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Catherine II: The head of the Orthodox Church

Princess and grand duchess

As most German nobility, Sophia — before she became Catherine — was homeschooled. One of her tutors was Wagner, a Lutheran chaplain of her father's regiment who tutored her in matters of religion (S 12.46)¹. Sophia had an investigative mind and she wondered how people like Marcus Aurelius could end up in hell; what was the chaos that in Wagner's opinion preceded the creation of the world (10) or what circumcision was, and Wagner gave unsatisfactory answers or no answers at all (11); he asked her to accept some things by faith or simply cut the discussion. The problem was not his theological knowledge — Sophie's questions remain to this day a theological challenge yet to be satisfactorily answered — but an uncharitable spirit with which Wagner treated his precocious pupil. Apparently he was irritated by her questions that he did not answer, which stemmed from his frustration. However, even today a religion teacher would feel very uncomfortable when

¹ References are made to the following publications:

G — Письма Императрицы Екатерины II к Гримму (1774–1796), *Сборник Императорского русского исторического общества* 23 (1878).

J — *Joseph II. und Katharina von Russland: ihr Briefwechsel*, Wien 1869.

PSZ — *Полное собрание законов Российской Империи*, Санкт-Петербург: Типография II Отделения Собственной Его Императорского Величества Канцелярии 1830, vols. 1–45.

S — *Сочинения императрицы Екатерины II*, Санктпетербург: Типография Императорской академии наук 1901–1908, vols. 1–12.

V — *Voltaire–Catherine II: correspondance 1763–1778*, Paris 2006.

Z — *Der Briefwechsel zwischen der Kaiserin Katharina II. von Russland und Joh. Georg Zimmermann*, Hannover und Leipzig 1906.

ZB — J.G. Zimmermann, *Briefe an einige seiner Freunde in der Schweiz*, Aarau 1830.

trying to explain to a 7-year-old girl the nature of circumcision² — much more so in the prudish times of Sophie's childhood. Moreover, Wagner was too apocalyptically inclined and talked so much about the Last Judgment that it made Sophie cry (11). This was a fairly accepted method to get children in line by instilling in them the punishment after death for their misbehavior on earth. In any event, she said that she did not have a grudge against him, but she considered him a fool (*sot*) (G 88, and for her, foolish and ridiculous were synonyms, G 431). However, all was not so bad with Wagner since she appears to have remembered him fondly because reportedly she once sent him a thousand ducats from St. Petersburg³.

The atmosphere in Sophie's house was religiously reverent; both her mother and father liked "inalterable religion" and loved justice (S 12.12). It is also worth mentioning that the oldest brother of Sophia's mother Johanna was a bishop of Lübeck (18, 458), a later king of Sweden, Adolf-Frederick.

Sophia arrived in St. Petersburg at the age of 14 and when she turned 15, she was assigned a religion tutor, Simon Todorskii, later archbishop of Pskov (S 12.45, 203, 450). He was supposed to introduce her to the Orthodox religion to which she had to convert to become a wife of grand duke Peter, the future emperor. She had serious scruples about the idea of abandoning her Lutheran faith. The teachings of Wagner sunk in to a considerable extent, after all. Moreover, she knew that her father opposed the idea quite strenuously. The choice of Todorskii was very good in that respect. An illustrious, highly cultured ecclesiastic, he could flawlessly communicate with Sophia in German, translator of theological texts, in particular the very influential opus of a Lutheran theologian Johann Arndt, *True Christianity*, which he translated when he studied in Halle. He had a good grasp of Protestantism and it was not difficult for him to stress the commonality of Lutheranism and Orthodoxy. "I found that the bishop of Pskov was right in respect to everything; he didn't diminish at all my belief, he added some dogma and [achieving] my conversion didn't cause any problem for him. He frequently asked me if I have any objections to make, any doubts to raise; but my response was brief and satisfactory, since I've already made a decision" (46). If Todorskii really only added some doctrines without modifying anything (by dropping *sola* from the *sola scriptura* doctrine), then this would be due to his rhetoric skills by presenting Orthodoxy as a more developed version of Lutheranism, thereby

² It is a stretch to claim that Catherine's question what circumcision is "revealed an early interest in sexuality," as claimed by John T. Alexander, *Catherine the Great: Life and Legend*, New York 1989, p. 21; how would she know that it has anything to do with sexuality if the meaning of the word was not explained to her?

³ В[асилий] А. Бильбасов, *История Екатерины II*, Берлин 1900, vol. 1, p. 8; E.A.B. Hodgetts, *The Life of Catherine the Great of Russia*, New York 1914, p. 4.

making it palatable to Sophia. Maybe he was able to convince Sophia that all the differences amount to the rites. As Sophia herself wrote to her father regarding “the common error” made concerning Orthodoxy: “the external cult is very different, but the Church was reduced to it because of the brutishness of the people”⁴. That was all the easier to accept because, after all, the fate of the Russian throne was at stake.

Incidentally, when in Stettin (Szczecin), she asked Wagner what the oldest Christian Church was, to which he responded that it was Orthodoxy. “Since that moment I had a lot of respect to the Greek Church ... and now I am the Head (*Chef*) of this Church” (S 12.10), she mused years later. It is very unlikely that Wagner would ever give a temporal and theological priority to Orthodoxy. The reason for the Lutheran reformation was to shake off things added during the history of the Church (particularly, indulgences) in order to restore the original Christianity. Assuming that Wagner was familiar with the Orthodox doctrine, he would never have agreed that anything beyond faith is needed for salvation, that Mary can have an elevated status of the Theotokos, or that the elaborate rites of Orthodoxy have anything to do with the original Christianity. Maybe she just confused the source of that statement. Her father wrote to Johanna, which she could repeat to Sophia, that “the Greek Church was the first pure apostolic church that was changed by all sorts of splits and ceremonies”⁵. However, it seems that Sophia primarily wanted to be cute to point to, as it were, the paradox of fate designed for her in the midst of Protestantism to become the head of the Russian Church. It is more likely that Wagner, in her words, repeatedly had said that before the first communion each Christian can choose his religion; since she had not taken the first communion yet, the door for a denominational change was still open — and she made her decision. Whether only religious reasons weighed in is at least uncertain. If she had refused to become a member of the Orthodox Church, she would have had to leave Russia abandoning any prospect of becoming a wife of an emperor.

When Sophia caught pneumonia, the situation was so serious that Johanna wanted to call a Lutheran priest, to which Sophia replied that Todorskii would be just fine⁶. That was very pleasing to the empress and to the court as well (S 12.204). This may indicate that she sincerely embraced Orthodoxy: she said that she was told that she had given her answer semi-consciously. On the

⁴ F. Siebigk, *Katharina der Zweiten Brautreise nach Russland 1744–1745: Eine historische Skizze*, Dessau 1873, p. 57.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

⁶ It is as though she wanted to say, “What was my mother thinking of? A Lutheran pastor would have created the worst possible impression”, suggested Z. Oldenbourg, *Catherine the Great*, New York 1965, p. 67.

other hand, she admitted that during her illness she pretended to be asleep to listen to conversations of people around her, whereby she “learned about a lot of things” (205). Could she have given her answer about calling Todorskii knowing well about its beneficial effect? The 15-year-old Sophia was bright and perceptive to see what were the ways into the good graces of the empress Elizabeth who was very religious. In that respect, Sophia was much different than Peter who openly expressed his disdain for Orthodoxy, which endeared him to very few people and, eventually, led to his unenviable end.

Sincerely or otherwise, Sophie embraced the Orthodox religion and in 1744 she made a public confession. Todorskii wrote the confession of faith that he translated into German and, in Sophie’s words, “I learned by heart the Russian [version] like a parrot” (S 12.48), or, in her slightly different version, she read in Russian, without understanding anything, 50 pages in quarto and then she recited the symbol of faith from memory (451). The confession came out fine and everyone was satisfied (49). With the confession came a change of her name. From this moment on, Sophie became Catherine since her own name was odious because it was the name of Peter I’s sister (451). She also received a made-up patronymic Alekseevna: her father was Christian August and apparently “Christianovna” or “Avgustovna” would sound too odd to a Russian ear. In a letter to her father, who, insultingly, was not invited to the betrothal, Johanna fibbed that “according to the local dialect” the name August “cannot be given in any other way than as Alexei”⁷. The next day, the betrothal with Peter took place and Sophie, now Catherine, became the grand duchess.

Then Catherine waited for nearly two decades to become the empress, mastering in the meantime the intricacies of the court life — and survival.

Catherine wholeheartedly embraced Peter I’s church reforms and made some improvements of her own which had some consequences for the Orthodox as well as non-Orthodox believers. On the day when she seized power, in the first words of her proclamation she presented herself as a defender of the Orthodox Church (PSZ 16.11582).

Matseevich

In 1721, at the end of Peter I’s reign, the *Spiritual regulation*, authored mainly by Prokopovich, was enacted which permanently abolished the office of the patriarch and replaced it with the Spiritual College later to become the Holy Synod, basically a governmental ministry composed of a dozen of officials, not all of them necessarily ecclesiastics, headed by a president who

⁷ F. Siebigk, op. cit., p. 63.

responded to the emperor The Church became a state institution subordinated to the monarch.

Pecuniary needs of the government directed Catherine's eyes toward the Church. During his half-a-year reign, in March 1762 Peter III issued a decree that all church estate should be supervised by the College of Economics (S 12.479; PSZ 15.11481). In August the same year, Catherine abolished Peter's decree on the administration of church property (PSZ 16.11643), but this decision did not last long. She came back to this idea very soon. In November 1762, she ordered a survey of church properties (16.11716, cf. 16.11745, 11747, 11789) and in May 1763 she reestablished the College of Economics (16.11814, 11844, 11864, 11865) to prepare ground for a take-over. Metropolitan Arsenii Matseevich, "one of the most illustrious minds of the 18th century Russia"⁸, was opposed to the idea — the only bishop in the otherwise complying Church — and in 1763 he wrote two letters to the Synod on the subject. Catherine accused him of *lèse-majesté* and of inflammatory interpretation of the Bible, for which he was arrested. As Catherine wrote in her letter, "I think that under no other Ruler was there so much interceding for a guilty of *lèse-majesté* as it was now in favor of the Rostov Metropolitan arrested by the decision of the Synod and I don't know what reason I gave to doubt My mercy and the love of man? Before, without any ceremony and formality in matters not so important the heads of the Clergy were chopped off⁹ and I don't know how I could keep peace and order of the people (not to mention the protection and maintenance of the rule given to me by God) if the rebels were not punished?"¹⁰ As she wrote to Voltaire, "his insolence and folly redoubled" after an imposition of silence on him and he was judged by the Synod as "a fanatic imbued with Latin principles pernicious and contrary to the Orthodox faith and to the power of the sovereign [since he favored the principle of two powers, secular and ecclesiastical] and consequently of the Church stripped of the bishopric and priesthood and delivered to the secular power. I agreed with this sentence only to confirm the loss of dignity of the Church and of priesthood and he was locked as a simple monk to the rest of his days in a monastery"¹¹. In a word, the Synod rubber-stamped Catherine's

⁸ W.A. Serczyk, *Katarzyna II carowa Rosji*, Wrocław 1974, p. 141.

⁹ This never happened; the harshest punishments of the clergy were under Peter I, which included an exile or defrocking, Михаил С. Попов, *Арсений Мацеевич, митрополит Ростовский и Ярославский*, Санкт-Петербург 1905, reprinted as *Изгнанный правды ради: жизнь святителя Арсения (Мацеевича)*, Москва 2001, p. 151, note 1.

¹⁰ Письма Императрицы Екатерины II к Графу А.Н. Бестужеву-Рюмину, *Чтения в Императорском Обществе Истории и Древностей Российских при Московском Университете* 1862, no. 3, pt. 5, p. 191.

¹¹ *Voltaire–Catherine II...*, 11 Sept. 1773, 7 Jan. 1774, p. 49.

decision, defrocked Matseevich and sent him to a far-away monastery in the Archangel eparchy. Catherine annulled the defrocking part of the sentence.

In February 1764, Catherine carried out her plan and by her decree, church property became administered by secular authorities of the College of Economics (S 12.522, 567; PSZ 16.12060); the Church lost its economic support and priests became paid public servants. Spiritual services were commercialized since priests were allowed to charge for some of them (three rubles for baptism, ten for wedding, etc., PSZ 17.12376). In 1786, this administration was extended to the Ukrainian churches. In 1767, when Matseevich's protests reached Catherine's ears, she defrocked him and sent him, under the name of Andrei Vral' (Liar), to Revel/Tallinn, where he died.

This was not an isolated incident. In 1764, archimandrite Theofilakt voiced his opposition against appropriation of monastery property and was also deposed and exiled¹². About the same time, archimandrite Gennadii was defrocked and exiled for saying a prayer for consolation of the Church in time of persecution¹³. In 1767, metropolitan Pavel Koniuskevich protested against the actions of the government and was lucky to be only dismissed by Catherine from his post¹⁴. In 1771, a merchant Alexei Smolin wrote a letter in which he criticized Catherine for taking away church property and giving it to her favorites. He was also opposed to her tolerance policy which, in his eyes, was directed against the Orthodox Church. Predictably, it did not end well for him. Catherine ordered his imprisonment for five years and then a transfer to a monastery as a monk and the general procurator had to be annually informed about his behavior¹⁵.

If Catherine, the head of the Orthodox Church, could act so uncharitably against her own believers, we can sense how she could act against those in theological disagreement with the Church she headed.

The Catholics and Uniates

One motivation for the aggressive politics toward Poland that led to three partitions of this country was the fate of Orthodox believers in the Polish-Lithuanian territories. The only foreign bishop in Belorussia present at Catherine's coronation was Georgii Konisskii, who on that occasion gave a speech in which he pleaded for the defense of Orthodox believers in Poland who, sadly, were frequently persecuted: "save us with your right hand, protect

¹² Попов, op. cit., pp. 190–192.

¹³ Ibid., pp. 207, 212, 223, 228–229.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 226–227.

¹⁵ A. Brückner, *Katharina die Zweite*, Berlin 1883, pp. 144–146; Попов, op. cit., pp. 262–263.

us with your arm”¹⁶. The nature of this protection was not specified and the speech did not have an immediate effect, but the idea of fighting for tolerance of the Orthodox in Poland soon became very handy. At first, Catherine wanted complete equality of Catholics and non-Catholics in Poland. In 1764, Russian envoys at the convocation Diet demanded that the Orthodox would have equal rights with the Catholics, which amounted to nothing since the Poles were afraid of their allegiance to Russia. Non-Catholics saw an opportunity for an improvement of their situation after the election to the Polish throne of Poniatowski in 1764, a former Catherine’s lover, now considered an ally. In 1765, Konisskii gave a speech before Poniatowski and submitted documentation concerning persecution of the Orthodox in Poland. The Russians pressed for the rights of the Orthodox again at the Diet in 1766, but only small concessions were made in favor of the Orthodox. Now, as before, a major concern was, as Poniatowski wrote in his telegram, that if a small number of non-Catholics are allowed to become a legislative body, “they would become heads of an always legal party that could not view the state and the government of Poland as an adversary against which they should necessarily and perpetually seek support outside”¹⁷. Impatient Catherine decided to send Russian troops to the outskirts of Warsaw when in 1767 the Diet was summoned. After many threats and arrests the Diet approved the following year all that the Russians wanted. A confederation created in the city of Bar rejected Russian-imposed decisions of the Diet and fighting ensued between the Russian troops and the Bar confederation. Moreover, the Orthodox, encouraged by the decision of the Diet and instigated by Russia, revolted against the Catholics and Uniates in Ukraine. Russian policy, ostensibly to introduce equality, led to a civil war in Poland and, incidentally — and more dangerously for Russia — to a war with Turkey. Catherine’s apparent goal of equality of faiths in Poland resulted in chaos in the war-torn country. And this disarray was used as a reason for the partition of Poland. In 1772, Russia, Prussia, and Austro-Hungary decided as stated in the preamble to the partition treaty: “The spirit of faction, troubles, and internal war that has been shaking for so many years the kingdom of Poland, and anarchy that each day acquires there a new strength to the point of destroying all authority of the regular government create a justified apprehension concerning the coming of the total decomposition of the state, upsetting interests of its neighbors, changing the good harmony that exists between them, and inciting a universal war”. The neighboring powers had

¹⁶ Николай Бантыш-Каменский, *Историческое известие о возникшей в Польше унии*, Москва 1805, p. 374.

¹⁷ Copie d’une dépêche du roi au comte Rzewusky, 26 Sept. 1766, *Сборник Императорского русского исторического общества* 67 (1889), p. 138.

some unresolved old claims that they wanted to settle¹⁸, old claims, as it can be surmised, might include the Orthodox who belonged to Russia rather than to Poland, as Konisskii had already claimed.

Importantly, in spite of Catherine's official position concerning equality of Orthodox believers with Catholics in Poland, this was not really what she wanted. As Nikita Panin wrote to ambassador Nikolai Repnin in Warsaw in 1767 in a telegram approved by Catherine, in all this fighting for the rights of non-Catholics the goal was not to spread Orthodoxy, but to create an Orthodox "party with legal right to participate in all Polish matters" which being weaker than other parties would constantly require Russian protection. Just like the Russians were concerned about the Orthodox and the Uniates, the Prussians were concerned about Protestants. However, said Panin, their influence must be kept in check since equality of the Orthodox believers would be disadvantageous for Russia, since it would bind them closer to the Polish republic than to Russia. Also, Protestants could lift the Poles out of their ignorance, thereby leading them to an introduction of new order which would be inimical to the interests of Russia. Moreover, an increase in the number of the Orthodox might make them independent of Russia and even rely on the Polish government. Also, if the Orthodox became too comfortable in Poland, this might encourage the Russian Orthodox to flee to Poland or even create a hostile atmosphere against Russia in the Russian provinces that bordered with Poland. Besides, the Uniates should not be mentioned anywhere because "we cannot respect them since they are schismatics from our faith who did not quite unite with the Catholic [faith]"¹⁹.

The 1772 partition was followed by two more after which Poland no longer appeared on the map of Europe. For Russia, an interesting situation emerged: in the interest of tolerance and equality, the Orthodox became Catherine's subjects. However, with one partition after another, a very large number of Catholics found themselves under the Russian scepter as well. How would tolerance and equality of faiths professed by Catherine work for them now? The same as for the Orthodox. Just as Catherine had solely political goals using equality of faiths only as a cover when dealing with Poland, so it was then also: politics was the primary goal; tolerance was secondary and was maintained only as a political tool. Since Catholics and the Uniates recognized the authority of the pope, Catherine had to address the problem.

¹⁸ "Traité entre la Russie et l'Autriche, touchant le démembrement de la Pologne, signé à St. Petersbourg le 25. Juillet 1772", [in:] G.M. de Martens (ed.), *Recueil de traités*, Gottingue 1817, vol. 2, pp. 89–90.

¹⁹ Депеша Панина к кн. Репнину, 14 Aug. 1767, *Сборник Императорского русского исторического общества* 67 (1889), pp. 409–410.

Already in 1769, Catherine issued the Regulation for the Catholic Community in Russia (PSZ 18.13252). Priests should not proselytize (§§ 2, 9); the Church in Petersburg could have only six priests and only from the Franciscan order (§ 4), whereas the Church in Moscow could have only three Capuchin priests (§§ 48, 49); priests could stay in Russia only for eight years (§ 5; cf. PSZ 23.16820 (1798)); the Church superior should introduce a new priest sent by the College of Justice by having him make an oath in writing (PSZ 18.13252, § 12); the community elected a superior (§§ 14, 19) who swore to follow the Regulation (§ 18). Any disagreements between priests and parishioners concerning economic matters should be resolved by the College of Justice (§§ 44, 50). The tie to the Vatican was completely cut off; the priests answered to the College of Justice, i.e., to Catherine, not to the pope. In 1772, a ukase was issued directed to Catholics and the Uniates on the territory acquired from Poland (PSZ 19.13922): a Catholic bishop yet to be elected answered to the College of Justice (§ 2); prohibition of proselytizing was repeated (§ 7), and so was the role of the College of Justice in solving conflicts in regard to property (§ 8); any bull, encyclical, or *breve* coming from the pope could be announced to believers only after it was approved by Catherine (§ 9). With a 1773 ukase, Catherine appointed Stanisław Siestrzeńcewicz-Bohusz as a Belorussian bishop of the Belorussian eparchy/diocese (§ 6) with its seat in Mogilev (§ 2); the bishop would receive a handsome sum of 10,000 rubles a year “for his own support” (§ 4), for which price he remained very loyal to Catherine’s policies; his authority was extended to all Catholics in Russia (§ 5); of course, he answered to Catherine. Since Siestrzeńcewicz “earned Our Monarchical gratitude”, in 1782 Catherine elevated him to the rank of archbishop requiring that he should take orders only from the Senate and from her (PSZ 21.15326, § 5; Rome assented to it, PSZ 22.15982). After the last two partitions of Poland, Catherine’s policies remained in place, but the area of their application significantly widened, as specified by two 1795 ukases (23.17379, 17380): three new eparchies/dioceses were created with some prohibitions being repeated: no proselytizing (23.17379, § 8); in particular, priests who came from abroad without permission and those who harbored them should be punished (23.17380, § 5); all directives of the pope had to be approved by the state first to see “if there is anything in them disagreeing with the civic laws of the Russian Empire and with the laws of the Autocratic power given us by God” (§ 8). Also, in 1794, she issued a ukase aiming at “convenient uprooting of the Union [the Uniate Church]” in which process no Catholic or Uniate “should dare to create even the smallest obstacle or offence” under the threat of confiscation of property (PSZ 23, 17.199, 17.204, 17.290, 17.333, §§ 4–6). A pastoral letter written by the archimandrite Viktor (Vasilii Sadkovskii) that specified details of this

conversion was included in the ukase. Finally, by a 1795 ukase, only one Uniate bishop was allowed to stay (§ 1), others were released (§§ 2–3), and monasteries considered useless were closed (PSZ 23.17384, 17391, § 5).

Just as the Orthodox were kept in check in accordance with Catherine's political ambitions, so were the Catholics and Uniates, even more so since part of their doctrine included allegiance to the pope. Catherine simply could not tolerate that and this intolerance came from her as the empress, not as the head of the Church. Incidentally, her defense of the Jesuits was not at all stemming from her love for religious freedom. Jesuits swore allegiance to the empress, whereby they served Catherine's purpose to make the local (Belorussian) Catholic Church independent of the pope. Expelled from all countries and banned by the pope in 1773, they convincingly argued for Catherine's policy toward the Catholic Church. Also, their schools were on a high level²⁰.

The *Nakaz*

Catherine wanted a new consistent set of laws to be created to replace tsar Alexei's legal code of 1649. To that end, she designed a process of electing delegates who would deliberate on these laws for her to be eventually approved. She composed a *Nakaz*, an instruction for the codification of new laws; she wanted the delegates to know what kind of laws she envisioned and on which legislative areas delegates should deliberate. She was preparing the *Nakaz* for two years "following her mind and heart with most passionate desire of usefulness, glory, and happiness, and with the desire to bring the empire to higher level of happiness for all kinds, people, and things" (S 12.524). The *Nakaz* "introduced unity into laws and instructions for which there is no other example" (525). As for the fruit of a two-year work, Catherine did not have much to show for her efforts.

The *Nakaz* (PSZ 18.12949, 13075, 13096) consists of 655 articles; 294 articles came from Montesquieu, frequently verbatim, most often with small editorial changes, 108 articles came from Cesare Beccaria, 38 from Jacob Friedrich Bielfeld, 24 from Johann Heinrich Gottlob Justi, 26 from Semen Desnitskii, and some from Diderot's *Encyclopedia*. Counting out 24 articles that are just titles of sections, 490+ articles among 631 are plagiarized, which is 78% of the articles constituting some 80% of the volume of the *Nakaz*²¹.

²⁰ Я[ков] К. Грот, *Екатерина II в перепискѣ с Гриммом*, Санкт-Петербург 1879, vol. 2, pp. 4–5.

²¹ Н[иколай] Д. Чечулин, *Наказ Императрицы Екатерины II, данный комиссии о сочинении проекта нового уложения*, Санкт-Петербург 1907, pp. cxxix–cxliv. In his commentaries written six years after the publication of the *Nakaz*, Shcherbatov indicated most of the articles copied from Montesquieu, М[ихаил] М. Щербатов, *Неизданные сочинения*,

Although the main effort in creating the *Nakaz* was in cutting and pasting, the document itself is a manifestation of Catherine's views, although the vast majority of them are not of her authorship. In some cases she did manipulate borrowed fragments by modifying them to adjust them to her views, particularly with respect to the preeminence of autocracy.

Already in 1766, in a manifest to create a committee for getting the process under way, she wrote that people should pray day and night that God would help her "to take the Scepter to obey our Orthodox law, to protect justice, to root out evil and all untruths and oppression, and finally to enact state laws"²². At least on the surface, Catherine wanted the prospective state laws to be created under her imperial supervision, the laws that would agree with the Orthodox law, presumably, the laws accepted by the Church. However, since she was the head of the Church, the state laws should be in agreement with the laws as she envisioned them. That would be fairly clear from the way delegates should be elected. In her instruction on that very election process, she required that those who elect a delegate should make an oath that they would elect a delegate who would be "the most loyal slave (*паб*)" of the empress²³. A most loyal slave should not even think about constructing laws opposed to the will of the empress, and the head of the Church at that.

Catherine stated that God's law should not be mixed with civil law, although the latter should strengthen the former. God's law does not change; the civil law does change according to the situation. "Human laws prescribe us what is good and faith reveals [what is] better". Usually natural law includes: knowledge of God; nourishment; self-defense; and the desire to live with the like²⁴. National law is based on the principle that in the time of peace, each nation should do as much good to another nation as possible and during the

Москва 1935, pp. 16–63. Borrowings from Desnitskii are shown by A.H. Brown, S.E. Desnitsky, "Adam Smith, and the *Nakaz* of Catherine II", *Oxford Slavonic Papers* 7 (1974), p. 51, although, as Brown indicated (note 27), Chechulin noticed it too in his 1913 article. To her credit, Catherine admitted to her borrowings, at least from Montesquieu; in her letters to d'Alembert she wrote: "to the sake of my empire, I have pillaged the president Montesquieu without naming him; I hope that if from the other world he sees me work, he'll forgive this plagiarism for the good of thirty million people which should result from it; he loved humanity too much to be offended by it. His book is my breviary", *Oeuvres et correspondences inédites de d'Alembert*, Paris 1887, p. 239; and "my main occupations for the last two years are reduced to copying and appreciating principles of the president Montesquieu", p. 245.

²² *Наказ ея императорскаго Величества Екатерины вторыя самодержицы всероссийския данный Коммиссии проекта Нового уложения*, Москва: В Сенатской Типографии у С. Селивановскаго 1809, pp. 3–4; PSZ 17.12801.

²³ *Ibid.*, pp. 26, 45, 55; PSZ 17.12801.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 107; PSZ 18.12950.

war, as little harm as possible; this is based on God's law that people should do as much good to one another as possible (§ 1, 6)²⁵.

The motto to the *Nakaz* comes from a prayer of Solomon: "Lord my God, listen to me and give me wisdom to administer judgment to your people according to how your sacred law directs to judge with righteousness" (1 Kings 3:9), which is a not so subtle indication that not just any sovereign is issuing the *Nakaz*, but the one on a par with Solomon; thus, it should be treated accordingly by the delegates. The opening articles of the *Nakaz* are religious statements: "The Christian law teaches us to do good one to another as much as possible" (§ 1), which should be the principle in light of which any other rules and regulations are created and it should be assumed that every honest man wants "to see all of his fatherland on the highest level of happiness, glory, blessing, and peace" (§ 2). And moving very quickly from religious beginning to what counts, the imperial power, Catherine stated that the ruler in Russia is an autocrat (§ 9) which is required by the vastness of Russia and the need to accomplish things quickly (§ 10; S 12.674); any other form of government would destroy Russia (§ 11). Already Shcherbatov found her argument very weak; he observed that the Roman empire was doing very well as a republic notwithstanding its vastness²⁶.

Next, Catherine claimed that the goal of autocracy is the glory of citizens, the government, and the sovereign (§ 15) and that autocracy does not want to take away from men their natural freedom but wants to direct their actions to the greatest good (§ 13). When freedom is defined as doing what the laws allow one to do and not doing what they prohibit (§ 38), then, of course, autocracy does not suppress human freedom only if people obey the laws established or at least approved by that very autocrat: you are free if you do what I, the sovereign, tell you to do. Some laws were very sound, for instance, prohibition of torture (§ 123)²⁷, religious tolerance (§ 494), the principle of innocent until proven guilty (§ 194), and the view that capital punishment is "of no use" (§ 210). Another thing is whether Catherine herself was willing to follow her own laws. Torture in practice was not abandoned and capital punishment turned out to be of much use. This can always be justified by her principle that the most severe crimes against stability of society are the crimes of *lèse-majesté* (§ 229). Rampant crime and bribes are much lesser evils in the face of the possibility that someone can speak something uncomplimentary about Catherine.

²⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 291; PSZ 18.13095, introduction.

²⁶ Щербатов, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

²⁷ Actually, torture was officially abolished on 21 Feb. 1762, В.Е. Романовский, *Наказ Императрицы Екатерины II*, Тифлис 1899, p. 35, but still, Catherine urged a restraint from using it, e.g., in a 1764 ukase (PSZ 16.12227).

People have to know the laws; therefore, proper upbringing of children is an indispensable element in solidifying the rule of law in society: “the rules of education are the first principles that prepare us to be citizens” (§ 348); “everyone is obligated to teach children the fear of God as the principle of any wisdom and instill in them all the duties that God expects of us in His Decalogue and [so does] our Eastern Greek faith in its rules and tradition” (§ 351). Children “should also be inspired to love the fatherland, accustomed to the respect of the established civic laws and honor the authorities of their fatherland as caring by the will of God for their happiness on earth” (§ 352). The Orthodox Church was just a state department and as a governmental agency it should act for the benefit of this government, that is, of the autocrat. The Church should instill the fear of God in citizens so that they have fear for the autocrat. Other religious aspects of the Church are far less important. The Orthodox Church played this role very well — figures like Matseevich were exceptions to the rule — and thus it should play the prominent role on the religious scene. Therefore, other faiths could be tolerated in Russia — religious intolerance would be most dangerous in such a big country (§ 494) — but they should not gain a prominent status: “there is no other means of bringing all sheep that went astray to the true flock of the faithful except for reasonable tolerance of other laws that are not contrary to our Orthodox faith and politics” (§ 495). So, if any religion is contrary to Orthodoxy, it cannot be tolerated in Russia, which makes vacuous the lofty principle that “persecution irritates human minds and tolerance of belief according to one’s own laws softens even the hardest hearts” (§ 496): if some laws are contrary to Orthodoxy they will not be tolerated, which is very much tantamount to persecution.

In the words of Diderot, who commented on Catherine’s *Nakaz*, she “did not quite forget in her *Nakaz* that she is a sovereign. One encounters lines in which, without noticing it, she takes again the scepter that she put aside at the beginning”. He had no doubt that “the Empress of Russia is surely a despot”. He concluded that in the *Nakaz* he saw “the name of despot abdicated, but the thing itself preserved and despotism called monarchy”²⁸. No wonder that when Catherine read these comments after Diderot’s death, she said that his *Observations* were “a genuine babble in which can be found neither knowledge of things, nor prudence, nor foresight” (G 372); for her, the *Nakaz* “was not only good, but even excellent” (373), which is an outright delusion of grandiosity.

²⁸ D. Diderot, “Observations sur le *Nakaz*”, [in:] *Oeuvres politiques*, Paris 1963, pp. 385, 345, 457.

In all policies of the *Nakaz* Catherine mercilessly pressed her ambitious policy of strengthening the position of the empress and used her position as the head of the Church as an adornment or as a tool in promoting her ambitions. This is what transpires from her official actions and documents. Can a spiritually softer side of Catherine be expected in unofficial or at least less official ways that Catherine revealed herself? Memoirs and letters appear to be such a place.

Memoirs and letters

Catherine fashioned herself as an enlightened empress (S 7.282), philosophically minded (12.615) monarch benevolently ruling over her subjects, even, as she wrote to Potemkin, a mind at some point “thought to be one of the best in Europe”²⁹. It is thus interesting to see the level of this enlightenment and the way of thinking about philosophy and theology in her own words that can be considered intimate as included in the many versions of her memoirs and in her letters.

First, her *Memoirs*. However, they recount in great detail many events from her life and a lot of petty intrigues, cabals, and court gossip (that she sometimes called anecdotes or bruits): who with whom what and how; very interesting material for historians, but not a particularly good testimony of the grandeur of Catherine’s mind. She made passing remarks about her readings — she mentioned Voltaire and Plato — but there is no single philosophical or theological reflection. Any reflection is self-centered and concerned with her own ambitions. The most philosophical remark she made was that people thought she was smart and that at the prompting of a Swedish ambassador Gyllenborg who asked her “to write a picture of my spirit/mind and my character”, she wrote *A sketch of a draft of the character of the Philosopher of the age 15*. Even a dozen years later after she perused through it she was amazed at the profundity of her thought so that she was unable to add anything to it (S 12.61, 215–216). Is it really such a good testimony that she stayed on the same developmental level a decade later? It is all the more amazing because her philosophical self-education was not quite auspicious. In 1745, Gyllenborg prompted her to read Plutarch, Cicero, and Montesquieu. She read only two pages of the life of Cicero, she started to read Montesquieu’s book on Roman empire but it put her to sleep, and she was unable to find *Lives* of Plutarch (60–61). That is how studious was the philosopher of the age 15³⁰.

²⁹ S. Montefiore, *The Prince of Princes: The Life of Potemkin*, New York 2000, p. 115.

³⁰ So much for the idea that “she threw herself wholeheartedly into the ultra-serious prose”, as claimed by H. Troyat, *Catherine the Great*, Nuffield 1978, p. 37.

In 1753, she read four volumes of Bayle's *Dictionnaire* in two years, that is, one volume per six months (329). On the other hand, she read nine volumes in quarto of the history of Germany by Joseph Barre through winter and part of spring of 1749 (142), more or less two volumes per month, which is still not very impressive considering that she did not have anything else to do beyond riding a horse and dancing in balls, which she avidly did. Her readings were chaotic and spotty, her education limited to basic German, French, and then Russian literacy, some catechism, and dancing. Therefore, her 18 years spent in Elizabeth's court as the grand duchess were educationally rather thin, although very rich in gaining excellent experience of the court life. She recognized that and wanted help in designing education from primary school to university; as she wrote to Grimm, "me, who did not study at all and was not at all in Paris, I have neither science nor mind (*esprit*) and consequently I don't know at all what one should learn not even what one can learn and whence can it be taken" (G 19).

The 18 years in Elizabeth's court were by themselves the most educational. Catherine was savvy, bright, and cunning. She mastered the art of intrigue; she was very good in reading people and in winning people over to her cause, the art at which her husband failed miserably. She was the grand duchess, so she expected to become the empress if only as a wife of weak and incompetent Peter whom she mastered to manipulate. She was ready for the throne and that was her overriding ambition. When she then said, "I only desire, I only want the good of the country where God put me; he is my witness. The glory of the country is my glory" (S 12.614), she identified herself with the Russian empire and happiness of people being her happiness quickly became her happiness being the happiness of the people — and woe to those who stood in the way of this happiness. All her pronouncements should be viewed from this perspective. She could then flatter herself in the third person: "The Nation was universally attached to her and regarded her as its only hope ... The behavior of Catherine toward the Nation was always without reproach; she never wanted, wished or desired anything but the happiness of this Nation and her all life was devoted only to procure goodness and felicity for the Russians" (G 480, 797). In the light of the principle *l'état c'est moi* understood as "Russia is me", there is no objection to the statement that she always worked for the good of Russia. This ambition transpires from her memoirs and her private notes, but it is quite evident in her correspondence as well.

Frederick Melchior Grimm, a German minor literary figure, lived in Paris. Catherine corresponded with him for 22 years. She sometimes addressed Grimm as mister philosopher, but from their correspondence it is unclear why, since there is precious little in it that can be considered philosophical. It is mostly chatter. She spoke about her illnesses and about her constant concern

about Grimm's health, including his vomiting (684); about what she saw and what she read, but the discussion of the plays she watched or books she read was limited to one-or-two sentence remarks, basically "I liked it" or "I didn't like it" — no discussion of substance. She wrote about battles of her army and navy and about her trips. After the birth of Alexander, she constantly informed Grimm about how great a grandson he was, less about another grandson, Constantine, much less about granddaughters and, interestingly, nearly nothing about her own son Paul. She asked Grimm to run some errands for her such as purchasing art or books with the money she provided. And a lot of gossip: who, when, how, etc., in which words like *imbécile*, *fou/folle*, *sot/sotte* and *dumm* and the like were very generously used. She also used a lot of nicknames for a lot of people (Gu or Falstaff — Gustav III, Gu — Friedrich Wilhelm II; Ge — George III; piccolo bambino — Joseph II; souffre-douleur or Schmerzdulder — Grimm himself; marabouts — the Turks, and many others), which is endearing when a teenage girl does it, but much less so otherwise. Frequently a subject abruptly changes from one sentence to another and imperfections of the French and German often obfuscate the meaning³¹. Catherine was to some extent aware of it and repetitively asked Grimm to burn her letters to him (G 437, 545, 615). Incidentally, she also asked Grimm to get back her letters to Voltaire and destroy them.

The Catherine–Grimm correspondence contains plenty of verbiage which may be designed just to stay in touch. With only little exaggeration, Catherine once wrote that upon seeing paper and pen, "the demon of scribbling" overcame her and she had to write a letter to him although "I have nothing, absolutely nothing to say to you" (G 34). She detected this tendency also in overlong letters of Grimm to her and said that she would not respond to parts of his letters that were *bavardage tout pur* (84). A somewhat mismatched correspondence (an empress and a minor writer) was apparently beneficial for both parties. Catherine received a lot of information about European and particularly Parisian life and it was surely a badge of honor for Grimm to correspond with an empress. Letters provide a lot of information useful for historians, information related to Catherine's governmental and economic policies, not to mention her private life, but one aspect is almost missing. Letters to Grimm are one of very few places in which Catherine spoke about herself as the head of the Orthodox Church, and yet these mentions are made in passing, as almost irrelevant. After Grimm called her "Greek majesty", she said she was only "the head of the Greek Church" (131). At another point, "as the head of the Church" and with "the holy anger" she admonished Grimm

³¹ As rather bluntly summarized, "the French is execrable, and the frequent German interpellations are even worse and generally ungrammatical", Hodgetts, op. cit., p. 295.

that the Orthodox Church did not rebaptize anyone after conversion; the first baptism was good enough (55). She mentioned God quite often, but only in phrases like “God knows”, “thank God”, and the like. She sometimes mentioned going to church, but if she commented on it, it was that the church was beautiful (34, 182, 331, 612, 644) or that the service exhausted her (564). Her remarks concerning religious and theological matters are very few and brief. At one point she reported Euler’s prediction of the end of the world the next year and grand duchess’ rebuttal that the Antichrist did not come yet as the Bible states that he must come before the end of the world; “to all this I [Catherine] respond like the barber of Seville: I say to one: God bless you, and to the other: go to bed, and I go on as usual” (62), which is hard to consider as something other than a response of a mother, mildly annoyed at the unreasonableness of her children so that the matter is not even worth discussing. Orthodox dogma, if ever mentioned, is only stated with no reflection accompanying it. For instance, she advised “all Protestant powers to embrace the Greek religion to preserve themselves from irreligious, immoral, anarchic, villainous and diabolical pest, the enemy of God and the thrones; it is the only apostolic and Christian [religion]. It is an oak with deep roots”. That is all what these powers should accept (579). At another point she asked Grimm: “What do you want me to do with Lutheran theological books and hymnals? Greek Church is sufficiently equipped with all that is needed and at that point, those who separated themselves from it will teach it nothing” (683).

Since Grimm was not the tower of intellectuality, intellectually lofty topics may not be expected in Catherine’s correspondence with him. Voltaire may be expected to be another matter. In her memoirs, she frequently stated that she read Voltaire (S 12.105, 245, 373), called him her master (G 104, 217, 369), and claimed that no one had more respect for Voltaire than she (7.86). Here they are, Voltaire, one of the most celebrated intellectuals of the Enlightenment, and Catherine II, an enlightened monarch. Someone could expect that their correspondence would be filled with deep reflections and profound statements, but in that respect it is deeply disappointing. Their correspondence is inconsequential, a chatter of two cultured individuals who are widely recognized personalities and apparently they are satisfied to, basically, share this recognition with one another. And thus, flattery, compliments, overwrought niceties abound that can be pleasing only to one another, but quickly become unbearable, even nauseating, to any other reader. Voltaire seemed to be proud and flattered that a monarch of a large empire wrote letters to him; Catherine, in return, was flattered that someone considered to be a prominent French intellectual wrote back to her filling his letters primarily with praise, deserved or otherwise. And thus Voltaire did not find it exaggerated to state that what she wrote to him about Matseevich and about tolerance in the *Nakaz*

(§ 495) is “a monument of your glory. The three of us, Diderot, d’Alembert and myself, we erect altars for you. You make me a pagan. Along with idolatry, Madame, I am at the feet of Your Majesty, more than with the profound respect, a priest of your temple” (V 56); in the similar vein, he stated: “I place myself at your feet, I kiss them more respectfully than the feet of the pope. He considers himself to be the first personage of the world, Mustafa believed the same about himself, but I know very well to whom this title belongs” (212); also, with Diderot, “we are secular missionaries who preach the cult of St. Catherine and we can pride ourselves that our Church is quite universal” (289). Catherine’s compliments were only a bit more restrained. For a large part, Catherine was recounting, not to say bragging about, the exploits of her army and fleet in the war with Turkey (1768–1774)³². Interestingly, in sincerity or otherwise, she asked Voltaire as “a true Catholic” to persuade other Catholics that the Greek Church has nothing against the Catholic Church or any other Church; it only defends itself (180). She also, rather off-handedly, remarked while on the subject of a clock adorned with the likenesses of Constantine and St. Helena: “as the head of the Greek Church I wouldn’t like to see people like them occupy the same places which are frequently given to cocks and cuckoos” (207). “As the head (*chef*) of the Greek Church” she informed Voltaire about the conversion of a future wife of prince Paul to “the Catholic universal Greek Church, the only true creation established in the East” (287). Also, “as the head of the Greek Church” she corrected error made by Voltaire (the same as Grimm’s) who said that the grand duchess was rebaptized: “The Greek Church does not rebaptize at all, it recognizes as authentic any baptism administered in other Christian communions”; the princess was only anointed with oil for confirmation (292). That is the level of theological profundity they reached in their correspondence. Voltaire, a leading European intellectual, and Catherine, an enlightened monarch, limited their correspondence to mutual flatter and high-brow chatter; presumably both interested in literature and philosophy, they said nearly nothing literary or philosophical, just basking in the compliments they showered one upon another³³.

³² It is quite possible that she meant for her mail to be intercepted and copied and published in French newspapers since letters were sent by mail, not by a courier. This is suggested from her remark recorded on 6 Feb. 1791 by her secretary Khrapovitskii, about her correspondence sent to Hannover: “in this way I replaced de Choiseul [a minister of foreign affairs] when corresponding with Voltaire”, A.B. Храповицкий, *Памятные записки*, Москва 1862, p. 238.

³³ Their letters are “superficial and do not approach any grand themes, affirm without discussing, evolve very little, constantly repeat themselves”. There is no political discussion, and hardly any discussion of literature, C. Maurice, “A propos de la correspondance entre Catherine II et Voltaire”, [in:] *Rousseau et Voltaire en 1978*, Genève, p. 187; besides, Voltaire’s letters show some signs of senescence, pp. 191–192. “They rarely discussed literature, morals or politics in any serious way. Nor do they represent the best work of either correspondent. Clearly

Correspondence with Joseph II is almost all business, political business, which is understandable for the heads of two empires. There are rare personal exchanges — after all, they were related — such as the travels of Catherine's son Paul. At one point, after stating that she should be counted among the apostles of Joseph II (J 37), she offered an alliance: "As the head of the Greek Church, it would be my duty, I think, to recommend to the goodness and virtues of Y[our] I[mperial] M[ajesty] true believers of the Greek Church, but that would be unnecessary; I am certain that they will always be ready to fight against [anyone] it will please It [Majesty] and I know Its humanity" (38). This has nothing to do with religion — it is pure politics. One political remark is very interesting. After a hoped-for deliverance of Europe from "the enemy of the Christian name by chasing them from Constantinople" Catherine wanted Joseph's assistance in "the reestablishing of the ancient Greek monarchy on the ruins and defeat of the barbarian government that dominates there" with her grandson Constantine on the throne; this monarchy should be completely independent from the Russian empire (155–156)³⁴, to which Joseph assented (172). Although expressed in religious terms, this is an expression of the purely political ambitions of Catherine by extending the rule far beyond Russia if only through her offspring. Through all correspondence with Joseph, Catherine comes out as a skillful politician well versed in the European political scene. Rare religious mentions in this correspondence show that religion for her was just a convenient political tool.

Correspondence with Zimmermann begins with Catherine sending him in January 1785 a costly ring and a gold medal as recognition for his book on solitude (Z vi, which Zimmermann announced to the world in the preface of the fourth volume of his *Über die Einsamkeit*), which is quite remarkable. How many authors anywhere could take pride in receiving a costly gift from a crowned head of an empire for a book they wrote? Johann G. Zimmermann was a Swiss physician who wrote many books in various fields. Catherine was grateful for his book on solitude since it helped her in difficult times. As she wrote, at first she was afraid to open his book because of her hypochondriac disposition that she had felt for several months. This book first stopped it and then decreased it. "In this book there is power and force and charm of

the correspondence continued because it satisfied the vanity of both parties. Both enjoyed being praised by an illustrious personality", I. Gorbатов, *Catherine the Great and French Philosophers of the Enlightenment: Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot and Grimm*, Bethesda 2006, p. 96.

³⁴ This was not done on a whim: Constantine was given his name with the prospect of his becoming the emperor in Constantinople and his upbringing (e.g., learning Greek) was designed with the Constantinople throne in mind, R.K. Massie, *Catherine the Great: Portrait of a Woman*, New York 2011, p. 564.

the soul; I believe it is the best antidote for or rather against the disposition of hypochondria that can be imagined judging by the effect this precious book has had on me” (Z 4, 48, 68). Since the letter was written in February 1785, the cause of her “hypochondriac disposition” was most likely the death of one of her lovers, Alexander Lenskoi, who died in June 1784 (G 317). It turned out that it was not so easy to apply to herself a facile advice she gave Grimm to forget things that cannot be remedied and because the dead are dead, one should think about the living (G 48–49).

The first problem is, which book exactly Catherine meant. Zimmermann wrote three such books: *Betrachtungen über die Einsamkeit* (1756), *Von der Einsamkeit* (1773), which was first published as an article in *Hannoversches Magazin* 11 (1773), pp. 1–60, and *Über die Einsamkeit*, vol. 1, 1783, vol. 2, 1785, vols. 3–4, 1786. Catherine referred to the book twice in German, once by its title, *Von der Einsamkeit* (Z 48), once by its content, *von der Einsamkeit* (8), which appears to point to Zimmermann’s second take on solitude. If so, what did Catherine find to be so healing in this small book? One short passage could speak to her, when Zimmermann stated that “the desired solitude is not comforting for the unhappy person whose all joys of his life are in the grave, who embraces the beloved death figure, as often as he is alone, who would give up all happiness on earth to live with it (figure) in a poor hut, who sees all strength of his soul go away, knows or expects no other feeling except pain and in dealing with himself no other thought except doubt”³⁵. Could just this one fragment influence Catherine so much that it allowed her to break out of her depression? The book briefly mentions hypochondria: “hypochondriac head is loathsome and thus difficult to satisfy” (18/11); “profoundly hypochondriac people often want to flee the entire human society” (56/40); hypochondriacs are fearful and full of reflectiveness (83/61). All of this is not quite good if only because “man was apparently created for man” (12/6). Could that have had a healing effect? It may very well be that Catherine received the first volume of *Über die Einsamkeit* of which *Von der Einsamkeit* can be considered an abbreviated forerunner. In his magnum opus, Zimmermann wrote, “seldom will solitude be a consolation for a suffering person, whose only friend lies in the grave; who always sees the beloved shadow and always calls upon it; who would give up the earthly happiness for one sound that he hears no more; whose all strength flew out with tears” (1.41). Also, a hypochondriac says to himself, “no man understands me, since no man can know how I feel”, which leads to withdrawal (63) in which the person “not always finds peace” (64). It is not good for man to be alone; society is his first desire

³⁵ J.G. Zimmermann, *Von der Einsamkeit*, Leipzig 1773, pp. 22–23; idem, *Von der Einsamkeit*, Wien 1803, p. 15.

(18). It may be doubtful whether Catherine had volume 2, because of when it appeared; on the other hand, Zimmermann sent Catherine the last two volumes (Z 6, 9, 15, 16), which would suggest that she did already have the first two and Catherine did thank him with an awkward phrase, "I do not doubt that volumes 3 and 4 would not respond to [would not be as good as] the first two volumes" (16). The second volume is all about the problems that solitude causes and for the most part it is an uncomplimentary description of cloister and monastery life. Catherine could have been struck here by the statement that "female imagination is always more sensitive than male imagination and thus she is in the extremely lonely life and constant self-examination prone to accepting any foolishness" (2.68). Since it was authoritatively spoken by a physician, Catherine could have considered this to be serious enough danger to snap from her depression. Somewhat surprised about the effect of his book, Zimmermann said that he thought he showed only thorns of solitude (in volume 2) and that in the upcoming two volumes (volumes 3 and 4) he spoke about its fruits (Z 6), she answered that the thorns he showed her pulled her from her solitude (8). Apparently, the shock effect of Zimmermann's statements was effective.

However, there is another possible explanation of Catherine's award for Zimmermann. Zimmermann already acted as a physician on account of a commission received from empress Elizabeth in 1776 (ZB 238). Since 1780 he knew Grigorii Orlov (Z 94; ZB 276), who wanted to hire Zimmermann to come to St. Petersburg (ZB 278). He declined. Orlov recommended him to Catherine and in July 1784 she wanted to hire him (Z 3) as a personal physician (*Leibarzt*) and genuine state counselor, an equivalent to the rank of general (ZB 328). Since he again declined, Catherine may have wanted to entice him by her award for his book. It did not work. However, some correspondence ensued. Zimmermann was exceedingly flattered by it and complemented Catherine on the level that bordered on servility. Regretting that by declining her offer he could not be "close to her sacred person" (Z 3), he said, for instance, "If I were a hermit, a portrait of Your Imperial Majesty would be placed on the altar of my cell" (11). "Reading the august words of the first six pages of this work [*Nakaz*] I thought that never existed even a parcel of eloquence nor masterpiece of philosophy so able to elevate the soul of one nation and also full of the magic of feeling and of style that forever incites to grandest exploits" (17). Interestingly, this sentiment about Catherine did not quite transpire from his statement about Orlov in 1780, when he wrote that Orlov "put the crown on [her] head and then for many years he was her *amant*" (ZB 275).

In her letters to Zimmermann, Catherine described her voyage to Crimea, her successes in the war with the Ottoman empire and with Sweden; she sent

him some of her plays that he promoted; she gave him a commission to hire physicians in her service, which he did negotiating salaries that were not quite in favor of these physicians. He pleaded with her to help his friend Kotzebue in Revel, which she did. The most interesting part of this correspondence is Catherine's fairly long self-description. As she wrote, "I never wanted to inspire fear in anyone, I would want to be loved and esteemed if I deserve it — and nothing else. I always thought that I am insulted because I am not understood. I saw many people who had infinitely greater spirit/mind than me. I never hated nor envied anyone. My desire and my pleasure was to make [people] happy. But because everyone wants to be [happy] according to his character, imagination, or understanding, my desires found there frequently obstacles that I never understood. My ambition surely was not to be evil, but perhaps I undertook too much believing that people are fit to become reasonable, just, and happy. Generally, human race leans toward unreasonableness, injustice with which it is impossible to be happy. If it listened to reason, justice, there would not be any need of us; as to happiness, as I stated above, everyone understands it in his own way. I take philosophy into account since my soul has always been singularly republican; I admit that this is perhaps in singular contrast between this strength of the soul and the unlimited power of my position, but no one in Russia will say that I have abused it". I ascribed no importance to my writings, she said, that I consider mediocre and done only for amusement. As to politics, "I tried to follow the plans that seemed to me to be the most useful for my country and bearable for others. If I had known something better, I would have adopted it; Europe is wrong to be alarmed by my designs from which it can only gain. Although I was repaid with ingratitude, at least no one will say that I lacked recognition, frequently I avenged myself on my enemies by doing them good or pardoning them. Humanity in general has had in me a friend who contradicted herself on no occasion" (Z 87–88; S 12.595–596).

In all this, she was quite certainly sincere. In everything she sought the good and happiness of others. She never understood why people did not understand that. Because of prevalent human unreasonableness, drastic measures were occasionally needed to reach the goal of universal happiness. The Biblical precept of not sparing the rod can be scaled up to the national level. Thus, unreasonable or outright foolish Poles had to be harshly treated, which eventually would lead to their happiness. The need for aggressive politics toward the Turks could also be explained by the need to overcome their lack of understanding of what happiness should be. The Russians' successes in wars in the 18th century were ultimately caused by "intrigues and machinations of enemies of this empire" (Z 132), in which way every war could be explained away: it is the enemy's fault. "I love peace and wish peace to all my

neighbors; I don't intend to start [a war] with anyone, but when I am attacked, I believe I proved that I can defend myself. ... If I am attacked, I will fight by myself or with allies. You can be assured that I would count only on support of the Divine benediction — of my just cause — and on zeal of my subjects” (134). In a true royal fashion she identified herself with Russia and thus any attack on Russia (as we understand now, Russia never attacks anyone) was a personal attack on her and since she was placed on the throne by divine providence, she could easily — by definition — count on the divine help in political and military matters.

Almost repeating the phrase, *l'état c'est moi*, Catherine spoke like an autocrat, always like an autocrat, and yet, curiously, in the same breath she pronounced herself to be a republican. Zimmermann felt obligated to comment on this statement by saying that through Catherine, one can see “philosophy, humanity, justice, sweetness and all that one can imagine in the world to be lovable on the throne” and “in that sense, with Her soul truly republican, Your Majesty is said to be royalist” (Z 123). The sweet, just, philosophically-minded monarch is a republican. It seems that this unconventional understanding was very close to Catherine's own. She did want it to be written on her epitaph that she had “a republican soul and good heart” (12.798; G 77 note 1), which she also announced to Grimm (G 48); on the other hand, she disparaged republicanism by considering republics of her age to have a tendency to unreason, like Americans (G 362); she considered the French to be “republican canaille” (618) and she claimed that “a republic always ends with royalty” (626). However, she made a comment about some French officials: “since these gentlemen are convinced republicans, they should love, respect, and encourage the truth, and if they don't, I will say that they are nothing at all since they are inconsistent in their own principles” (537). Thus, being a republican would mean for her to love and respect the truth, which vaguely matches Zimmermann's odd rendering. She also wrote about her father that his “purest virtue” led him to love the republican government, which Catherine, “out of respect for my father or otherwise”, could not prevent from retaining a taste for it, “a thing almost incredible in the place in which I am and in which I have ambitions that I have” (S 12.445). So it appears that by pronouncing having a republican soul she believed that the pure virtue of her father somehow rubbed off on her³⁶, but her political ambition did not really make her a friend of republicanism³⁷.

³⁶ According to one opinion, Catherine simply considered the purest virtue as the principal characteristic of republican attitude, H. Fleischhacker, *Mit Feder und Zepter: Katharina II. als Autorin*, Stuttgart 1978, p. 199.

³⁷ Or, as more forcefully expressed, she “dedicated herself to destroying the very idea of republicanism”, J. Winik, *The Great Upheaval: America and the Birth of the Modern World, 1788–1800*, New York 2007, p. xiii.

Memoirs and correspondence show Catherine as a cunning politician who wanted to increase her grandeur by elevating Russia culturally, economically, and through aggressive politics toward neighboring countries. Her position as the head of the Church was a very efficient instrument since defense of Orthodoxy was always used as a tool to motivate people to follow the will of the monarch and Catherine did not shy from using it. Although she claimed respect for religion, without allowing it to enter into the affairs of the state (12.625), she was the first to violate this principle using religious motivation whenever it suited her.

The celestial crown and the terrestrial crown

Catherine repeatedly mentioned in her memoirs her participation in church rituals. For example, she regularly attended mass on Sundays (S 12.233). During Lent, Catherine spent mornings listening to matins/prayers with her servants who were very devout (221), thereby “fulfilling exactly the prescriptions of Lent according to our rite”. When Peter, who was quite irreligious, scolded her for her excessive devotion, she answered that she “did not do more than was proper and what everyone else did, and what could not be avoided without scandal” (222). This pretty much summarizes her attitude toward the observance of church rites and traditions: do what others do and do not scandalize them. Very early, she made three resolutions: to please grand duke Peter, to please the empress Elizabeth, and to please the nation (57). She succeeded particularly in pleasing the nation (58): “I had a principle to please the world with which I lived ... I wanted to become Russian so that the Russians would like me” (60). In this, “the hope or the prospect not of the celestial crown but of the terrestrial crown kept my spirit and my courage” (105). Catherine, the head of the Church, cared little about the heavenly prospects offered by the doctrine of this very Church. She needed Church in order to acquire and then maintain the terrestrial crown, in which she did succeed probably beyond her own expectations. The Russians, for whom their religion was very important, were very pleased with Catherine’s attitude and she did her best to keep the appearances.

Catherine fasted during Lent. “Madame Vladislavova was too rigid in the articles of devotion ... for me to dare to scandalize her by asking for a piece of bread ... I suffered and kept silent”. The largest part of the population thought like her so it would also be easy to scandalize people. “She was extremely devoted and rigid about all trifles (*bagatelles*). ... I was particular about avoiding in everything and everywhere the smallest trifle concerning what can shock this disposition of the national spirit that dominated then among the multitude; I also took upon myself to conform as I knew the principle that says that very often trifles of that nature when neglected are more hurtful in

the totality than the essentials since there are many more spirits on the level of small things than sensible people who despise them” (S 12.150). Thus, on account of the insensible multitude, Catherine took upon herself the observance of such trifle as fasting in order to win people over to herself, as she did. Thus, when she said that on Easter it would be proper to make her devotions — making confession and taking communion — so that her attachment to the Greek Orthodox faith can be seen (419), she did all of it for a show. And this had been noticed. As French ambassador de Breteuil, who was in her confidence, wrote in 1761, Catherine “wins oven more and more hearts. No one more assiduously follows the duties/rites in respect to the deceased [day before] empress [Elizabeth], which [rites] in the Greek Church are numerous and full of superstition at which she most assuredly laughs, but the clergy and the nation believe that she is touched [by Elizabeth’s death] and are grateful for it. For those who know her she observes with remarkable exactitude holidays, fasts, all religious rites”³⁸.

Catherine once wrote about Peter: “I never knew an atheist more perfect in practice than him, who very often was afraid of the devil and of good God and even more often forgot both of them according to the occasion that presented itself or to the caprice of the moment that carried him” (S 12.134). Could she, unwittingly, have written about herself as well? At least in her official pronouncements, she expressed her recognition of God, but in her political and private life she frequently acted as though only this world existed. Was she an atheist? Probably not, she very likely believed in God and although she pronounced human dependence on God and how He influences the fate of individuals and nations, she acted in the spirit of the Enlightenment deism where the existence of a distant God disinterested in the affairs of the world was usually grudgingly acknowledged³⁹. Interestingly, however, once in 1790 she was asked during her confession if she believed in God. Would the confessor even contemplate asking this question if there were no doubts? In response, she recited the creed and said somewhat defiantly that she could provide proofs of existence of God that no one heard about. She said, “I believe all what was enacted in all the [seven] Councils since the Holy Fathers of those times were close to Apostles and could better figure things out than we can”⁴⁰. The response is interesting for its impersonal character: reciting the creed, reference to some unspecified proofs of the existence of

³⁸ *La Cour de la Russie il y a cent ans 1725–1783: extraits des dépêches des ambassadeurs anglais et français*, Berlin 1858, p. 188.

³⁹ “Under the influence of Voltaire Catherine moved from Christianity to Deism, and chose a benevolent, even beaming God, who demanded neither humility nor the rendering of accounts”, V. Cronin, *Catherine, Empress of All the Russians*, New York 1978, p. 306.

⁴⁰ А.В. Храповицкий, *op. cit.*, p. 217.

God (although it would be interesting to see what original Catherine could have offered), a reference to the seven Councils. Nothing about her own mind and soul, her life, her personal attitude, so that the answer sounds like something she thought was expected of her; thus, another example of her hypocrisy, the hypocrisy she apparently despised so much, at least judging by some of her dramatic works⁴¹.

The office of the head of the Church was for Catherine just a tool for her enormous ambitions⁴². A little German princess who grew in the shadow of a powerful empress Elizabeth wanted to outdo her — and she did. She used religion to increase her power internally and on the European scene. She, as it were, enlisted God Himself to help her and the fact that she was an empress was clearly a sign — to her and to her subjects — that God was on her side. By merging the will of God with her own will, she did as she pleased, which included imprisonment, exile, aggression toward other countries, not to mention violating church laws concerning personal life. The fact that two emperors (Peter III and Ivan VI) met an untimely demise on her watch should also be mentioned. She wanted, ergo God wanted it; thus, no one could stop her.

Екатерина II: глава Православной Церкви

Резюме

Екатерина II, одна из самых могучих правительниц России, интересует историков прежде всего как политик: как это случилось, что мало известная принцесса заняла столь высокую позицию и была в состоянии влиять на судьбу огромной российской империи? Нечасто воспринимают Екатерину как духовную личность, хотя она была номинальной главой церкви, о чем вспоминала не менее семи раз: один раз в мемуарах, два раза

⁴¹ A. Drozdek, *Catherine II and her plays*, Cuadernos de Rusística Española 11 (2015), pp. 111–128.

⁴² Catherine was “dominated by her overweening ambition, and to it she subordinated all else”, I. Grey, *Catherine the Great, Autocrat and Empress of all Russia*, Philadelphia 1962, p. 79; “There was one promise to which Catherine was faithful throughout her life, one commitment on which she would never renege: this was to her own ambition”, R.K. Massie, op. cit., p. 78; she was “edgy and ambitious ... she craved power on the grand European stage”, J. Winik, op. cit., p. 39. Already before her marriage with Peter, Catherine had said that the heart does not predict much happiness, “only ambition sustained me” in her conviction that one day she will be an empress (S 12.227) and in 1757 she wrote, “two things I know well: one is, that my ambition is as great as is humanly possible; the other, that I shall do some good for your country”, *Correspondence of Catherine the Great when Grand-Duchess, with Sir Charles Hanbury-Williams and Letters from Count Poniatowski*, London 1928, p. 283. Ambition never ceased to sustain her and the good of the country was a fitting means to satisfy this ambition.

в письмах Гримму, три раза в письмах Вольтеру и один раз в письме Иосифу II. Как это повлияло на ее духовность и как ее духовность повлияла на ее отношения с церковью? Глава церкви и просвещенная сударыня: пыталась ли Екатерина II совместить эти два аспекта?

Перевел Ежи Россеник

Catherine II: The head of the Orthodox Church

Summary

Catherine II, one of the most powerful rulers of Russia, is interesting to the historians primarily as a politician: how was it possible that an obscure German princess rose to such a prominence to be able to shape the fate of the enormous Russian empire? Rarely is Catherine viewed as a spiritual figure, and yet she was the nominal head of the Church, a fact she mentioned at least seven times: once in her memoirs, twice in her letters to Grimm, three times in her letters to Voltaire and once in a letter to Joseph II. How did that fact influence her spirituality and how did her spirituality influence her relationship with the Church? The head of the Church and an enlightened monarch: did she try to reconcile these two facets?

Translated by Anna Kijak