters of tradition in this case is reduced only to its translation and protection from any 'external encroachments'.

K.P. Pobedonostsev understood the tradition just so, so we cannot agree with the thesis that "in his basic worldview and attitude, Pobedonostsev was a typical Russian conservative" [13]. In our opinion, such a characteristic impoverishes the entire diversity of Russian conservatism, in which the Slavophiles, and Pochvenniks, and representatives of Orthodox theology, etc., who were not conservators, are represented. They understood the tradition not as mummified, but as living, evolving, responding to the challenges of time.

In his program speech on the 900th anniversary of the baptism of Russia, Konstantin Petrovich gives a description of the two fundamental foundations of "all Russian history" [7, p. 831-835]. First, "the obedience to the sovereign", since it was "the autocracy... that rooted, collected and saved the state integrity of the Russian land and created the Russian state"; secondly, for the Russian people there is nothing "dearer than the church". In it there is "the treasury of our destinies, here is the storehouse of our oldest legends and the source spring of our strengths". Hence the program of "healthy state forces" aimed at strengthening "unified rule and autocracy" is understandable: under their banner, "we have grown, we stand under it", and indeed in it "we see in future times the guarantee of the truth, order and good of our land"; as well as "for the protection and prosperity of our great Church" so that it will be "united with the people and people will be united with the Church".

Since both in Philosophy and in History there are 'various contradictory judgments and sentences', a criterion for their evaluation is needed. From the point of view of the Chief Procurator, "absolute truth is available only to faith" [12, p. 309], and the latter was understood by him as "a repository of unchanging church ordinances, traditions and rites". Moreover, these ordinances, of course, were subjectively interpreted by him. An outstanding Orthodox theologian, hieromonk (then bishop), Mikhail (Gribanovskii), during the defence in 1888 in

the St. Petersburg Theological Academy of his master's thesis on 'The Experience of Understanding the Main Christian Truths by Natural Human Thought' rightly observed that "the confession of faith should never be belittled to personal desires of every single person" [14]. If such a transformation occurs, then the very faith itself is 'distorted', i.e. loses its identity. In K.P. Pobedonostsev's views, Orthodoxy becomes not so much a transcendental teaching but a real political force that helps preserve the existing regime.

In the political field, K.P. Pobedonostsev consistently fought against any restriction of the autocracy. "Waves of liberalism", coming from Western Europe, from his point of view, are striving to introduce "false principles of an artificial and alien civilization to Russian society" [12, p. 169]. Particularly harmful is the idea of representative institutions, for the latter are the "decaying principle of social life", replacing the "unified will" of state power with "irresponsible party programs". The propaganda of freedom is also connected with the Western influence, which, under the slogan of "fighting superstitions and prejudices", destroys "the sources of the lifeblood of... the people, the results of moral discipline that unites it in a single whole" [12, p. 303]. The basis of true freedom can only be a religious feeling based on faith, and indeed on the Christian faith that draws 'from the perfection of the Divine an immutable moral principle' and directs man's will 'to the firm principle of truth'.

These installations indeed became the basis of K.P. Pobedonostsev's 'prohibitive measures'. Moreover, they were manifested not only in the strict censorship of print media, which were one 'of the most deceitful institutions of our time'. The Chief Procurator was also dissatisfied with the activities of the courts, in which, after the liberal reform, there was competition among the parties, publicity, and jury trials.

The activities of court institutions, the print media did have a significant impact on society, but Pobedonostsev was ready to regulate any particular manifestations of civil initiative. So, even the proposal of the Moscow Governor-General V.A. Dolgorukov to celebrate the centennial of the 'noble diploma', given to the upper class on April 21, 1785, provokes a negative reaction from him. In a letter to the Minister of Internal Affairs, D.A. Tolstoy, he declares: "...I am extremely afraid of realizing this idea", since there are people among the leaders of the nobility who are "confused" and "God knows what issues will rise at such a meeting" [7, p. 453]. Pobedonostsev's position turned out to be decisive, and the event in Moscow did not take place.

The chief Procurator also worried about the organization of the funerals. It turns out that "the attachment of a civil funeral to a church procession" occurs "not without a secret intention to establish an excuse for a demonstration", as it already happened several times "during the burial of Dostoevsky, Turgenev, etc." Because of this, it is necessary "to stop this custom and it is most convenient for the order to proceed from the Synod, since the burial in our country always was and remains under the jurisdiction of the Church" [7, p. 557].

The statesman even cares about the sale of postal paper “with envelopes of hideous red colour”, besides, it contains a watermark depicting a “red cock”. And it was in revolutionary France that “red paper appeared and became fashionable”. In this connection, the Minister of Internal Affairs D.A. Tolstoy is advised to “pay attention to it” [7, p. 555].

Pobedonostsev also pays a lot of time to control over works of art. He took up arms against I. Repin’s painting ‘Ivan the Terrible with the Murdered Son’, in which the tendency of ‘criticism and denunciation’ is traced, the desire to propagate ‘the trends of a certain kind’, that is, to underline the imperfection of the ‘unified principle of government’. Even more irritating for Pobedonostsev is N. Ge’s picture ‘What is Truth’, since the artist allegedly ‘meant to abuse the image of Christ the God-Man and Saviour, who is above all dear to the heart of a Christian’. The Chief Procurator is indignant: how did St. Petersburg governor P. A. Gresser, who is ‘charged with the censorship of paintings’ for selection to the exhibition, left this work ‘without remarks’. Pobedonostsev recalls that a few years ago (on his initiative – L. Sh.) the ‘less outrageous’ painting by Repin ‘Ivan the Terrible’ was removed from the exhibition. And in this case Pobedonostsev achieved his goal: Alexander III instructs the Minister of Internal Affairs I.N. Durnovo “to forbid carrying” “N. Ge’s picture” “through Russia, and to remove it now from the exhibition” [7, p. 934].

K.P. Pobedonostsev was also worried about the theatre repertoire: for example, the play by Leo Tolstoy ‘The Power of Darkness’ attracted his attention. In a letter to Alexander III, he asserts that after reading it he cannot “recover from the horror”, because there is “a denial of the ideal... a humiliation of the moral sense... an insult to taste”. But there is a danger, writes the Chief Procurator, that “the play can become fashionable. All the Petersburg public, from young to old, will be drawn to the theatre”. And, although E.M. Feoktistov, the Chief of the General Directorate of Press Affairs, reported that “the Emperor ordered to stage the play of Count Tolstoy on the stage of the imperial theatres”, Pobedonostsev nevertheless persuaded the supreme power in the necessity of “banning the play from the theatre” [7, p. 648, 687].

Even such a loyal writer to Orthodoxy as N.S. Leskov also gave rise to suspicions. During the preparation for the publication of his collection of works, K.P. Pobedonostsev did not like a number of works, and already mentioned by us E. Feoktistov reports to him: “Concerning Leskov’s book, be calm. Measures have been taken.” [7, p. 851]

At the same time, among the representatives of the creative intelligentsia, the Chief Procurator also had those whom he treated with restrained sympathy. So, Pobedonostsev assisted P. Tchaikovsky in response to his request for financial assistance, advised Emperor Alexander III to attend a concert of A. Rubinstein, whom he considered “the first magnitude and the first authority in music”, besides, according to Konstantin Petrovich, “he is a man of high education and noble heart” [7, p. 558].

Pobedonostsev highly valued F.I. Tyutchev, Y.F. Samarin, whose works he recommended to the Emperor [7, p. 910, 932, 976], and also I.S. Aksakov, whom he attributed to that small number of “honest and pure people with such a burning love for Russia and for everything Russian” [7, p. 556].

With all his might wishing to strengthen Orthodoxy and autocracy, K.P. Pobedonostsev, through his protective attitudes, contributed to the development of crisis trends in the state and in the Church, and thereby brought revolutionary events to Russia. Another monarchist and conservative, true innovator, L.A. Tikhomirov found significant shortcomings in his activities, since he, being ‘after the Sovereign... the first man in the Empire’, showed astonishing inactivity and apathy. This was particularly evident in relation to the church, since the Chief Procurator opposed both the convening of the Local Council and the restoration of the conciliar principles in the church administration. Therefore, giving a description of the policy of Pobedonostsev and his associates, Tikhomirov ironically notes: “This devil knows who are these conservatives”, i.e. they “all dissolved in small things, forgetting about the main thing”. Because of the inability of the protective conservatism to create a positive political program acceptable for the society, the impotence of “the Church and monarchy has become much clearer than three or five years ago”. Striving to somehow overcome the crisis trends in Russian society, these people “can only be reactionaries, but not builders of Russian principles” [15, 16]. The main means of reaction is violence, although Pobedonostsev, being an educated man, who knew the law, understood that “only one means of restraint and repression is not sufficient to bring order to free human activity” [7, p. 301]. The latter have ‘only negative values’ for society and for its stable state ‘positive ideals are necessary’. Naturally, they must express the needs of people, respond to ‘the challenges of time’. However, in the practice of the Chief Procurator, everything was the other way around: his value orientations did not bring the government and the Church closer to people’s expectations, but, on the contrary, alienated them, since his policy was implemented without taking into account the society’s request for change.

4. Conclusions

An analysis of K.P. Pobedonostsev’s views and activities makes it possible to draw an original conclusion that Russian Orthodoxy is not primarily considered by him as the highest transcendental value, but as a means of preserving and strengthening the autocracy in Russia.

Realizing the program of ‘protection of eternal Christian truths’, the Chief Procurator not only implanted ‘prohibitive measures’ in politics, but also hampered the organic development of the Church thought. Because of this, the Orthodox Church was unprepared for the revolutionary events of the early 20th century; it did not have an answer ‘to the challenges of the times’.

Using the example of K.P. Pobedonostsev’s activity, it can be clearly seen that reaction can slow the course of the mature transformations both in the Church

and in society, but it cannot overcome the objective course of history. K.P. Pobedonostsev's views are located not only in the past: today they even cause active rejection with some people, while others, on the contrary, see them as a 'saving tool' for the improvement of Russian society. Therefore, it is necessary to study his heritage, trying to give him an objective assessment.

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