

Article

Synthesizing Religions: Vasily Rozanov's "Phallic Christianity"

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Abstract: Vasily Rozanov was one of the first Russian writers of the fin de siècle to create a nexus between the study of the history of world religions and the history of sexuality. He viewed Christianity's asceticism as a source of the disintegration of the contemporary family. This article examines Rozanov's strategy to synthesize religions and to use pre-Christian religions of the Middle East as proof of common physical and metaphysical essence in celestial, human, animal, and mythological human/animal/divine bodies. I argue that while his rehabilitation of the physical life by endowing it with religious value was socially positive, his self-proclaimed "mission of sexuality", when politically motivated, was manipulative and incorporated the notion of the atavistic 'survivals'. In conclusion, I explain that Rozanov's monistic search for the divine in the physical body as well as his strategy to synthesize religions were additionally driven by his personal doubts in the preeminence of Christian eschatology.

Keywords: Vasily Rozanov; Christianity; Judaism; sexuality and religions; human–animal monism; proto-posthumanism



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1. Introduction

Vasily Rozanov (1856–1919) was one of the first writers of the Russian fin de siècle to view religious beliefs in relation to the history of sexuality. Rozanov stated that his generic "new philosophy" or "philosophy of life" is based on the phenomenon of life itself, which he observed with "curiosity and surprise" (*Opavshie list'ia* (*Fallen Leaves*), Rozanov 1970a, p. 144) (1912/1914). Rozanov observed life through the life of the body, which, in his terminology, was both a "phenomenon" and a transcendental "noumenon" ("Iz zagadok chelovecheskoi prirody" ("From the mysteries of human nature"), p. 29) (1901). In spite of the often contradictory nature of his parataxic narratives, his writing shows a stable preoccupation with drawing examples from diverse religions to substantiate his point of view, no matter how fluctuating the evaluative side of this position might be.¹ Rozanov's search for examples of alternatives to Christian attitudes to the physical body followed the line of argument which became methodologically acceptable by the end of the nineteenth century among ethnographers and cultural evolutionists. It became conventional to use both synchronic and diachronic approaches to explain differences between and within modern societies and to "mine non-Western cultures for 'survivals' from the past, whether as primitive practices to regulate, or as a 'window onto the past' study" (Yoshiko Reed 2014, p. 120). Rozanov turned his attention to the conceptualizations of the human and animal body in relation to the links with the divine across religions, and often based his opinions on readings of Scriptures, the Talmud, as well as on the study of ancient artefacts and pictorial representations taken from pre-Christian sources.² His professed missionary goal was to rehabilitate the body in all its biological activities by breaking boundaries between the physical and metaphysical essence. In doing so, he challenged Cartesian dualist thinking. Moreover, he specifically used Spinozian religious monist ideas to support his project to endow physical corporeality with spirituality.

Current body theorizing, including posthumanist thinking, is often grounded in a revival of the Spinozian monist model of the body.³ The monist approach recognizes the existence of the same substance in all objects of nature, and does not create dualist categories

out of physical and metaphysical, flesh and spirit, or mind and body. For Spinoza, there is one infinite substance—God. This substance is expressed in extension and in thought, and is as corporeal and physical as it is mental. Rozanov regarded Spinoza as the most original of all the European philosophers. Additionally, Spinoza’s Jewishness was of special importance for Rozanov, as it provided him with the means of comparing Christian and Judaic attitudes towards the body. For Rozanov, the Cartesian denigration of the body was synonymous with European Christian asceticism, while in contrast Spinozian mystical pantheism was congenial to his vitalism (Volzhskii 1995).⁴ Grosz summarizes dualist philosophy as an understanding that assumes that there are “two mutually exclusive types of things, physical and mental, body and mind, that compose the universe in general and subjectivity in particular” (Grosz 1994, p. 7). By polarizing mind/soul and the body, Descartes denied the metaphysical aspect of the body—he regarded nature as soul-less. Importantly, Rozanov singled out Descartes’s views as hindering a holistic view of material life and creating discriminatory hierarchies between spirit and matter. Notably, for Descartes, animals were devoid of soul and epitomized matter devoid of spirit, while Rozanov specifically chose (mythic) animals to promote the idea of the monist essence in the divine and physical spheres. His interest in the ancient religions of the Middle East was linked to his search for a connection between God, or other divine figures, and human and/or animal essence. In the following paper, I first explain the key ideas of his project to reform Christian asceticism, then turn to his interpretations of the relevant themes taken from the Old Testament, Jewish religious customs, and Ancient Egyptian beliefs. Next, I examine his elucidations of the religious value of (composite) animals found in ancient artefacts and pictorial images. The last section assesses Rozanov’s subjectivities in his mission to synthesize religions.⁵

2. Rozanov’s Mission of “Phallic Christianity”

Rozanov’s main interest in the search for manifestations of the divine in human corporeality was the result of his expressed concern about the negative effect of Christian asceticism on contemporary society. He arrived at the idea that the breakup of the contemporary Russian family was a result of the somatophobia of Christian beliefs. Moreover, he argued that these harmful views on the physical life of the body were imposed by the Russian Orthodox Church and its clergy, which failed to promote the importance of love and care between family members, including parental love and harmonious relations between spouses.⁶ His quest to look for unity of the physical and metaphysical in the living body was driven by what he perceived as pressing practical necessity. The New Testament and the Church’s interpretation of the Holy family were, for Rozanov, key to the decline of the contemporary family. In *Liudi lunnogo sveta* (*People of the Moonlight: Metaphysics of Christianity*) (1909/1911) he argued that the moment “semenality” was introduced to “the Image of Jesus Christ”, the Image will be destroyed (Rozanov 1990, p. 59). Jesus, for Rozanov, is the prime example of the annihilation and absence of sexuality and sex, asexuality being a phenomenon that defined Christianity as a religion, and which separated it from the religion of the Old Testament.

In his early work, Rozanov had already focused on sexuality and procreation, and sensationally argued that sexuality itself was of divine origin. In view of his daring pronouncements, it is not surprising that his book, *V mire neiasnogo i nereshennogo* (*In the World of the Unclear and Undecided*) (1901), was taken out from circulation a month after its publication, and he was labeled by the high-ranking ministers, responsible for censorship, as “a terrible pornographer” (Gollerbach 1922b, p. 49).⁷ In “Brak i khristianstvo” (Rozanov 1995a) (“Marriage and Christianity”) (1898), he shocked his readers by proclaiming that the very essence from which sexual organs are made was not of “phenomenal” but “supra-natural” (*sverkhestestven*), even cosmic origin:

Quite often, the thought occurred to me, and still occurs to me, that the very “clod of earth” from which that place is made has a totally different origin from the other parts of the body (this is why, during the usual, phenomenal time and with the usual eye, we cannot even

look at it) and it is to other parts of the body the same as iron from a *meteorite* is to *ordinary* iron. (“Brak i khristianstvo” (“Marriage and Christianity”), p. 119)⁸.

Italicizing important words and concepts, he argued that human sexuality was a manifestation of the (“*noumenal ‘nost’*”) noumenality of the human body, the latter he explained as “the second and most important, but hidden from the rational conscience, part of things” (“Iz zagadok” (“From the mysteries of human nature”) p. 29).

In his search for helpful examples, Rozanov turned to the Hebrew Bible, and even the Talmud for indications of the Judaic attitude to human sexuality, love within the family, and the role of procreation. Similar to many of his contemporaries, following Tylorian methods advocated in *Primitive Culture* (Tylor 1873), Rozanov explored contemporary cultures for ‘survivals’ of ancient beliefs, and his views of contemporary Jewish life were based on his amateurish interpretations of the Talmud and the Hebrew Bible.⁹ For Rozanov, Judaism exemplified an attitude to the family which he would like to see emulated by the Russian family. Notably, while pursuing his project, Rozanov claimed that he discovered examples of divine–human interaction in the Hebrew Bible, which he used as an antidote to contemporary somatophobia. One revealing example is found in his essay “Kontsy i nachala” (“Ends and Beginnings” 1902) in which he alludes to the Old Testament story of Watchers, whose divine origins did not prevent them from copulating with human women. As elucidated by Howard Eilberg-Schwartz in his groundbreaking study *God’s Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994), there are several myths in the Old Testament that ponder erotic relationships between humans and divine beings. He specifically refers to the myth in Genesis 6: 1–4 (J) which recounts the meeting between the sons of God and humans:

The sons of God saw how beautiful the daughters of men were and took wives from those that pleased them. The Lord said, “My breath shall not abide in man forever, since he too is flesh; let the days allow him one hundred and twenty years”. It was then, and later too, that the Nephilim [Fallen Ones] appeared on earth—when the divine beings cohabited with the daughters of men, and bore them offspring. They were the heroes of old, the men of renown. (Genesis 6:1–4 (J))

Eilberg-Schwartz regards this episode as a fragment of a larger mythology that is now lost, yet its presence in the Bible is meaningful. Eilberg-Schwartz stresses that the relationship between divine males and human women results in offspring as men of renown. This aspect would appeal to Rozanov, who was arguing for a need for a strong family that would take emotional care of children. However, according to Eilberg-Schwartz, the story of Watchers in the Bible does not have positive connotations in terms of progeny, as cohabitation between angels and human women does not bring good results in the logic of the Hebrew Bible. The sons of God are later described as fallen angels, or Watchers, who are responsible for the fall of humankind. The placement of this story before the flood reflects an editorial judgment that the incident contributes to God’s decision to wipe out humanity: “God brings the flood to wipe the slate clean” (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, p. 129).

For Rozanov, the Biblical episode with the Watchers has useful and positive meaning as it also helps him to imagine the compatibility of celestial and earthly corporeality. The story, for him, is not a myth, but an example of historical past. He argues that writers with a mystical inclination, such as the Russian romantic poet Mikhail Lermontov, could express this plot of sexual contacts between the divine angels/demons and humans. According to Rozanov, the plot of Lermontov’s romantic poem “Demon” (1839) is a manifestation of the poet’s latent mystical knowledge. In the poem, Demon falls in love with young woman Tamara, a love which Rozanov sees as a proof of the remnants of the distant past, applying the methodology of searching for ‘survivals’ of the past in contemporary, albeit fictional narratives. It is symptomatic that Rozanov turns to Lermontov as a suitable candidate in his search for a forgotten past, due to his foreign ancestry and personal family history: one of his ancestors was a clairvoyant who came to Russia from Scotland, where he had practiced his arcane craft. This presupposes that he had latent knowledge or insight into the beginnings of humanity.

However, these creative interpretations, based on insights into Old Testament stories, could become politicized, as was the case of Rozanov's maintaining that Jews have an atavistic predisposition to blood rites—a classic case of quasi-scientific Tylorism which looked for 'survivals' of primitive instincts and drives in contemporary peoples.¹⁰ In a collection of articles, written during the infamous blood libel trial, the Beilis Affair (1911–1913), Rozanov maintained that contemporary Jews could have unconscious desires, expressed by their "olfactory and tactile attitude to blood"—a notion which he used as a title for the book *Oboniatel'noe i osiazatel'noe otnoshenie evreev k krovi (The Olfactory and Tactile Attitude of Jews to Blood)* (1913/1914) (Rozanov 1998). It is symptomatic that it was during the Beilis Affair that Rozanov declared his search for phallic Christianity was a missionary act, meant to defeat the (imagined) advance of contemporary Jewry.

In his best-known text, *Fallen Leaves* (1913), revealing a mimetic underpinning of his views on Judaism and Jewish materiality, he argued that, for Christianity to triumph, a return to the corporeality of Judaism was essential:

Christianity expressed in itself and revealed an inner content of non-semenality, just as Judaism in the Old Testament had revealed semenality" (*Opaushie list'ia (Fallen Leaves)*, p. 21).

If Christianity continues to deny sex, the consequence will be an increase in the number of Jewish triumphs. This is why my starting to preach sex is so timely. Christianity must become phallic, at least in part (children, divorce, i.e., putting the family in good order, increase in the number of families). (*Opaushie list'ia*, p. 132).

In his mission, Rozanov defined Judaism as the religion of a people whose covenant with God was connected with their very flesh, indeed "with the extremity of flesh", the covenant of circumcision (*ibid.*, p. 132). Strikingly, in circumcision, he saw not only a symbolic but also a material link between the sexuality of God and that of human beings. He believed that the Jews understood the mystery of how the divine is revealed in a human being, knowing that it resided in sexuality. He conflated the imagined God's phallus with human genital organs, and linked sexuality in nature with the mystical world of divine sphere.

In terms of recent academic opinions, Rozanov's turning to circumcision in relation to his project to prove the divine aspects of human procreation is not unjustified. Eilberg-Schwartz writes that, in the Judaic priestly writing, circumcision is treated as a symbol of male fertility, of God's promise to make Abraham the father of multitudes:

It is not an accident that the symbol of the covenant is impressed on the male organ of generation, rather than the ear or nostril. By exposing the male organ, the rite of circumcision makes concrete the symbolic link between masculinity, genealogy, and reproduction (Eilberg-Schwartz 1994, p. 202).

In this line of argument, however, circumcision does not necessarily mean that God's body is sexed. Eilberg-Schwartz sees one of the paradoxes of the emphasis on human procreation in the fact that the father God is sexless. He argues that the two myths of human creation defining what it means to be human pose a paradox, as the human Adam was made in the image of God who does not procreate. This factor does not hinder Rozanov's mission, as for him it was strategically paramount to make a point about the divine nature of procreation as encoded in circumcision.

Looking for further examples in the rituals of contemporary Jewry that relate to the treatment of the body, Rozanov turns to the ritual cleansing bath—*mikvah*. According to his logic, *mikvah* is yet another practice which encodes the divine nature of sexuality:

By this means [the *mikvah*] as yet nothing is actually said to the Jews, but they are given a thread, and if they grasp it and follow it each one can reach the idea, the conclusion, the identity, that 'these things' (the organs and their functions), although they are not shown to anyone and to pronounce their names aloud is indecent: they are nevertheless sacred. (*Uedineno (Solitaria)*, p. 26)

By making these quasi-anthropological observations, Rozanov hoped to reform his contemporaries' perception of sexuality. His intended message was to help people remove the sense of shame in their attitude to the sexed body. This, by implication, would lead

to the development of a loving and emotionally healthy family in contemporary Russia contributing to the country's social stability.

As well as Judaism, Ancient Egypt was a source in Rozanov's search for spiritualized materiality. Continuing with his ideas of the meaning of circumcision, by studying drawings made during the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt, he concluded that ancient Egyptians practiced circumcision. In "Obrezanie u Egiptian" ("Circumcision in Ancient Egypt") (1917) he polemically noted that all contemporary European commentators of Ancient Egyptian religion deliberately silence this fact out of contempt for the ritual itself. This silencing, for Rozanov, meant the lack of admission that the cultures of the Middle East "already four thousand years ago were developing the universal and global theme and idea of Fatherhood—an idea that is of utmost comforting importance to all humans" ("Obrezanie u Egiptian", Rozanov 2002, p. 92). His conclusion implicitly reveals his search for religious beliefs demonstrating the importance of strong emotional family ties and parental love.

3. Looking for God in an Animal

Egyptian art additionally provided Rozanov with examples of non-anthropocentric religious beliefs, which erased boundaries between human and animal bodies. Symptomatically for his project, his interest in the divine essence of sexuality made him arrive to the conclusion: "Look for God in an animal" already in his work on *The Family as Religion* (1898) (Rozanov 1995e, p. 67). The blurring of the boundary between animals and humans plays in his writing the role of a "synthesizer". The result of Rozanov's deciphering various Ancient Egyptian artefacts was a creation of the tripartite equation, animal = man = god, which became a cornerstone in his mission of sexuality.

Rozanov realized that within the European Christian tradition, animals have been treated as inferior others. The Church Fathers—Augustine, Clement of Alexandria, and John Chrysostom—claimed that humans and animals had nothing in common.¹¹ According to their teachings, animals had no souls, could not therefore have an afterlife. With the advent of the Scientific Revolution, the line separating animals from humans grew finer, but, at the same time, the triumph of Darwinism deprived animals and humans alike of souls, and maintained the taxonomy in which non-human animals were inferior to human animals. Rozanov pointed out the absence of living, earthly creatures in Christian mythology and in Russian Orthodox art, and linked this with Christianity's deliberate neglect of the body, and its sterility:

It is not by accident that the ancient temples were full of calves, sheep, pigeons—of a healthiness that was still pre-human, whereas the new [temples] are full of the lame, the blind and the weak. It is not by accident that the Gospels are sprinkled with so many stories of healing, and that Christ began his "new" healing by chasing the animals out of the temple ("Po tikhim obiteliam" ("In Quiet Monasteries"), p. 113).

In "Irodova legenda" ("Herod's legend") (1898), Rozanov makes clear the religious and philosophical meaning of his interest in animals. He attacks Descartes for considering the animal to be merely "an improved machine" ("Irodova legenda", Rozanov 1995b, p. 41) that lacks feelings, and notes that in the European philosophical tradition the animal is equated with physiology; he posits Descartes's dualism as the "antithesis" of the beliefs of Ancient Egypt, where the "animal is god" (ibid., p. 41). He also notes that there is no concept of a "sacred animal" (ibid., p. 43) in European religious and philosophical thought and that, likewise, in the scientific discourses of Darwin and Wundt the animal is merely a physiological object, "an outgrown body" (ibid., p. 41). Only in the Eastern religions, he says, is there a "constant intertwining of the animal and the human in God"—in the East "there has always been an understanding of an animal as a religious and mystical category, not as a physiological phenomenon" (ibid., p. 45).

As the vehicle for challenging this equation of sexuality with animality—and the devaluation of both—, Rozanov chose a mythical Egyptian sphinx:

Here in Petersburg, near the Nikolaevsky Bridge, there are two sphinxes past which you cannot walk without a feeling of excitement. The way their limbs are arranged is so imperishably lifelike! The smile from four thousand years ago is a smile for the gloomy and sad people of Petersburg; it is as if the cheerful young faces of the sphinxes are seeking to burst out laughing at a slow-witted generation of people (and according to Chrysanthos there is no satisfactory theory to explain the animal worship characteristic of the Egyptians). The idea expressed by the sphinx is “Look for God in an animal”, “Seek Him in life”, “Seek Him as the Lifegiver”. “I am the great cat” (the sun-god Ra speaking of himself); but a god—as every Petersburg citizen can see—is completed at the front as a human being and consequently the full idea expressed by the sphinx reads “God-Human Being”. (“Sem’ia kak religiia” (Family as religion), p. 73)

In this narrative, Rozanov creates a tripartite syllogism of man = animal = god, de-stigmatizes the body, and equates the physical with the metaphysical. He goes on to argue for the divine nature of human sexuality in a passage that equates the pagan sphinxes with the mystical animals of the Biblical Apocalypse:

But here... but here with the Egyptian sphinxes who died in the past we encounter the expectations of the Apostle that are promised to the future: that Someone will come who “will bring fire down from heaven” and of whom, seemingly, people will say: “Who resembles this beast? He gave us fire from heaven”. “A beast”—and here again you are to look for what is divine in an animal, and this is what the sphinxes show us: and the fire from heaven, heavenly fire, is the fire of the flame of marriage ties, as understood in their heavenly origin, by which humankind are bound together, having started a religion of births to replace a religion of dying (“Sem’ia kak religiia”, pp. 74–75).

Rozanov further returns to the theme of the animal in his theological discussion in “Russkaia tserkov” (“Russian Church”) (1906) (Rozanov 1994b), where he notes that Christianity, especially its Russian Orthodox form, has become “monophysitic” (p. 14) despite the fact that the church rejected monophysitism—the dogma that Christ was of *one essence only* (divine) and therefore was not truly human—as heretical many centuries earlier. Christianity, Rozanov notes, has denied everything that is “human, everyday, earthly” leaving only that which is “celestial, divine, superhuman” (p. 15). In view of his main concern about Russian society, he also states that Russian Orthodox art in particular lacks representations of animals, because animals are powerful embodiments of the earthly:

“In the pictorial art of Orthodoxy (unique and original, disseminated everywhere) one never sees the animals in the Nativity Scene: the cattle, the shepherds, the little donkeys. On the whole the animal principle has been torn away, rejected by Orthodoxy with terrible force” (“Russkaia tserkov” (“Russian church”), p. 14).

Rozanov saw this as evidence that presence of animal flesh was unacceptable to the Eastern Orthodox churches. This he juxtaposed to western Christianity, stating that churches in Catholic Italy provided him with examples of cathedrals containing representations of animals. During his travels to Italy, he was struck by the many depictions of animals in ecclesiastical buildings there. Regarding the many portrayals of lambs in Italian church paintings, he concludes that, by rejecting the flesh and the joy of life, Christianity in the East has lost the opportunity of seeing “the way things are connected” (*Ital’ianskie vpechatleniia*) (*Italian impressions*) (1901) (Rozanov 1994a, p. 37). This search for the monistic connection of matter and materiality with religious beliefs is foundational for his life philosophy, with its search for physical forms revealing a synthesis between the divine and the earthly.

In the “Post-scriptum” to *Italian Impressions*, Rozanov describes his search for an alternative kind of faith and perception of life. A religious ceremony that made a particular impression upon him was the one in which the Pope himself shears a lamb, the wool from which is used to make vestments (*pallia*) for distribution to the archbishops. Indeed, he records that he found the Papal lamb-shearing ceremony more pleasing than any other dogma in Catholicism; the mere fact of an animal being brought into a Christian church was surprising to him, but what struck him as particularly significant was that the lamb

was placed on the altar table. This fact leads him to compare the Catholic cathedral with a Jewish temple, using the ceremony as an allegory for the connection between animals, humans, and God and as symbolic of a pan-religious synthesis: “This is almost as delightful as the animals in Solomon’s temple” (*Ital’ianskie vpechatleniia*, p. 125).

His synthesizing methodology can be found in his description of the statue of the black Diana in the museum in Rome, where he blurs animal/human/divine categories:

The Diana of Ephesus is not a flight of the spirit, but a philosophy... The black goddess is dressed in white clothing which comes down to the steps... but as you look closely at this clothing you see that it is made up of tiny animal figures: bulls, sheep, birds and even enormous flies and bees. For scholars I will observe that it would not be out of place to compare a statue made by the Greeks with the way Baal is depicted by the Assyrians and Phoenicians of whom the prophet Ezekiel tells us that behind this statue were compartments or small boxes in one of which were kept live doves, in another sheep, in another—something else, and in the last one, the seventh, human beings (the statue was of enormous dimensions) (*Ital’ianskie vpechatleniia (Italian impressions)*, p. 432).

Soul, according to Rozanov, is something that animals and humans have in common. By blurring the boundaries between pagan and Christian categories, he believes he has restored the mystical status that the human/animal body supposedly held in the pagan world.

Unlike some of his contemporary professional and amateur Egyptologists, Rozanov did not travel to Egypt. However, his discoveries through the study of drawings received some recognition for his interpretations by contemporaries (Gollerbakh 1922a). For example, although a famous artist Aleksandr Benua was skeptical about Rozanov’s knowledge of European art, he gave high praise to his work on Egyptian artifacts: “he worked out what was mysterious in the bas-reliefs and hieroglyphics which provided evidence of the beliefs of the Egyptians and in so doing revealed his gift for penetrating the deepest of their secrets” (Benua 1995, p. 142).

Pursuing his quest to synthesize religious beliefs about the body, Rozanov looks for similarities between Judaism and Ancient Egyptian beliefs, finding in the presence of the animal an equation between sexual matter and spirit. His thinking in one example develops as follows: the human “face” (*litso*) is, in Judaism, a path into the Cosmos, while in Egyptian drawings the face, or a person’s head, is freely interchangeable with that of various animals. But the human being has more than one “face”—human genitalia, the second “face” of the body, is unique to every individual too. Both cultures recognize the importance of this “sexual face” through the ritual of circumcision (“*Iz sedoi stariny*” (“From grey-haired antiquity”), Rozanov 1995c, p. 361). Furthermore, the Egyptians’ “usual metamorphosis of the human body” through the addition of an animal head, speaks of the organic unity of animals, humans, and deities. His book, *Iz vostochnykh motivov (From the Eastern Motifs)* (1916) abounds with illustrations painstakingly copied from various historical sources, and each one is provided with commentary. Significantly, a drawing of a woman with the arms and legs of an animal is catalogued as “The future” (Rozanov 1995d, p. 407, Figure 42), while another, featuring stylized vertical figures with plant, animal, and human parts, is inscribed as “A sample of physiological-religious painting” (*ibid.*, p. 416, Figure 48). He formulates this thematic grouping as “a human, botanical, theological being” (p. 417). For Rozanov, these instances proved that, in Ancient Egypt, there was an understanding of the single essence of the physical and cosmic worlds:

And they united with the world without writing dissertations ‘*De rerum essentia*’ but having depicted everywhere that the ‘essentia’ of the whole world is one, that there is no ‘multiplicity of essence’, but singularity of essence, mono-essence. And it is precisely this that the universality of Egypt represents. (*Iz vostochnykh motivov*, p. 421).

4. Finding a Place for the Self through Connecting with Human/Animal/Divine Bodies

In the last year of Rozanov’s life, his desire to connect with the divine through linkages with real and mythological animals became most explicit. The weaker his own body grew,

the more he desired to link it with animal bodies, to create a oneness with the animal world. In a letter to art historian Erik Gollerbakh, penned in a cold room where Rozanov experienced illness and hunger in 1918, while thinking of food, he imagined an idyll with close relationships between humans and animals:

I would like to be Polyphemus and to look after goats and sheep, and I would suck milk from them with MY OWN MOUTH. By the way, for a long time now I have been tempted to drink milk from the cow with my own mouth, to suck from her udder. It is so beautiful. Truly—beautiful. And I am quite sure, very HEALTHY. This thought has attracted me for twelve years. In future, better times, people will give their aged parents a live goat or a cow to suck from. (“Pis’mo 27” (“Letter 27”), p. 545.)

Of special interest is Gollerbakh’s comment on this passage, in which he states that it reveals Rozanov’s characteristic “gustatory”, “olfactory”, and “tactile” “attitude” to everything “living” (“Pis’mo 27”, p. 545). This commentary clearly alludes to the title of Rozanov’s book *The Olfactory and Tactile Attitude of the Jews to Blood*, obliquely uncovering mimetic underpinnings of Rozanov’s perception of Judaism and Jewry. While the book was written at the time of the blood libel, the Beilis Affair, and was perceived by contemporaries as a political and opportunistic slander, it revealed Rozanov’s phylogenetic views on contemporary Jews as an ancient people. In his comment Gollerbakh exposes an important mythological aspect of Rozanov’s perception of the physical world, and the human and animal body. The fact that Rozanov imitates Polyphemus, a character from the Ancient Greek myths, shows yet again that his vision was underpinned by his search in past cultures for alternative views on living matter. Fittingly, in this passage he recalls that Polyphemus was dubbed a “Divine shepherd”, thus bringing the religious aspect into the theme of human-animal relations.

Through this fantasized connection between human lips and animal udder, Rozanov breaks antithetical categories. He forms assemblages with the animal at the same time envisioning a proleptic posthumanist futurity based on his understanding of the premodern cultural beliefs about inter-species communications. Notably, while thinking about the family of the future with its caring relations between children and old parents, he includes domestic animals as part of the family. While he evokes Ancient Greek mythology in the image of Polyphemus, this utopian family idyll also implicitly alludes to the attitude to domestic animals in the Hebrew Torah. In Rozanov’s visualization of the idyll, domestic animals are treated as part of the household, which is in line with the ethos of the Torah which grants animals rest on the sabbath.¹²

After the Bolshevik Revolution, Rozanov continues to conceptualize theogony and cosmogony by religious synthesis underpinned by his search for the phallic beginnings of the universe. The divine/animal/human correlation is part of his synthesis. Tellingly, in his last letters to Gollerbakh, he asked for a drawing of an antique statuette which embodied a much-desired synthesis of religions, of which mystical animals and pagan deities are part:

I am in urgent need of a statuette (small). Horus in the shape of an eagle with a phallus that has a lion’s head at the end. Please copy it on paper and send it to me (Rozanov, “Pis’mo 16”, p. 526)

In another, later letter to Gollerbakh (“Pis’mo 30” 6. 10. 1918) (Rozanov 1970b), musing about the link between mysteries of sexuality and religion, he recalls the episode when he met the (in)famous Russian mystic, monk, and political charlatan Grigory Rasputin. According to Rozanov, Rasputin allegedly told him that he was struck by fear when he first met Rozanov. Rozanov interprets this fear as evidence of yet another of Rasputin’s “revelations”, another “miracle”, in that he recognized something mystical and “noumenal” in Rozanov (“Pis’mo 30”, p. 551). In turn, Rozanov labels Rasputin’s essence as “noumenal” and links it to the Egyptian deity Apis. Rozanov’s interest in Apis is related to his interest in phallic cults, and it emerged when he discovered illustrations of this phallic animal/god in an Egyptian drawing from the Napoleonic expedition to Egypt. Characteristically, Rozanov describes his first reaction as a desire to kiss the “balls” of this sacred bull in an act of mystical-religious elation (“Pis’mo 30”, p. 551). Since he sees in Rasputin an embodiment of

the phallic Apis, in order to experience the phallic power of religious beliefs, he takes part in Rasputin's notorious parties. Rasputin's performances of quasi-orgiastic dances¹³ were, for Rozanov, a manifestation of the "Theogony of Rasputin-Apis-Dionysus-Adonai" ("Pis'mo 30", p. 551)—a striking synthesis of the Siberian mystic sectarian practices and Ancient Egyptian, Greek, and Judaic religions. Noteworthy is the fact that Jesus Christ is markedly absent in this synthesis. In order to secure a place in this almost all-encompassing theogony, Rozanov develops a formula "I am Grishka, Grishka is Apis" (ibid., p. 551). In this way, he fantasizes crossing the boundaries between his own body and the divine/animal body. By doing this he puts the tripartite formula animal = man = god into operation in relation to his own body.

Rozanov's professed mission of sexuality aimed at saving the Christian Russian family became redundant after the Bolshevik Revolution, which separated the church from the state. His late writing made clear that his search for god in the human/animal body was to a large degree motivated by eschatological concerns about the immortality of the body. This concern was well understood by a Russian-Jewish historian and literary critic Mikhail Gershenzon, who knew Rozanov well. Gershenzon characterized Rozanov's religious position by using the expression "maybe", explaining that Rozanov presumed that any religious belief could be true.¹⁴ Of relevance to Gershenzon's point is the fact that Rozanov wrote about his intention to convert to Judaism in his last work, *The Apocalypse of Our Times*, a few months before his death. He also at the time ordered that his anti-Jewish writing be burned and made a written apology to the Jewish community. While his mission of sex was socially driven by his worries about the disintegration of the Russian family as the supporting pillar of Russian society, his interest in the physical body had eschatological underpinning. His notion of phallic Christianity was connected with his uncertainty over the divine origins of Jesus as a messiah.

Rozanov died from malnutrition at the Sergiev Posad Monastery where he was given refuge after the October Revolution. In his last, already dictated thoughts, he compared his visceral experience of disintegrating body as being inside "the black waters of Styx" (Ivanova 1990, p. 84). Concomitantly he also described his suffering as Hell, thus synthesizing two diverse religious mythologies. After his death his family repeatedly maintained that he died peacefully as a Christian. While it was important for the family to maintain respectability, Rozanov's dying as a Christian does not contradict his views on Christianity which, for him, was a religion of the cult of the death. At the same time there was a telling rumor circulating among his friends that on his deathbed he asked for a figurine of a phallus, the Talmud, and an icon. While the story was apocryphal and invented, it nevertheless encapsulates Rozanov's unorthodox quest for synthetic religious beliefs.

Rozanov embarked on his mission of sexuality during a time characterized by a proliferation of scientific discourse on sexuality and the institutionalization of body politics. He developed a comparative approach to the history of religions and sexuality by using syncretistic multicultural sources. By defying the human/animal dualism, and instead creating an alternative trinity of animal/human/god(s), he challenged the hierarchies of religious, philosophical, and scientific categories as they were expressed in the body politics of his time, and promoted a monistic cohesion of organic matter and metaphysical essence. In his elucidations, he moves in the posthumanist direction, thus contributing to contemporary thought.

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Notes

- ¹ For an overview of Rozanov's stance on Judaism and Jewry see Glouberman (1976), on Jewry and sexuality see Engelstein (1994) and Mondry (2010, 2021), on Jewish religion and blood libel see Kurganov and Mondri (2000); Murav (2017).
- ² On Rozanov's interest in the representation of animals in art see Mondry (1999).
- ³ On Spinozian monism as opposed to Cartesian dualisms in application to body theorizing see Grosz (1994).
- ⁴ Murav notes that Rozanov viewed Jews' vitality in opposition to tiredness of the Russian people. Murav (2017, pp. 151–71).

- ⁵ [Ure \(2011\)](#) asserts that Rozanov rejected Christian eschatology.
- ⁶ On Rozanov's views on marriage see [Putnam \(1971\)](#) and [Matich \(2005\)](#).
- ⁷ Ober-Procurator of the Holy Synod K. Pobedonostsev himself was involved in stopping the book's publication. See [Gollerbakh \(1922b\)](#), p. 49).
- ⁸ All translations from Rozanov's texts are by me.
- ⁹ For a discussion see [Mondry \(2010\)](#), pp. 15–19).
- ¹⁰ See a discussion on Tylorism and Rozanov's contribution to the discourse of atavistic survivals during Russian ritual murder trials in [Mondry \(2021\)](#), pp. 73–90).
- ¹¹ For the history of the reception of animals in Christianity see [Salisbury \(1994\)](#).
- ¹² Rozanov used the Torah as an example in his animal advocacy. See [Mondry \(2021\)](#), pp. 73–78).
- ¹³ On Rasputin's dancing, intoxication and orgies see [Radzinsky \(2000\)](#), pp. 383–84).
- ¹⁴ See [Prishvin \(1995\)](#), p. 110).

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