In 1901, Dmitry Merezhkovsky and Zinaida Gippius formed the first instantiation of the St. Petersburg Religious/Philosophical Society, a colloquy that aimed to reconcile two segments of Russian society whose historical paths had long ago diverged: the intelligentsia and the Orthodox Church. In a fin-de-siècle cultural climate that fostered all brands of esotericism, spiritualism, and mysticism, Merezhkovsky looked to the Church as the locus of an ancient ritual tradition that would inform his theorization of a novoe religioznoe soznanie, a religious ontology that posited Greco-Roman religion, and particularly the cult of Dionysus, as a semiotic forebear to Christianity. Though Merezhkovsky (and other contemporaneous theoreticians such as Viacheslav Ivanov) envisioned the novoe religioznoe soznanie as a conglomeration of liturgical and ritual elements from pagan antiquity and Christianity, we consistently see Christ accorded a special status in Symbolist religious thought as the culmination of a series of suffering, perishing, and resurrected deities.

In this paper, I will examine the role of Christ within Merezhkovsky’s syncretically-minded novoe religioznoe soznanie. Drawing from his novelistic, poetic, and theoretical texts from the late 1890s and early 1900s, I will attempt to determine, firstly, how Merezhkovsky understands terms such as “Christ”, “Dionysus”, “Christianity”, and “Paganism”, and then proceed to analyze the particular significance of Christ within his ontological continuum.

jeffreyriggs@gmail.com