

**Title:** Holy Foolishness in the Age of Enlightenment  
**Author:** Priscilla Hunt, University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Holy foolishness emerged in Byzantium and developed and flourished in 16th and 17th century Russia within the context of a certain paradigm of knowledge: a mystical-ascetic-liturgical concept of Divine Wisdom that sanctioned the ruler's and the state's legitimacy. In the 18th century, the advent of the absolutist enlightened state and the synodal church introduced a new paradigm of legitimacy based on a secularized model of knowledge that placed holy foolishness in an entirely different position. Under this new worldview, the fool was an anomaly, redefined as a social vagrant and actively ridiculed and persecuted, disconnected from the paradigm of the ruler's legitimacy.

This paper will examine the differing perceptions of the holy fool by the state under the two systems of knowledge. The first traditional approach was expressed in the authoritative Byzantine translated *Vita of Andrew the Fool*, which was seminal for the development of the holy foolish tradition within the mystical-ascetic Wisdom paradigm of imperial Byzantine-Russian rulership ideology. There a critique of holy foolishness as a form of social vagrancy was placed in the mouth of demons, and expressive of the idolatrous "external" viewpoint of the "worldly wise." It was contrasted to the viewpoint of the initiate. She, in the spirit of Pauline mysticism that was the textual basis for holy foolishness, sees an inner Wisdom hidden behind the fool's "madness" that made him the ruler's spiritual alter-ego. The second approach was expressed in the 18th century, when Peter the Great was the first to officially repudiate the traditional intimacy between king and fool evidenced in his father's reign. Official proclamations of Peter's time and later gave authority to the "idolatrous" viewpoint of Andrew's vita, which reduced the fool to the status of useless social vagrant; they de-ritualized the fool's pollution so that, rather than a mystical teaching, it was simply socially unacceptable and made no sense in terms of contemporary religious life or imperial ideology.

An analysis of the verbal polemic between the traditionalist Archpriest Avvakum and the westernizing cleric Epifanii Slavinetskii in the late 17th century allows us to take a closer look at the underlying paradigm shift that desacralized the fool. Each party interprets the same Pauline vocabulary of Wisdom and foolishness from opposite perspectives in hopes of exposing the other. The ability of Epifanii and his like to secularize the paradigm of sacred knowledge led the Church Council of 1666–7 to lay down sanctions against holy foolishness, sanctions that in turn laid the groundwork for its 18th century repudiation of assumed foolishness as holy. Thus it becomes clear that changing paradigms of knowledge and authority resulted in the desacralization of the holy fool and his repudiation by the ruler.

phunt@slavic.umass.edu