Between Traditions: Religious Identity and Self-Identification in the Case of Simeon of Polotsk

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Abstract
This article re-examines the confessional identity of Simeon of Polotsk (1629–1680), a key Belarusian intellectual and the first professional poet and playwright in Moscow. Building on textual, contextual and intellectual-historical analysis, the study reassesses Simeon's religious affiliation by examining his sermons, catechisms, didactic poetry and the confessional character of his library. By situating Simeon within the contested religious landscape of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and seventeenth-century Muscovy, the article challenges established interpretations that present him as strictly Orthodox or covertly Uniate. Instead, it argues that Simeon's identity emerged at the intersection of Catholic, Orthodox and Uniate traditions, shaped by the ideological, political and cultural pressures of his time. Through a multi-method approach, the study offers a more historically grounded understanding of confessional hybridity in early modern Eastern Europe.

Keywords: Simeon of Polotsk, confessional identity, Eastern Christianity, Early Modern Russia, Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, intellectual history, religious hybridity, Jesuits

Introduction

Religious affiliation in the seventeenth century among the educated elites of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania was not merely a matter of personal spirituality but was closely intertwined with state and confessional politics.[1] This is particularly evident in the creation of the Uniate Church

[1] The confessional politics of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania were marked by pragmatic pluralism: alongside Catholic, Orthodox, Protestant, and later Uniate (Greek Catholic) communities, Jewish and Muslim populations were also legally recognised. Religious life was governed less by confessional uniformity than by political compromise and noble patronage, creating a framework in which diverse religious, linguistic, and cultural traditions coexisted and interacted.

following the Union of Brest in 1596,[2] which sought to bridge the divide between Orthodoxy and Catholicism while simultaneously reshaping confessional and political allegiances within the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. A key figure in this context is the Belarusian writer Simeon of Polotsk (1629–1680), whose religious identity was contested both during his lifetime and in modern scholarship.

This article offers a new perspective on the debate concerning the confessional identity of the Simeon of Polotsk, the first professional poet and playwright of the Tsardom of Muscovy.[3] Drawing on his literary legacy, his sermons and the intellectual currents reflected in his library, the study reconsiders the question of his religious affiliation.

Methodologically, the article adopts a comparative, contextual and textual approach. Textual and rhetorical analysis are used to examine Simeon's catechisms and didactic poetry, while an intellectual-historical perspective situates his education and worldview within the broader ideological movements that shaped his theology. Because Simeon was educated within an environment shaped by both Catholic and Orthodox traditions, a multi-pronged method is necessary to move beyond binary confessional labels and toward a historically grounded understanding of his identity.

Simeon is usually described as an Orthodox monk, but scholars have long recognised Simeon's broad familiarity with Western theological literature and his direct references to Catholic and Protestant writings (Korzo, 2007; Zvonareva, 1988; Eremin, 1953; Tatarskii, 1886). Those examining his sermons and catechisms have argued that émigrés from the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, including Simeon, introduced elements of Catholic doctrine into Muscovite Orthodoxy, initiating a development influenced by Catholic moral theology (Metropolitan Evgenii, 1827, p. 214; Korzo, 2011). British researcher Anthony Hippisley has described Simeon of Polotsk as "a Trojan Horse of Latin learning in Moscow" (Hippisley and Luk'janova, 2005). As Hippisley (2005, p. 1)

[2] The Union of Brest (1596) brought part of the Orthodox hierarchy of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth into communion with Rome while preserving the Byzantine rite, giving rise to the Uniate (Greek Catholic) Church.

[3] Throughout this article, the term "Muscovy" is used to denote the political entity commonly referred to in earlier scholarship as "Russia", in order to avoid anachronism and reflect contemporary usage in the seventeenth century.

notes, Simeon assembled the largest private library in seventeenth-century Moscow, and its approximately 600 volumes—predominantly works by Catholic authors writing in Latin and Polish—underscore his role in transmitting Western learning into the conservative Orthodox milieu of the city. The catalogue of this library further reveals the breadth of texts in Latin, Polish and Church Slavonic, and confirms that the majority of the volumes bear the *ex libris* "Simeonis Piotrowski Sitnianowicz Hieromonachi Polocensis Ordinis Sancti Basilii Magni" ("From the books of Simeon Piotrowski Sitnianowicz, hieromonk of Polotsk, of the Order of Saint Basil the Great") (Bylinin's (1990, p. 7), a designation that reflects both his scholarly identity and his monastic affiliation. The debate concerning Simeon of Polotsk's religious affiliation centres on three main theories: that Simeon was Orthodox; that he was a Basilian monk (Uniate); or that he maintained a public Orthodox persona in Moscow for political and personal safety. By integrating textual, historical and semantic analysis, this study seeks to clarify these conflicting interpretations and reassess the confessional ambiguity surrounding Simeon of Polotsk.

Simeon of Polotsk: Background

Simeon of Polotsk stands at the crossroads of cultures, confessions and political transformations in seventeenth-century Eastern Europe. Born in the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and educated at the Kyiv-Mohyla Collegium and the Jesuit Academy in Wilno (Vilnius), Simeon brought to Muscovy an intellectual and literary formation steeped in Latin learning. At the court of Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich (r. 1645–1676), Simeon of Polotsk rose to prominence, serving as poet, preacher and educator (Tatarskii, 1886, p. 69). Under the tsar's patronage, he also opened a school in which the first pupils were young clerks of the Office of Secret Affairs. This institution functioned as the tsar's personal chancery, which partly explains Simeon's appointment to the royal court and his early inclusion on the court payroll. Funding for teaching came directly from the tsar's treasury (Zabelin, 1872, p. 197). As Ierofei Tatarskii (1886, p. 72) later observed, the principal subject of study in the school was Latin language

and grammar 'according to Alvarus',[4] while knowledge of Greek, although expected of Orthodox clergy in addition to Church Slavonic, was not taught there. By introducing the teaching of Latin, rhetoric and poetics according to Western European (especially Jesuit) educational models, Simeon of Polotsk not only reformed the system of learning but also indirectly facilitated the introduction of Catholic-inflected intellectual norms and conceptual frameworks into the traditionally Orthodox cultural milieu of Muscovy.

Simeon can be seen as a figure of religious and cultural accommodation, shaped by the particular circumstances of the borderlands, where competing traditions and worldviews frequently overlapped. This kind of synthesis was crucial for the transmission of Western European culture to Eastern Europe during the period, especially in its literary Baroque form. Simeon's educational background and confessional stance were not unusual but rather reflected broader patterns of the time. In many ways, Simeon's position aligns with that of other notable Eastern Slavic writers and intellectuals active in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, who likewise navigated complex ideological and cultural terrains shaped by confessional plurality, educational mobility and political change, such as Meletij Smotryc'kyj (c. 1577–1633) and Theophan Prokopovich (1681–1736) (Robinson *et al.*, 1982, pp. 7–12, 18–25).

The Grand Duchy permitted relatively free movement, enabling young scholars to study at European universities such as Kraków, Prague, Bologna and Padua. This access significantly shaped the intellectual elite of the region. Meletij Smotryc'kyj, for example, rector of the Kyiv school[5] from 1617 to 1618, studied in Nuremberg, Leipzig and Wittenberg (Frick, 1995, pp. 30–38). Similarly, Petro Mohyla (1594–1647), who later founded the Kyiv-Mohyla Collegium, where Simeon studied, received his education in Western Europe (Sysyn, 1984, p. 155). For figures such as Smotryc'kyj and

[4] Manuel Álvares (1526–1583) was a pivotal sixteenth-century Portuguese Jesuit grammarian whose masterpiece, *De Institutione Grammatica Libri Tres* (1572), became the standard Latin grammar of the Society of Jesus and circulated globally in numerous editions, translations (including a Japanese version) and adaptations.

[5] The institution later known as the Kyiv Mohyla Academy originated as the Kyiv Brotherhood School; in 1635 it was reorganised into the Kyiv Mohyla College under the leadership of Petro Mohyla, Metropolitan of Kyiv. The official title of "Academy" was conferred only in 1701 by decree of Tsar Peter I.

Mohyla, study abroad was not merely a matter of prestige but a formative intellectual experience. Smotryc'kyj's encounters with Protestant philological methods shaped his grammatical and polemical writings, while Mohyla's training in Jesuit and humanist institutions informed his later reforms of Orthodox education and his synthesis of Latin scholasticism with local traditions. In this way, access to European universities helped produce an intellectual elite capable of integrating Western intellectual currents into East Slavic ecclesiastical culture.

Confessional and Cultural Contexts

In this context, the emergence of a pragmatic, conformist type within the post-Renaissance religious landscape of the East Slavic territories becomes apparent. From the late sixteenth century onwards, individuals emerged whose temporary conversion to Catholicism or Uniatism functioned not as betrayal, but as a strategic adaptation to gain access to education or clerical advancement. This process of Latinisation paradoxically enabled Orthodox scholars to pursue cultural preservation and national ambition. And quite often, Latin education, rather than undermining Orthodox conviction, offered the intellectual tools necessary for a more coherent articulation of the tradition. Access to Catholic academies, particularly those run by the Jesuits, did not formally require conversion to Catholicism. While their curricula reflected Catholic theological assumptions, they admitted students of diverse confessional backgrounds, a reality acknowledged by both Catholic and Orthodox authorities (Korzo, 2011, p. 130; Pokrovskii, 1897, pp. 427–428).

While the institutional foundations of the Uniate Church were being consolidated, political interest in confessional reconciliation gradually took shape. Władysław IV Vasa (1595–1648), who ruled as King of Poland and Grand Duke of Lithuania from 1632 to 1648, developed a plan for a religious settlement with the Uniates that involved the establishment of a special patriarchate in the Ruthenian lands of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth. This patriarchate was to bring together Uniates and Orthodox Christians who had been reconciled with one another under a

single ecclesiastical authority.[6] Petro Mohyla, was considered a likely candidate for Patriarch. The central idea of this reconciliation rested on the premise that:

> […] the Uniates would return to the bosom of Orthodoxy, and after such reconciliation, all relations with the Pope would be reduced to an honorary recognition of his primacy (without introducing this primacy into dogma). (Golubev, 1883, pp. 230–231)

In this regard, significant influence was exerted by the rapprochement between representatives of the Orthodox Church who rejected the Union and various currents of the Reformation movement, within which the problem of religious tolerance had long been explored using approaches developed in broader European intellectual life.

The Orthodox Metropolis of the Rus' lands was not a monolithic institution; rather, it was an arena of ongoing disputes and divisions. The struggle centred on the primacy of Kyiv versus Moscow, and in practice there were two metropolises: the Kyivan and the Muscovite. In 1589, the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople, Jeremias II,[7] visited Moscow and, during negotiations, agreed to establish an independent (autocephalous) Patriarchate, elevating Metropolitan Job to the rank of the first Patriarch of Moscow and All Rus'. In this way, the Muscovite Russian Orthodox Church received formal recognition. In the same year (1589), Muscovite metropolitans obtained patriarchal dignity and formal acknowledgment of autocephaly within the borders of the Tsardom of Muscovy from Patriarch Jeremias II of Constantinople and the other Eastern patriarchs.[8] By contrast, the Kyivan metropolis remained under the jurisdiction of the Ecumenical Patriarch in Constantinople (Pokrovskii, 1897, p. 28).

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[6] By "reconciliation" contemporaries in the first half of the seventeenth century referred to initiatives—most closely associated with Metropolitan Petro Mohyla—aimed at healing the confessional division created by the Union of Brest (1596), whether through the reintegration of the Uniates into Orthodoxy or through the establishment of a unified ecclesiastical hierarchy acceptable to both confessions.

[7] Jeremias II Tranos, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople (r. 1572–1579, 1580–1584, 1587–1595).

[8] The charter of the Council of Constantinople on the establishment of the Moscow Patriarchate is preserved in the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts: RGADA, fond 52, opis' 2, unit 5.

In June 1632, the Sejm[9] convened to discuss the question of the Orthodox hierarchy and the confirmation of episcopal sees (Makarii, 1882, p. 422). The discussion reached an impasse and was postponed until autumn. The Sejm reopened on 27 September 1632 and, faced with tensions concerning the status of the Orthodox population, transferred the matter of dividing the episcopal sees to the royal prince (the heir apparent) and to a council of his choosing, which consisted predominantly of Orthodox and Protestant members. The council resolved:

> To equalise the ecclesiastical and civil rights of Uniates and Orthodox, granting both groups freedom of faith and worship.
> To leave the Kyivan St Sophia Cathedral to the Orthodox Metropolitan consecrated by the Patriarch of Constantinople. The election of the Metropolitan of Kyiv was to be conducted by Orthodox nobles, clergy, and inhabitants, while the metropolitan would still be required to receive a royal confirmation charter.
> To leave the see of Polotsk to the Uniate bishops.
> To establish a special commission of two Catholics and two Orthodox, tasked with visiting all towns, settlements, and villages, and allocating churches according to the relative size of the Orthodox and Uniate populations. (Pokrovskii, 1897, p. 428)[10]

Most importantly, the Sejm decreed that all persons were granted the full right to move from the Union to Orthodoxy, from a Uniate diocese to a non-Uniate one and vice versa—for example, from the Mstsislaw diocese to the Uniate bishopric of Polotsk, or from the Polotsk diocese to the Orthodox bishopric of Mstsislaw. Both sides were to live in peace and harmony, without encroaching upon each other. This agreement was ratified on 1 November 1632. On 13 November, Władysław was elected King of Poland and swore to uphold all articles. Thus, the Orthodox population of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth regained their rights, and an Orthodox West-Rus' metropolis was restored.[11]

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[9] The Sejm was the parliament of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth and the central institution of its legislative authority.

[10] Pokrovskii 1897 is cited from the original Russian; the English translation is by the author.

[11] See further: Makarii, *Istoriia Russkoi tserkvi*, pp. 432–441; *Arkhiv Iugo-Zapadnoi Rossii* [*Archive of South-Western Rus'*], part 2, vol. 1, XVIII, pp. 208–214; *Opisanie Kievo-Sofiiskogo Sobraniia* [*Description of the Kyivan St Sophia Chapter*], pp. 167–170;

It is striking that these events gained renewed resonance in the twenty-first century. On 15 October 2018, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church resolved to break eucharistic communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in response to the latter's intention to establish a unified autocephalous Orthodox Church in Ukraine, its decision to restore to communion the leaders of two non-canonical Ukrainian Orthodox bodies and its annulment of the 1686 synodal letter transferring the Kyivan metropolis to the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. The Russian Orthodox Church's Holy Synod in Minsk decided to sever full communion with the Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople in response to its actions regarding Orthodox autocephaly for Ukraine (RBC, 2018). The disagreement over jurisdiction, authority and the very meaning of Orthodox order echoes early modern tensions that had already set the Kyivan and Muscovite hierarchies apart:

> an anciently formed, distinctive, and more secular character of the higher West-Rus' hierarchy, gravitating toward the West, had very little in common with the indigenous and comparatively uneducated Great-Russian hierarchy; all this, and many other factors, did not unite the Kyivan hierarchy with the Muscovite one, but rather pushed them away from each other. (Pokrovskii, 1897, pp. 451–452)

Polotsk, a seventeenth-century trading city with Magdeburg rights and a multiconfessional landscape, had a Uniate bishop; yet its Orthodox population recognised the primacy of the Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople. Crucially, the transition from the Union to Orthodoxy had been legally sanctioned. *Uniatism*, or alternatively, *Slavia unita*,[12] emerged as a synthetic form of confessional identity, combining Byzantine-Slavic traditions with Latin influences. The coexistence of two competing tendencies, namely the preservation of the Eastern rite and the gradual adoption of Latin practices, shaped the internal dynamics of Uniate identity.

Vilenskoe arkheograficheskoe sobranie [*Vilnius Archaeographic Collection*], vol. II, appendix p. ix; *Zapiski igumena Oresta* [*Notes of Igumen Orest*].)

[12] *Slavia unita* denotes an early modern intellectual, confessional and cultural concept envisioning the unity of the Slavic world—especially the Ruthenian lands—within a shared Christian (most often Catholic or Union-oriented) civilisational framework, frequently contrasted with *Slavia orthodoxa*. The term is used primarily in historiography to describe elite discourse rather than a concrete political project.

In 1596, the Polotsk diocese became Uniate (and remained so until 1833), leaving the Orthodox Community with only the Brotherhood Monastery of the Epiphany. Thus, Simeon of Polotsk born in 1629, was born in a city where the Uniate Church predominated over Orthodoxy.

Categorising the Identity of Simeon of Polotsk

Simeon's move to Moscow in 1663 (Tatarskii, 1886, pp. 64–65) may be interpreted as an attempt to place himself within a more securely Orthodox milieu. Yet this decision should also be viewed in the broader context of the war between the Muscovite Tsardom and the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth (1654–1667) (Brown, 1982, pp. 58–59; Sahanovich, 1995, pp. 7–12). The climate of hostility towards the priests of the Uniate Church at this time was not only political but also theological and ideological. It reflects a wider sentiment in seventeenth-century Eastern Europe, in which the Union was increasingly perceived both as a spiritual danger and as a destabilising force within the confessional landscape. This perception stemmed from its challenge to Orthodox doctrinal legitimacy, its reconfiguration of ecclesiastical hierarchies and its close association with the confessional and political ambitions of Catholic authorities within the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth.

In 1696 Heinrich Wilhelm Ludolf (1655–1712) published his *Grammatica Russica*, the first grammar of the Russian language to appear in Western Europe, at Oxford. This Latin work was intended for practical use by diplomats, scholars and travellers. In the preface, Ludolf reflects on the literary activity of a poet and writer he had encountered at the court of Tsar Aleksei: Simeon of Polotsk, a Belarusian-born polymath. Ludolf introduces him simply as a member of a monastic order, without specifying which one:

> Fuit alias Monaſtici ordinis Quidam Simon Polotski, qui tempore ultimi Tzari Theodor: Alexeovitichi Pfalmos Davidis in rythmos Slavonicos redegit, & alia multa Theologica in lnacem emifit.[13] (Ludolf, 1696, p. 13)

[13] "There was once a certain Simon of Polotsk, a member of a monastic order, who, during the reign of the last Tsar, Feodor Alekseevich, rendered the Psalms of David into

This phrase may simply mean ‘a certain Simeon Polotsk of a monastic order’. It is also plausible that Ludolf, addressing a Western European audience accustomed to clearly structured religious orders, employed the term in a more specific institutional sense. In the Eastern Slavic lands of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, monastic communities were not generally organised as formal ‘orders’ in the Latin understanding of the term. Within this context, the Basilian Order of St Josaphat stands out as the only monastic community that corresponded clearly to a Western institutional model of an order. Ludolf’s formulation in the *Grammatica Russica* likely reflects an effort to describe Simeon of Polotsk in ways accessible to Western readers, rather than to define his exact religious affiliation. Understood this way, the description works as a practical label, not a precise match with Western monastic orders; still, within the confessional setting of the time, the Basilian Order appears the most plausible institutional reference for Ludolf’s audience of scholars and travellers across Europe encountering text in print.

Unlike the Latin Church, where monastic orders such as the Benedictines and Cistercians were formally structured institutions with central governance, Eastern Orthodox monasticism did not produce equivalent ecclesiastical orders. In the Orthodox world, monasteries remained largely autonomous and subject to local episcopal authority rather than to centralised organisational structures. The absence of monastic orders in Eastern Orthodoxy is rooted in fundamental theological and organisational differences that emerged after the Great Schism (1054). While Orthodoxy preserved the structure of local autocephalous churches, emphasising conciliarity and monasticism as a path of salvation within a unified tradition, Western Christianity developed centralised papal authority and a variety of religious orders designed for governance and apostolic activity—structures incompatible with the Byzantine ecclesiological model. From within the contemporary Orthodox tradition, Schiarchimandrite Gabriel argues that Orthodox monasticism is highly diverse but lacks a tendency towards institutionalisation, with its concrete forms shaped by the historical origins of individual monasteries and the

Slavonic verse and published many other theological writings” (All translations appearing in this article are the author’s own, unless otherwise stated).

legacy of their founders. He further notes that, despite this diversity, monastics may move freely between monasteries (Bunge, 2018).

The Basilian Order of St Josaphat, often cited in this context, was not an Orthodox institution but an Eastern Uniate (Greek Catholic) order established after the Union of Brest, which recognised the pope in Rome as the head of the Church while retaining the Byzantine rite. Ludolf's reference to Simeon of Polotsk as a member of a monastic order indicates that he was understood as belonging to an organised order; in the absence of Orthodox monastic orders and considering Simeon's own *ex libris*, this very likely refers to the Basilian Order of St Josaphat.

Jacob Reitenfels (fl. 1670s), a Courland aristocrat who visited Muscovy earlier and met Simeon, also introduced this identification to Western European readers. On his return journey to Italy, he composed a major work, *De rebus Moschoviticis ad serenissimum magnum hetrvriae ducem Cosmum Tertium* (A Description of Muscovite Affairs, Addressed to His Most Serene Highness Cosimo III, Grand Duke of Tuscany).[14] First published in Latin in Padua in 1680, Reitenfels's report includes a description of Simeon: "Alter literatorum est Monachus quidam Basilianus, nomine Simeon, Latinā eruditione non leviter imbutus" ("Another of men of letters is a certain Basilian monk, by name Simeon, imbued not lightly with Latin erudition") (Reitenfels, 1680, p. 206). This suggests that Reitenfels understood Simeon to be affiliated with the Basilian Order. Reutenfels, himself a Catholic and possibly a Jesuit, appears to associate Latin fluency with Basilian monastic identity. This assumption, shaped by direct interaction with Simeon and by shared use of Latin, underscores the exceptional quality of Simeon's education and places him firmly within the intellectual tradition of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, where theological flexibility was often necessary to gain access to elite learning. Attachment to the Basilians, however, would have constituted a serious liability in Muscovy, where Uniate affiliation, associated with papal allegiance and Roman influence, was regarded as both religiously and politically suspect and could expose an individual to exile or even death. Simeon's security in this context depended entirely on the protection of

[14] Grand Duke Cosimo III de' Medici of Tuscany (1642–1723).

Tsars Aleksei Mikhailovich and Fyodor Alekseievich, whose patronage enabled his continued cultural and literary activity.

In 1960, Nikolai Kiselev analysed the ownership inscriptions of Simeon found in books from his library.[15] It was he who discovered them on the title pages of volumes five and nine of *The Complete Works of Saint Jerome* (Basel, 1553).[16] On volume five, on the flyleaf, there is Simeon's autograph: "Ex Libris Simeonis Piotrowski Sitnianowicz Jeromonachi Polocensis Ord(inis) S(ancti) Basilii Mag(ni). A(nno) D(omi)ni 1670 Aug(usti) 26 Moscovie" ("From the books of Simeon Piotrowski Sitnianowicz, hieromonk of Polotsk, of the Order of Saint Basil. 26 August 1670, in Moscow"). In volume nine, there is an almost identical inscription in Simeon's hand, differing from the previous one in its opening words: "Fida Sum Suppellex Simeonis Piotrowsky Sitnianowicz H. Jeromonachi Polocensis Ord(inis) S(ancti) Bas(ilii) Mag(ni) A(nn)o 1670 Aug(usti) 26 Moscovie" ("I am the faithful possession of Simeon Piotrowsky Sitnianowicz, Hieromonk of Polotsk, of the Order of Saint Basil the Great, in the year 1670, August 26, in Moscow"). Kiselev concluded that:

> The published autograph inscriptions [of Simeon] constitute indisputable evidence that [in 1670] he was and recognised himself as a Basilian, and therefore a Uniate rather than an Orthodox Christian. (Kiselev, 1964, p. 166)

Recent findings further reinforce the identification of Simeon of Polotsk with the Basilian Order. In 2024, the historian Nikolai Nikolaev (St Petersburg) reported the discovery of a book that once belonged to Simeon of Polotsk. During conservation work, restorers identified ownership inscriptions in Latin and Slavonic indicating that the volume, an Arabic–Latin Gospel printed at the Medici Press in Rome in 1591, belonged to "Simeon Piotrowski Sitnianowicz, hieromonk of the Basilian Order". According to Nikolaev, the inscription is in Simeon's own hand, a finding he described as exceptional. Reports of this discovery were published in Russian media in 2024 but were subsequently removed; the information is

[15] Nikolai Petrovich Kiselev (1884–1965) was a Russian and Soviet scholar of book studies, bibliographer, palaeographer, librarian and museum specialist, known for his work in cataloguing incunabula.

[16] Hieronymus, Eusebius Sophronius, *Opera Omnia* (Basileae: Apud Nicolaum Episcopium Iuniorem, 1553), issued in nine folio volumes.

now preserved only in the archives of Belarusian news platforms such as *Nasha Niva* and *Charter97* and Nikolaev's personal page on social media.

The autographed inscriptions constitute strong evidence that Simeon, by his own identification, was a Basilian monk as late as 1670. Taken together, these manuscript and bibliographic traces confirm that the poet and writer operated within a trans-confessional intellectual world. The *ex libris*, "Simeonis Piotrowski Sitnianowicz Hieromonachi Polocensis Ordinis Sancti Basilii Magni" ("From the books of Simeon Piotrowski Sitnianowicz, hieromonk of Polotsk, of the Order of Saint Basil the Great"), reflects both his scholarly identity and his monastic affiliation. In *In Simeon Polockij's Library: A Catalogue* (2005), Anthony Hippisley and Evgenija V. Luk'janova document the contents of this library, revealing the breadth of texts that shaped Simeon's intellectual formation—including Latin, Polish and Church Slavonic works—and confirming the authenticity of the *ex libris* signature. Further evidence of Simeon's reading habits and intellectual profile may be found in the assessment offered by the editors of his library catalogue:

> Apart from his importance for seventeenth-century Russian literature, Simeon of Polotsk was a learned man who assembled the largest private library in Moscow. His 600 books by mostly Catholic authors writing in Latin and Polish confirm the view that Simeon was a Trojan horse of Western learning in the largely conservative Orthodox milieu of Moscow. His collection is today preserved as part of the Synodal Press Library in the Russian State Archive of Ancient Documents.[17]

Simeon of Polotsk was a supporter of the Western Latin intellectual tradition, which was grounded in Aristotelian natural philosophy. Studying the manuscript of *The Crown of the Universal Faith* (*Venets very kafolicheskiia*) reveals that the learned monk describes different layers of heaven—or, more precisely, different heavens: the empyrean heaven, immobile and the highest; the crystalline heaven, which moves with inexpressible speed; and the firmament, which is divided into two belts, the first consisting of the fixed stars and the second of the planets. In this

[17] Quoted from the back cover of Hippsley and Luk'janova (2005) *Simeon Polockij's Library: A Catalogue*.

theological treatise, Simeon of Polotsk clearly seeks to explain the structure of the universe in a manner that is intelligible and accessible even to the least educated readers. He explicitly emphasises the didactic purpose of his work, stating: "I offer this to readers for the sake of knowledge, not belief" (from the manuscript: Simeon of Polotsk, *The Crown of the Universal Faith*. Manuscript // State Historical Museum, Synodal Collection, no. 396, fol. 27). At the same time, the intellectual environment of Moscow remained markedly different: until the end of the seventeenth century, no books on natural science were printed there, and popular *azbukovniki*[18] continued to explain the movement of the heavenly bodies as the direct work of angels (Zvonareva, 1988, pp. 230–231).

Historiographical Misinterpretation

Large-scale, anti-Protestant polemics had affected Orthodox Christianity throughout the seventeenth century, and questions relating to the sacrament of Communion occupied a central place within these discussions (Krylov, 2014, pp. 7–9). At the same time, the initial emergence of disputes in Muscovy concerning the moment of the transubstantiation of the Holy Gifts was an issue of a strictly internal nature, arising within the context of the seventeenth-century *Raskol*, the major schism in the Russian Orthodox Church following Patriarch Nikon's reforms.[19] In the aftermath of the *Raskol*, those who refused to accept the liturgical and doctrinal changes introduced by the reforms came to be identified as Old Believers (*staroobriadtsy*). In the first major anti–Old Believer treatise, *The Rod of Governance* (*Zhezl pravleniia*),[20] considerable attention was devoted to polemics with the Old Believer understanding of transubstantiation. At the same time, as is evident from Simeon of Polotsk's correspondence,

[18] *Azbukovniki* were elementary primers widely used in seventeenth-century Muscovy for the teaching of literacy. In practice, however, they functioned as multi-purpose instructional and reference books, combining alphabetic exercises with prayers, moral instruction, lexical explanations, calendrical information and rudimentary cosmological notions.

[19] Patriarch Nikon (1605–1681) introduced liturgical reforms in 1653; their active implementation followed in 1653–1656, and the Great Moscow Church Council of 1666–1667 formally condemned the opponents of the reforms, thereby consolidating the *Raskol*.

[20] Written and published in 1667 following the decisions of the Moscow Church Council of 1666–1667.

substantial changes were introduced into the original text of the work under pressure from certain "obstinate" figures. In a letter to Lazar Baranovych (c. 1620–1693), Simeon emphasised that for this reason he did not wish to indicate his authorship on the title page of *The Rod*. This episode, unfolding within the broader context of the conciliar processes of 1666–1667, clearly points to significant divergences between Simeon and the Muscovite theological milieu in their understanding of key dogmatic issues, including the sacrament of the Eucharist.

The often-tense relationship between Simeon and official Muscovite Orthodoxy is perhaps most clearly exemplified by his efforts to acquire an independent publishing house. Seeking to publish his works without prior ecclesiastical censorship, Simeon obtained the tsar's permission to establish a private printing press at court, which became known as the Upper Printing House. Founded around 1667 (Eremin, 1948, p. 344), the press enabled Simeon to issue three works: *The Psalter in Verse*, *The Spiritual Banquet*, and *The Spiritual Supper*.[21] Yet the instability of his role became clear in the years following Aleksei's death in 1676. Simeon himself survived his patron by only four years, passing away in 1680.

After the death of Tsar Fyodor in 1682, the Upper Printing House was abolished, Princess Sophia (1657–1704) was sent to a convent in the summer of 1689, and Patriarch Joachim (1620–1690) launched an investigation against Sylvester Medvedev (1641–1691) a student and follower of Simeon of Polotsk; he was arrested and deprived of his monastic rank. Joachim reproached him for having been seduced:

> by the newly invented Kyiv books of Latin teaching and by the words uttered by his teacher, that Uniate from Polotsk, Simeon (for they lived together in one and the same cell […]) (Osten, 1865, p. 131)

and for "spreading and confirming that Latin heresy" (Osten, 1865, p. 131). Simeon himself was posthumously declared a heretic, and his works were banned. The ruling of the Moscow synod stated:

[21] *Psaltyr' rifmotvornaya* [*The Psalter in Verse*] (Moscow: Verkhnaya tipografiya, 1680); *Vecheria dushevnaia* [*The Spiritual Supper / Banquet*], published posthumously c. 1682–1683.

> Some of them [i.e. Simeon's books] were found to contain hidden, and others even explicit, speculations foreign to the Greco-Russian Church and more appropriate to Roman and Uniate teachings. The Patriarch, having enumerated them in detail at the Council of Moscow Clergy in 1690, forbade both the published and unpublished dogmatic works of Simeon of Polotsk to be read in public or in churches, under threat of defrocking for the clergy and excommunication. (Metropolitan Evgenii, 1827, p. 214)

These outcomes reflect the tensions inherent in attempting to introduce a more Europeanised model of theology and pedagogy into a confessional culture that resisted ambiguity and innovation.

Revisiting the "Secret Uniatism" Thesis

Attention may now be directed to the argument that the thesis concerning Simeon of Polotsk's "secret Uniatism" is in fact the result of a historiographical misunderstanding (Sazonova, 2018). This argument is grounded in the research of Paul Bushkovitch (1992), who contends that Robinson and Bylinin's (1990, p. 6) interpretation of the term "Basilian" is based on a misunderstanding. According to Bushkovitch, "Basilian" was a common Western designation for Orthodox monks long before the establishment of the Uniate Basilian order. Bushkovitch further cites a contemporary Catholic encyclopaedia, which defines the primary meaning of Basilian as an:

> erroneous term for monks of the Greek rite that arose in the Latin Middle Ages from the assumption that they lived under the 'rule of St Basil', just as Western monks lived under the rule of St Benedict. (1992, p. 234)

Yet it must be noted that the second edition of the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (2003), perhaps one of the most up-to-date major multi-volume Catholic reference works, also observes:

> The Ruthenian Basilians of St Josaphat Kuncevyč were established shortly after the Union of Brest-Litovsk (1595), when St Josaphat reformed about thirty Ukrainian monasteries, under the influence of the constitutions of St Ignatius of Loyola, and

> instituted an active congregation, which he called Basilian (1617). (2003, p. 143)

It also offers a particularly detailed account of Ukrainians and Belarusians in the early modern period:

> Basilian Order of St Josaphat. In 1072 the rule of St Basil was introduced in the monastery of the Pecherska Lavra in Kiev, capital of the Ukraine, by (St) Theodosius (d. 1074). Subsequently the rule became the model for other monasteries in the Ukraine, Belarus, and Russia. Following the union of the See of Kiev with Rome (1596) some monasteries of the Ukraine and Belarus formed in 1617 the Basilian Congregation of the Holy Trinity (also called the Lithuanian Congregation). Approval was given by Urban VIII in the brief *Exponi nobis*, 20 August 1631. (2003, p. 143)

Thus, while Bushkovitch rightly emphasises the broad medieval use of *Basilian* as a generic Latin designation for Orthodox monks, more recent evidence suggests that by the seventeenth century the term was increasingly understood in a more specific confessional sense, closely associated with the Uniate Basilian Order of St Josaphat.

Conclusion

Considering the available evidence, Simeon of Polotsk did not conceive of confessional identity in rigid or binary terms. His own *ex libris* unequivocally identifies him as a Basilian monk, a self-designation that must be taken seriously as an act of confessional self-definition. In the seventeenth-century intellectual milieu in which Simeon was formed, *Basilian* did not function as a neutral or incidental label but carried recognisable confessional and institutional connotations. To disregard or marginalise this explicit self-identification is therefore not a neutral scholarly choice, but a distortion of the historical record.

In Simeon's lifetime, Eastern Orthodox Christianity did not have a single dominant centre, and several Orthodox and related religious communities coexisted alongside one another. When this diversity is overlooked, Simeon's religious position is often explained using later,

Muscovy-centred perspectives that were only beginning to take shape in his time, which can blur the historical context in which his views were formed. Simeon's intellectual biography situates him above all within the educational and cultural world of Eastern Europe, shaped by the schools, scholarly networks and confessional dynamics of the Polish–Lithuanian Commonwealth, rather than within Muscovite religious culture. His example shows that in the early modern Grand Duchy of Lithuania religious identity could remain flexible and closely connected to education and intellectual exchange. Rather than being confined to simplified labels such as Orthodox or Uniate, Simeon is best understood as a figure who moved between traditions and cultural worlds, whose religious self-understanding was shaped by a complex and evolving historical context.

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