

Differences and Sameness: Secularity in the Case of Nicholas Roerich¹

Mi You and Eszter Szakács

Mi You (由宓) is a curator, researcher, and academic staff member at the Academy of Media Arts in Cologne. Her long-term research and curatorial project takes the Silk Road as a figuration for deep-time, deep-space, de-centralised and nomadic imageries. Under this theme she has curated a series of performative programmes at the Asian Culture Center Theatre in Gwangju, South Korea, and the inaugural Ulaanbaatar International Media Art Festival, Mongolia (2016). Her academic interests lie in performance philosophy, science and technology studies, as well as philosophy of immanence in Eastern and Western traditions. She is a Fellow of the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation (Germany) and serves as advisor to The Institute for Provocation (Beijing).

Eszter Szakács is a curator and editor based in Budapest. She has worked at tranzit.hu since 2011. There she is curator-editor of the ongoing collaborative research project *Curatorial Dictionary* that has been realised as an online dictionary with various offline research events, among other work. She was co-editor of the book *IMAGINATION/IDEA. The Beginning of Hungarian Conceptual Art. The László Beke Collection, 1971* (Budapest/Zurich: tranzit.hu, /JRP|Ringier, 2014) and has since 2016 been co-editor of tranzit.hu's online international magazine on art and culture *Mezosfera*. Her research interests include concepts of internationalism in art and curatorial discourse, especially in relation to Eastern Europe. From 2013 to 2016 she was a guest lecturer at the Art Theory and Curatorial Studies Department of the Hungarian University of Fine Arts.

Abstract

The article explores the conceptual structures behind secularity and associated concepts such as immanence versus transcendence and progress versus anachronism by drawing on the life and activities of Nicholas Roerich (1874–1947).

Roerich was a Russian painter, theosophist and archaeologist. He established his reputation both as a spiritual leader and as a painter mixing syncretic religious symbols, from Orthodox Christianity, Theosophy to Tibetan Buddhism. Together with his wife, he pursued—and ultimately failed—to establish Shambhala (paradise in Tibetan Buddhism) in the area from Tibet to Southern Siberia, in a time of great geopolitical tension.

We argue that Roerich's enterprise emerges from the ruins of multiple broken orders: the empire/transnationalism, traditionalism, mysticism, religiosity and Communism on the one hand, and nation-state, modernity, scientism, secularisation and liberal democracy on the other. His curious path transgresses ideological divides and points to the categorical limits of the dichotomies they produce. His legacy is appropriated today by various, often conflicting lines of thought, canonising him in the context of Russian art, esoterism, and in Russia's revived geopolitical interest of Eurasia.

Svetoslav Roerich. *Portrait of Nicholas Roerich*, 1928. Oil and tempera on canvas. Courtesy The State Museum of Oriental Art, Moscow.



This essay aims to examine and problematise some aspects of the conceptual history of secularity in the case study of the Russian theosophist and painter Nicholas Roerich (1874-1947). More precisely, it looks at conjunctions of secularity and politics through the tracing of Roerich's messianic life project to bring about the mystical kingdom of Shambhala, a pan-Buddhist state in Central-East Asia—a plan that also coalesced various conflicting strands of political ideologies. Following Charles Taylor, we treat secularity as it arises from the modernisation process of European societies, through which religion is taken as only one option among other ways of self-fulfilment and human flourishing, and the latter as an indicator that self-sufficient humanism has never existed on the same scale before in European societies before the Enlightenment.²

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Taylor, Charles. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press. 2007.

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Klimentieva, Victoria. *Nicholas Roerich: In search of Shambhala*. MA dissertation. Graduate School of the University of Texas. 2009. p. 6.

4
Leek, Peter. *Russian Painting*. Bournemouth: Parkstone. 2005. p. 256.

5
Klimentieva, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-13.

6
Ibid., p. 14.

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Troncale, Joseph C. "The transcendent as theatre in Roerich's paintings". In Manju Kak (ed.). *Nicholas*

Nicholas Roerich [Nikolai Konstantinovich Rerikh], born in Saint Petersburg in 1874, is today a renowned, and also infamous, figure in Russia and the Western world, especially in the US, as well as in Asia. Roerich was a versatile figure: already in his youth he was drawn to archaeology and ethnography, throughout his life he published literary works, he was an especially prolific painter, in the 1910s he was a successful stage designer, and he was regarded by many as a guru and a leader who, as a makeshift diplomat, was capable of exercising power and convincing people at the highest levels to support his cause in Central-East Asia.

Nicholas Roerich and the Debated Roerich Legacy Today

Upon his father's wish Nicholas Roerich studied law in Saint Petersburg, and art at the Academy of Arts in the landscape studio of Arkhip Kuinji.³ Throughout his career, Roerich created more than 7000 paintings of various themes and series, and his oeuvre is often contextualised within the broader art movement of symbolism.⁴ At the turn of the twentieth century Roerich belonged to the conservative part of Russian art circles, and was not always well-regarded by the more European lenient, Art Nouveau-style group and magazine *Mir isskustva* (World of Art). Nevertheless, he collaborated with them, and in 1910, after the movement's heyday, he became its chairman.⁵ Roerich's most notable and highly regarded theatre design works for Borodin's *Prince Igor* (1909), and particularly Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1913) were the productions of Sergei Diaghilev, co-founder of *Mir isskustva* and later founder of the Ballets Russes, who trusted Roerich as an expert in ancient history and Russian medieval architecture.⁶

In his early period, including his stage designs, ancient Slavic culture characterised the theme of his works, such as in his 1905 painting *Slavs on the Dnieper*.⁷ This period was influenced by journeys and observations made in 1899 along the ancient trade route from Lake Ladoga to Novgorod, and in 1903 and 1904 to a range of old Russian cities—such as Yaroslavl, Kostroma, Uglich, Vladimir, Suzdal, Pskov, Izborsk and

Smolensk.⁸ Especially after his marriage to Helena Shaposhnikova in 1901, he turned towards mysticism and Eastern religions (Helena Roerich also acted as a medium to communicate the messages of higher powers), and together they created their own school of mysticism, the theosophy-based Agni Yoga in the 1920s.

His “oriental” interest also signalled a shift in his paintings in the mid-1910s: he departed from the theme of the roots of Russian culture, and based his painterly work more on Eastern mysticism and spiritualism, creating “philosophical landscapes”.⁹ This metaphorical-mystic interpretation of the world subsequently defined the style and the iconography of Roerich’s work, which he practised until his death. With their two children, later Tibetologist Yuri (George) Roerich and later painter Svetoslav Roerich, the couple emigrated in 1918, after the October Revolution, from Russia to Finland, subsequently to London, and then to the United States, and they finally settled in India in the 1930s. In terms of iconography, Roerich often merged motifs of Byzantine, Western European and “Oriental” art, resulting in syncretic representations, such as in the case of his “madonnas” (*Mother of the World* 1924 or *Madonna Oriflamma*, 1932).

Even though Roerich produced a massive body of paintings, and he is especially famous for his lavish and vibrating depiction of Himalayan, Tibetan, and Mongolian mountain ranges, his art—while its reception is still debated—we consider as rather circumstantial, not as an end in itself, but as a means (financial and spiritual) to fulfil a greater purpose. That is, the ultimate goal, the so-called Great Plan, of Roerich was not merely intellectual or artistic, but to physically establish the mystic-metaphorical kingdom of Shambhala, a “pan-Buddhist” state that would stretch across the politically heavily charged territories of Southern Siberia, Mongolia and Tibet. To achieve this, he departed on his first great expedition to Central Asia and the Himalayas between 1925 and 1928 and went on the second, so-called Manchurian expedition, to Central and East Asia from 1934 to 1936.

To achieve all of these very complex goals¹⁰—especially to realise the expeditions—Roerich indiscriminately mobilised financial and diplomatic support from the Bolsheviks, the US government under Franklin D. Roosevelt, and wealthy private supporters, who regarded

Roerich: A Quest and A Legacy. New Delhi: Niyogi Books. 2013. p. 201, p. 204.

8
Leek, *op. cit.*, p. 256.

9
Troncale, *op. cit.*, p. 204, p. 209.

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Another significant facet of Nicholas Roerich’s life is the so-called Roerich Pact/Banner of Peace that pushed for international alliances for the preservation of cultural heritage and that essentially served as a basis for the UNESCO charter for the “Protection of Cultural Property in the Event of Armed Conflict.” See McCannon, John. “By the shores of white waters: the Altai and its place in the spiritual geopolitics of Nicholas Roerich”. *Sibirica*. Vol. 2. No. 2. 2002. p. 183.

11
Ibid., p. 178.

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See especially McCannon, John. “Competing legacies, competing visions of Russia: the Roerich movement(s) in Post-Soviet Russia”. In Birgit Menzel, Michael Hagemeister, and Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (eds.). *The new age of Russia: occult and esoteric dimensions*. Munich: Kubon & Sagner. 2011. pp. 348–369.

13
Ibid., pp. 349–350.

14
Ibid., pp. 350–351.

15
Ibid., pp. 348–369.

him as their guru, making a peculiar case of the intertwining of the secular and the religious, and even the occult, on these missions.¹¹

Roerich’s highly complex life project, and particularly his political ties and motivations, however, contain still many nebulous parts, due also to the fact that many ideologically opposed forces are trying to claim Roerich’s legacy as their own.¹² The reception and contemporary interpretations of the Roerichs over the last decades have been just as manifold as the activities of the family itself. After Nicholas Roerich and his works were made to be forgotten in Stalinist Russia, because of their religious-occultist path, his rehabilitation started in the late 1950s. As John McCannon outlines, George Roerich returned to the USSR from India in 1957 at the invitation of Nikita Khrushchev, and a major exhibition showcasing Roerich’s painting was organised in 1958 in Moscow, thus re-canonising Roerich as an artist—but not as person of occultism, not to mention his political ties—who also proved valuable during the Cold War to position the USSR as a propagator of world peace and friendly relations with Asia.¹³

However, the strongest support came later, during Glasnost, when Mikhail Gorbachev embraced the Roerich legacy, eventually leading up to the securing of state funds for a Roerich museum/centre in Russia in 1989 (the so-called Soviet Roerich Foundation), and skyrocketing the interest in Roerich in the 1990s, and especially in the 2000s.¹⁴ All of this paved the way for the various, oppositional claiming of Roerich as an ideal figure through the prism of anti-Marxism, nostalgia for communism, contemporary occultism and esoteric movements, neo-Eurasianist ideas, Russian patriotism, a model for (new kinds of) international relations, as well as the art market through the increased value of Roerich’s paintings at prestigious auction houses.¹⁵ Furthermore, the Roerich museums, galleries, memorials, and research centres (in Moscow, in Naggar, in New York, and in Saint Petersburg) as well as the different followers of Agni Yoga today also contribute to the cultivation of an intricate Roerich legacy.

The latest chapter in the dispute over Roerich’s legacy and his paintings concerns the forced closure in April 2017 of one of the most visible museums dedicated to the polymath; the Nicholas Roerich

Museum at the International Centre of the Roerichs (ICR) in Moscow. While the events are still unfolding at the time of writing, there are a few things that can be noted. The origins of the current feud also need to be traced back to the 1990s, and even earlier, to how the collections of paintings of Nicholas Roerich and his son, Svetoslav Roerich, came about in two important institutions in Moscow: the International Centre of the Roerichs and the State Museum of Oriental Art. The latter, a state-owned museum, acquired its core collection of Roerich's paintings, drawings and the family's personal belongings in 1974—as per the wish of Svetoslav Roerich—through the donation of Katherine Campbell-Stibbe, a close friend, follower and collector from New York.¹⁶ The Museum of Oriental Art (MoOA) subsequently opened a Roerich Hall in 1977, and later a memorial room (both of them still exist today), as part of the museum's permanent display.¹⁷

The question of the “rightful” heir of Roerich's legacy, however, arose with the creation of the Soviet Roerich Foundation. While, according to the website of MoOA, a government decree ordered the establishment of a state-owned Roerich Museum as a branch of MoOA on the Lopukhin's estate in Moscow under Yeltsin in 1993, it did not come about then. Instead the (Soviet) State Roerich Foundation was created, which received a collection of about 280 paintings by himself and his father from Svetoslav Roerich—and which (both the estate and collection) has been, as MoOA claims, illegally seized by the ICR.¹⁸

The brains and the main force behind the establishment of the ICR and the subsequent Roerich Museum was Liudmila Shaposhnikova, an Indologist who was well connected with the Soviet elites.¹⁹ The ICR has functioned as a private, non-governmental institution, however, through the funding of patrons they consider themselves as the institutional continuation of the Soviet Roerich Fund as it is stated on the ICR website.²⁰ Through Svetoslav Roerich Shaposhnikova was also able to acquire a major donation of 432 paintings and various personal objects for the Soviet Roerich Fund, and thus for the collection of the Museum by name of Nicholas Roerich. This included portions of Nicholas and Helena's ashes from the Roerichs' home in India—the “airlifting” of which to Moscow, as McCannon underlines, bordered on a potential violation of Indian law.²¹

16 Наследие Рерихов (The Legacy of Roerich). The State Museum of Oriental Art, Moscow. See <http://www.orientmuseum.ru/art/roerich/default.aspx> (Accessed 2017-05-16.)

17 *Ibid.*

18 *Ibid.*

19 McCannon, *op. cit.*, p. 351.

20 Museum named after Nicholas Roerich. International Centre of the Roerichs, Moscow. See <http://en.icr.su/museum/> (Accessed 2017-05-16.)

21 McCannon, *op. cit.*, p. 352, p. 358.

22 *Ibid.*, p. 358.

23 Holdsworth, Nick. “How an art museum in Russia became the target of Kremlin police raids”. *The Christian Science Monitor*. 3 May 2017. See <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Europe/2017/0503/How-an-art-museum-in-Russia-became-the-target-of-Kremlin-police-raids> (Accessed 2017-05-16.)

Museum display, The Hall of Living Ethics, The Nicholas Roerich Museum at the International Centre of the Roerichs (ICR), Moscow. Wall labels indicate that the artistic conception of the hall was by L Shaposhnikova and were realised by A Leonov and N Cherkashina. In the foreground: the installation *Messengers of the Cosmic Evolution* (2008) comprising busts and on top a sculptural copy version of Nicholas Roerich's painting *Mother of the World* (the original painting was made in 1937 and is now at the Nicholas Roerich Museum, New York). Photo courtesy Eszter Szakács, 30 July, 2016. (As of now, according to reports, The Nicholas Roerich Museum at the International Centre of the Roerichs in Moscow is closed down.)



Throughout the years the ICR has pushed for the cosmic-messianistic-spiritualist interpretation of Roerich on the one hand, and that was clearly visible in the temple-like exhibition display of the museum. On the other hand, as the ICR declared itself the sole heir of the legacy, it often collided with MoOA, and hence with state structures, by dubiously claiming rights for the Roerich collection of MoOA that the museum acquired in the 1970s and 1980s, long before the establishment of the ICR.²²

The latest, and probably, for the time being, final chapter of this struggle between the two institutions came in spring 2017. On 9 March 2017, reports allege, state investigators from the Russian Ministry of the Interi-

or, backed by riot police, raided the museum and seized 197 works of art, and on 28 April 2017 the museum carrying the name of Nicholas Roerich was evicted; in effect the museum was closed by the state.²³ The artworks were taken to the Museum of Oriental Art. As has been reported, the investigators claimed that those artworks taken from the museum were allegedly bought with “stolen money” by ICR patron

Museum display, The Hall of Living Ethics, The Nicholas Roerich Museum at the International Centre of the Roerichs (ICR), Moscow. Wall labels indicate that the artistic conception of the hall was by L Shaposhnikova and were realised by A Leonov and N Cherkashina. In the background of the installation *Messengers of the Cosmic Evolution* (2008): a sculptural and merged copy version of Nicholas Roerich's three paintings, from left to right, *Song of Shambhala* (the original painting was made in 1943 and is now at the State Museum of Oriental Art, Moscow), *Agni Yoga* (the original is a design for a fresco made in 1928 and is now in a private collection), and the *Burning of Darkness* (the original painting was made in 1924 and is now at the Nicholas Roerich Museum, New York). Photo courtesy Eszter Szakács, 30 July, 2016. (As of now, according to reports, The Nicholas Roerich Museum at the International Centre of the Roerichs in Moscow is closed down.)



and oligarch Boris Bulochnik—who was himself a follower of Roerich and whose Master Bank, named after Roerich, was already forced out of business in 2013 because of money laundering charges.²⁴ Whereas, according to reports, the ICR denies the suspicious provenance of the works, they also seem to insinuate that state officials have accused them of being a sect to facilitate the banning of the institution, and thus nationalising a private institution.²⁵ Although it is hard to judge at this moment what exactly has taken place, and may take place in the near future in the institutional landscape of the Roerich heritage in Moscow, the current situation attests to the contemporary relevance of the Roerich family as well as to a current clash between the spiritual/religious and scholarly/secular interpretations of the Roerich legacy.

24 "Russia's oriental museum takes custody of Roerich paintings seized in fraud probe". *Tass*. 9 March 2017. See <http://tass.com/society/934671>. (Accessed 2017-05-16); Bershidsky, Leonid. "Even a Putin couldn't launder Russia's seediest bank". *Bloomberg*. 20 November 2013. See <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2013-11-20/even-a-putin-couldn-t-launder-russia-s-seediest-bank>. (Accessed 2017-05-16.)

Context of Russian Avant-Gardism, Interest in Other Cultures and Cosmism

Inspired by Bolshevik proclamations, Russian avant-gardists envisioned a revolution wedded with lost civilisations and religions. Steven Lee gives a colourful survey of the development of what he calls the "ethnic Avant-Garde".²⁶ Examples of Roerich's contemporaries abound: Velimir Khlebnikov has famously proclaimed that Russia must embrace its Asian-ness and spoken in favour of a pan-Asian liberation in his "An Indo-Russian Union" manifesto (1918), while Aleksandr Blok's *Scythians* (1918) depicts the Bolsheviks as the ancient nomadic tribe sweeping Eurasia in battles.

Among those who identified the distinct path of Russia between West and East, modernity and antiquity, is the star of Russian futurism, Velimir Khlebnikov. More than indigenising the foreign term "futurist", Khlebnikov himself coined and preferred the Russian *budetliane* (people of the future), which one critic described as distinct from futurism in its embrace of the past, its "creation of new things, grown on the magnificent traditions of Russian antiquity".²⁷ This was in line with Khlebnikov's stated goal of enabling the human brain to grasp the ever-elusive fourth dimension, that is, "the axis of time". He envisioned artists and writers retreating to an "independent nation of time", free from everyday life and consumerism.²⁸

While Roerich himself is not considered a cosmist *par excellence*, his ties to artists closer to the movement, such as the group Amaravella, has been asserted.²⁹ Russian cosmism had at its centre notions of cosmic evolution, futurism, human resurrection and immortality, scientific-technological advancement, especially in relation to space travel, as well as occult and esoteric ideas.³⁰ Similarly to the heightened contemporary interest in Roerich, cosmism, also previously banned because of its affinity with religiosity, has recently resurfaced in Russian philosophical and intellectual discourse, starting from the late 1980s, early 1990s and peaking in more recent years.³¹ Due to cosmism's syncretic nature, and again not unlike the legacy of Roerich, it lends itself to leading to, or being deployed by, not only

25 Holdsworth, *op. cit.*

26 Lee, Steven Sunwoo. *The ethnic Avant-Garde: minority cultures and world revolution*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press. 2015.

27 *Ibid.*, p. 50.

28 *Ibid.*

29 Simakova, Marina. "No man's space: On Russian cosmism". *e-flux Journal*. # 74. June 2016. See <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/74/59823/no-man-s-space-on-russian-cosmism/> (Accessed 2017-03-05); and Siddiqi, Asif A. "Imagining the cosmos: utopians, mystics, and the popular culture of space-flight in revolutionary Russia". *Osiris: Intelligentia Science: The Russian Century, 1860-1960*. No. 1. 2008. p. 283.

30 Young, George M. *The Russian cosmists: the esoteric futurism of Nikolai Fedorov and his followers*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2012. p. 4.

31 Simakova, *op. cit.*

technological-utopian optimism, but also eugenics or nationalism.³² Recently, prominent contemporary art theorists, artists and art institutions have also started to re-examine Russian cosmism.³³

As we unpack the conceptual history around religiosity recurring in political debates and contemporary life in the following section, we will end up considering socialist realism and Roerich's mystic worldism as two sides of the same coin. Both strive to reach a higher, perhaps transcendental, goal. Roerich, though never active or even self-aware, is not so far away from the orbit of the early-twentieth-century development of what we today acknowledge as the Russian avant-garde.

On Progress, Power and Secularity

Taylor asserts that modernisation brought about a paradigmatic shift in concepts, which manifested itself in the distinctions we make today, such as that between the immanent and the transcendent, the natural and the supernatural. Crucially, compared to the medieval man for whom the transcendent is the only construal of the world, it is our ability to understand both sides of the dichotomous concepts regardless which side we take that marks the modern conceptual world. This can be seen in, for instance, the “hiving off of an independent, free-standing level, that of ‘nature’, which may or may not be in interaction with something further or beyond.”³⁴ It is exactly this differentiation that has come back as a spectre in contemporary society, for this kind of differentiation confirms only difference of the same, thereby essentially leaving the same conceptual structure intact. How can a society that on the one hand is to a great extent intolerant to certain religious practices, and on the other experiences the resurgence of certain spiritual if not religious aspiration be accounted for?

Time appears as an important vector in the discussion of secularity. “Secular” comes from “*saeculum*”, a century or age or a shared world of human experience. “Death of God” theologian Gabriel Vahanian argues that *saeculum* does not mean the opposite to sacred in the primary sense, but instead underlines the secondary opposition

32 See Siddiqi, op. cit., p. 265 and p. 268; and Scanlan, James P. (ed). *Russian thought after communism: The recovery of a philosophical heritage*. Armonk: M.E. Sharpe. 1994. pp 26–28.

33 See, among others, Anton Vidokle's film trilogy *Cosmism* (2014–2017), as well as Simakova, op. cit.; and Groys, Boris. “Cosmic anxiety: The Russian case”. *Supercommunity, e-flux Journal 56th Venice Biennale*. 9 September. <http://supercommunity.e-flux.com/authors/boris-groys/> (Accessed 2017-03-05); Zhilyaev, Arseny (ed). *Avant-garde Museology*. New York, NY: e-flux, in collaboration with the V-A-C Foundation in Moscow. 2015; Groys, Boris (ed.). *Russian Cosmism* (in Russian). Moscow: Garage Museum of Contemporary Art, in collaboration with Ad Marginem Press. 2015; the *Center for Experimental Museology* project by the V-A-C Foundation in Moscow; as well as the upcoming exhibition *Art Without Death: Russian Cosmism* at Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin (September–October 2017).

34 Taylor, op. cit., pp. 13–14.

35 Crockett, Clayton. *Secular theology: American radical theological thought*. London and New York, NY: Routledge. 2001. p. 1.

36 Taylor, op. cit., p. 55.

37 Massad, Joseph. *Islam in Liberalism*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press. 2015.

38 Buchanan, Ian. *Deleuze and Guattari's Anti-Oedipus: a reader's guide*. London and New York, NY: Continuum. 2008. p. 115.

between sacred and profane for “a saeculum is a theological notion which implies that we live in a world of immanence which functions as the location of human and divine meaning and value.”³⁵ Taylor emphasises the disenchantment of time: “People who are in the saeculum, are embedded in ordinary time, they are living the life of ordinary time; as against those who have turned away from this in order to live closer to eternity. The word is thus used for ordinary as against higher time.”³⁶

Whether the conflation of human and divine experience together, or the carving out of ordinary time against higher time, time becomes a dimension through which worlds are played out. In this teleological view of time, non-Western cultures were or still are relegated to an earlier stage of development (the Muslim world is an example), or on the “benevolent” side of the same coin, they are romanticised and often categorically depicted as frozen in a pristine past (Tibet is an example).

For both, there are always groups with power whose interests are best served under the condition of history as telos. In recent years, the West has experienced categorical reactions to Muslims as “the Other”. In his eloquent study *Islam in Liberalism* (2015), Joseph Massad traces how liberalism has systematically established dualistic oppositions between Islam and Europe and Protestant Christianity, Western democracy and Oriental despotism, European/Christian women's freedom and Muslim women's slavery, European/Euro-American sexual freedom and “Islamic” repressiveness and oppressiveness of sexual desires and practices, the tolerance of modern Europe and the intolerance of Islam and Muslims.³⁷ In the everyday, we are confronted with practices that seemingly pertain to a religious order, such as the wearing of a headscarf in societies of moderate Islam. Is our reaction not victim of the normative function of secularism? Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's analysis, Ian Buchanan sees the French Muslim schoolgirls' voluntary wearing of the *foulard* (headscarf) as an act of “neoterritoriality”, an archaism with a perfectly modern function.³⁸

The hegemony and normativity of liberalism is based on the moral superiority co-extensive to the conceptual structure of difference of

the same, hence the universalisation of secularity becomes a weaponised ideal against the Muslim community. And behind these ideological debates often a blatant political game resides, leading to wars in the name of rescue and help. Talal Asad rightly argues, “Violence is embedded in the very concept of liberty that lies at the heart of liberal doctrine. That concept presupposes that the morally independent individual’s natural right to violent self-defence is yielded to the state and that the state becomes the sole protector of individual liberties.”³⁹ In the West now, the normativity of secularity serves concrete domestic power leverage, such as those propagated by rightist movements in the very heart of Western societies (e.g. banning the burkini). In all of these public outcries, the fundamental idea of the self versus the other, the difference to the same can be discerned, which in turn validates the position taken on secularity versus religiosity.

When one analyses his paintings, Roerich can be seen to have consciously and unconsciously participated in the romanticisation of the “Orient”. His life path, however, suggests something even more curious. As John McCannon pointedly highlights in his essay on Roerich’s “spiritual geopolitics”, Roerich was interested in the cultures and religions of Central and East Asia inasmuch as he could integrate them into his own eclectic mysticism centred around the realisation of Shambhala and the coming of Maitreya, the “Buddha of the Future”—in the unfolding of which he saw himself and his wife as key figures.⁴⁰ McCannon likewise highlights that despite the fact that Roerich was initially in line with his time’s anthropological understanding about the origins and paths of Indo-Iranic cultures, and was once keen on historical-geographical exactitude, his turn towards the occult yielded a more metaphorical interpretation and the flattening of differences in cultures in his mind: the “‘virtually identical’ natures of, for example, the Himalayan peoples (especially Tibetans) he encountered on his expeditions and the ‘Red Indians’ he had met during his travels in the American Southwest.”⁴¹ If the benevolent version of an Orientalist gaze casts the Other in anachrony, and romanticises it as harbouring higher truth (other than the self), then Roerich has reproduced the structure and maximised its inherent problematics less by reinforcing the other-than-the-same, but by inserting himself into the other

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Asad, Talal. *On Suicide Bombing*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2007. p. 59.

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McCannon, John. "By the shores of white waters: the Altai and its place in the spiritual geopolitics of Nicholas Roerich". *Sibirica* Vol. 2, No. 2, 2002: pp. 166–189.

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Ibid., p. 171.

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Reynolds, Michael A. *Shattering empires: the clash and collapse of the Ottoman and Russian Empires, 1908–1918*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2011. p. 254.

and performing exactly the anachronism that defines it. His action could have constituted a “neoterritoriality”, albeit one that needs to rewrite the rules of authenticity as to who is entitled to speak for whom. Yet, conditioned by the difference-of-the-same scheme, his proposals seemed incongruous with the expectations on either side, as we shall see.

Geopolitics Then and Now

Parallel to the intellectual history, the conflicts around Tibet, starting from the nineteenth century onwards, are complex and have left the region in a vulnerable position, Tibet had been overshadowed in the Great Game between the British and Russian expansionist forces (and in its extension into the Cold War and post-Cold War era, but which is beyond the scope of this article). As the Qing, the imperial monarchy in China collapsed in 1911, regions that were not under direct rule (or had not been for a long time), but had been integrated into the empire in a tributary relation, found themselves enmeshed in a global movement of nationalism. Following the Bolshevik “Declaration of the Rights of Peoples”, in which peoples of the empire were bestowed the rights to national self-determination and essentially to forming sovereign states, US President Woodrow Wilson embraced the self-determination principle and popularised it as the fundamental way for a post-imperial world. Yet, as Reynolds rightly points out, the principle was accommodated when it served the interests of the great powers and bent when it did not. Consequently, backed by the British and French, Poland was strategically attributed a part, despite it ethnographically being only one-third non-Polish, to create a buffer zone between Germany and Russia. In the Middle East, out of interest of connecting with the overseas colonies as well as creating a power balance against Russia, the British and French created “mandate” zones and effectively took control over Iraq and Palestine, and Syria and Lebanon respectively.⁴² As Roerich planned his Shambhala expeditions, both Tibet and Mongolia made for increasingly important leverage for geopolitical interests in Central Asia, inner China and East Asia—against an increasingly militant Japan.

Not disheartened by the geopolitical turmoil, and indeed absorbed in his own mission, Roerich walked on thin ice when carrying out his plans with partners such as the USSR and the US. Roerich left for his first expedition (1925–1928) from New York, where the family was residing in the early 1920s. They travelled first to Sikkim, with the ultimate goal to reach Tibet from there, which in effect transpired as his desire to unite all Tibetan Buddhist people of Asia in the “Sacred Union of the East”—that is, to bring about Shambhala.⁴³ Yet, the magnitude of support he was able to accumulate from various sides attest to the fact that Roerich’s mystical geopolitical plan—that was put forth as an expedition to paint landscapes and do archaeological research—was, in its principles, not so out of touch with reality.⁴⁴ As McCannon notes, in the 1920s and 1930s, British, Chinese, Japanese, Mongolian, and Soviet authorities equally considered it “dangerously plausible” that someone like Roerich, appealing to local-traditional heritage, could ignite Asia, and thus negate the formers’ ambitions.⁴⁵ Therefore, for his first journey with American supporters, Roerich managed to gain help—permission to enter Soviet territory and supplies for travel—from the USSR as well, in return for the hope of, among other things, the expansion of Soviet influence in Asia or undermining British rule in India.⁴⁶ The expedition and the first attempt for the Great Plan, however, fell through at the Tibetan border when Roerich and his team were halted for five months during the harsh winter and only let in to be rushed through Tibet to arrive in Sikkim—thanks also to the workings of a British spy tracking Bolshevik activities.⁴⁷



Nicholas Roerich. *Song of Shambhala*, 1943. Tempera on canvas.
Courtesy The State Museum of Oriental Art, Moscow

43
Znamenski, Andrei. *Red Shambhala: magic, prophecy, and geopolitics in the heart of Asia*. Wheaton and Chennai: Theosophical Publishing House. 2011. p. 166, p. 175.

44
Ibid., pp. 181–182

45
McCannon, “By the shores of white waters”, *Op. cit.* p. 181.

46
Ibid., pp. 179–180.

47
Znamenski, *op. cit.*, pp. 201–203.

48
McCannon, “By the shores of white waters”, *Op. cit.* p. 183. See also Osterrieder, Markus. “From Synarchy to Shambhala: The role of political occultism and social messianism in the activities of Nicholas Roerich.” In Birgit Menzel, Michael Hagemeister, and Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal (eds.). *The new age of Russia: occult and esoteric dimensions*. Munich: Kubon & Sagner. 2011. pp. 101–134.

49
Znamenski, *op. cit.*, pp. 209–212.

50
Ibid., pp. 217–18.

51
Osterrieder, *op. cit.*, p. 132.

In the second and last expedition (1934–1936), Roerich had formed a different plan. The mission was funded by the US government, under the guise of a botanical expedition for drought-resistant grasses that could help alleviate the US Dust Bowl crisis—due to the fact that Henry A. Wallace, Secretary for Agriculture under Franklin D. Roosevelt was initially a great supporter of Roerich’s occult teachings.⁴⁸ This time Roerich hoped to use Mongol revolts against the Bolsheviks, who had hardened their religious policy to the discontent of the Mongolian Buddhists while at the same time siding with the Japanese, who had occupied the vast territory of Chinese Manchuria and offered to ally with the immediate neighbouring Mongolian territories. En route to Mongolia, Roerich was stopped by Japan and he acted like a US dignitary without any official decree, and praised Japanese operations in the occupied Manchuria.⁴⁹ His scheme, however, backfired. Japanese intelligence, instead of embracing Roerich, started a smear campaign against him in the press, which was coupled by queries from the US press about the government’s involvement in the expedition, and finally Wallace suspended his support and turned against Roerich when it became clear that he was rather a “diplomatic embarrassment”—all of which forced Roerich not only to abandon his Great Plan, but also to remain in India until his death.⁵⁰

Roerich’s extensive plan for the unification of the East also resonates with Russia’s current neo-Eurasianist aspirations and anti-Western stance, as, Markus Osterrieder underlines: it is manifested by the “geopolitical Grand East (Bol’shoi Vostok) strategy”, coming into force especially under the second presidency of Vladimir Putin (2004–2008), which also builds on the prominent status the Roerichs were able to establish for themselves in Asia.⁵¹

On Scientism

Because the transcendent is left unresolved, it slips in through the backdoor in other disguises, such as scientism. From the development of twentieth-century information theory, such as cybernetics, one can trace how it has developed from a theory of information,



Museum Display, The Banner of Peace Hall, The Nicholas Roerich Museum at the International Centre of the Roerichs (ICR), Moscow. In the foreground: A model of planet Earth, with the Mir space station and a space shuttle around it. In the background, among others: archival photos of the meeting of Svetoslav Roerich with Soviet cosmonauts Valentina Tereshkova and husband Andriyan Nikolayev in Bangalore India in 1965, various photos documenting the display of the Roerich Banner of Peace flag on space crafts and mountain peaks, as well as a light box copy version of Nicholas Roerich's painting *Star of the Hero* (the original painting made in 1936 and is now at the Nicholas Roerich Museum, New York). Photo courtesy Eszter Szakács, 30 July, 2016. (As of now, according to reports, The Nicholas Roerich Museum at the International Centre of the Roerichs in Moscow is closed down.)

52

Hayles, N. Katherine. *How we became posthuman: virtual bodies in cybernetics, literature and informatics*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. 1999. p. 13

53

Siddiqi, *op. cit.*, p. 260.

communication and control abstracted from processes of life, to become the dominant model that replaces the material world, so that the world has to be explained in terms of virtual information and material bodies—the echo of the body-soul duality is obvious. Popular media and sci-fi have done nothing less than anthropomorphise the image of computers: the portrait of a deep-learning algorithm structurally designed with layers of artificial neurons is fondly likened to newborn babies who sift through and organise information in the world. Science has not reached the point yet of fully being able to account for how the brain functions, let alone of drawing computational designs modelled on the brain. In her study of this posthuman view of the world, Katherine Hayles highlights, ‘The point is not only that abstracting information from a material base is an imaginary act but also, and more fundamentally, that conceiving of information as a thing separate from the medium instantiating it is a prior imaginary act that constructs a holistic phenomenon as an information/matter duality.’⁵²

This tendency of seeing the world in terms of information and material further manifests itself in the more recent debate around human genome cloning and editing, presupposing that the DNA codes are the holy grail of human life, a book of life as it were. The field of epigenetics has shown that many tangible and intangible factors co-determine the expression of a DNA sequence. Still, the virtual codes enjoy a privileged position in popular imagination, which is no less than the place occupied by God a few centuries earlier. The way we turn to science today is the way we turned to religion then. As suggested earlier, the underlying problem is that the transcendent slips in through the backdoor and in a different disguise.

Under this condition, it is interesting to observe the attempts of both Roerich and others from his cultural milieu at reaching out to other realities through science. Here mysticism and science are bound together to explore the space of the unknown in a way that challenges the principle of science as a determining factor in the dualism of secularity and religiosity. In the words of Asif Siddiqi “the modern rocket with its new Communist cosmonaut was conceived as much in a leap of faith as in a reach for reason.”⁵³ While Siddiqi

argues that cosmonautics and the space fad, which started also as a religious-mystic kind of enterprise and idea in the early twentieth century, lost its religious overtones when actual space travels came about during the Cold War.⁵⁴ What is peculiar in the case of the contemporary legacy of Roerich, however, is a kind of return: how, for instance, the International Centre of the Roerichs in Moscow—which is at the forefront of preserving Roerich as a mystic but not as a political figure—stretches the line of a kind of cosmism by being a force behind renaming the planetoid #4426 as Roerich, or displaying the Roerich Banner of Peace flag on the Columbia space shuttle and the Mir International Space Station.⁵⁵

A Long Conclusion: the Roerich-Complex

In the above we have seen that Roerich took as his mission the righting of wrongs of the time. Along the way, he sometimes fell into the same trap as Western do-gooders, sometimes he landed himself in deep water of conflicting ideological and geopolitical positions, and at other times he made rather radical (though incidental) proposals, such as with the coupling of science and mysticism. We could see the problems that infuse our society through him.

To understand the real and conceptual realms Roerich moved through in a larger Deleuzian and Guattarian historical perspective means to understand desire in a new light. The primary flow of desire that submerges everything becomes mitigated through the historical stages of development. Whereas pre-capitalist societies code desire through inscription, the capitalist machine frees the flow of desire. Inscription entails marking bodies (the human, the non-human bodies and abstract bodies) to create representations of things and to attribute meaning, and this in turn suppresses the flux of desire. This process lies underneath the development of social formation—in other words, desire is socialised by coding. Ian Buchanan emphasises that there is only desire and the social, for social production is molar and consolidated, and desiring-production is molecular, dispersed and unruly.⁵⁶

54
Ibid., p. 288.

55
McCannon, "Competing legacies", p. 364.

56
Buchanan, *op. cit.*, p. 89, p. 96.

57
Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Felix. *Anti-Oedipus*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press. 1983, pp. 192–193.

58
Ibid., p. 194.

59
Buchanan, *op. cit.*, p. 115

60
Deleuze and Guattari, *op. cit.*, p. 260

In the next stage of their philosophy of history, the despot comes in and imposes a new alliance system and places himself in direct filiation with the deity. This can be observed when a spiritual empire arises or when a new empire replaces the old one: "It may be that the paranoiac himself is either a gentle creature or a raging beast. But we always rediscover the figures of this paranoiac and his pervers, the conqueror and his elite troops, the despot and his bureaucrats, the holy man and his disciples, the anchorite and his monks, Christ and his Saint Paul."⁵⁷ What comes with it is an absolute structure of hierarchy that the blocks of debt become "an infinite relation in the form of the tribute".⁵⁸ This abstraction rings true in cases of Christ, Moses, and indeed of Roerich too. The despotic state dreads the flow of production and exchange and tries to rule by tightening control. Yet what will overcome the despot state is the capitalist machine, which captures these flows of desire by making them part of its own operation, that is, through the appropriation of production—capital begets capital, bypassing the production of commodities. This is the post-imperial and capitalist society that Roerich was living in and we still live in, and his seemingly archaic endeavour could be understood thus as a wish for achieving order pertaining more to the despot machine than the capitalist machine. This can be seen in his visual depictions of pristine spiritual worlds, embedded firmly in a time far away from our disenchanted, ordinary time. This can be seen as well in his quest for scientific advancement and cosmology. Buchanan sees the role of religions and traditions practised today as "the absorption of the deracinated energies capitalism has detached from its body" and "the tying back down of desire".⁵⁹

The archaic appearance of Roerich's undertakings should be read less as a self-sure choice of returning to any purer states, than as a result of a socio-historical condition in which we have never been fully secular. Roerich was a curious figure who rose on the ashes and ruins of multiple broken orders: the empire/transnationalism, traditionalism, religiosity and Communism on the one hand, and nation-state, modernity, secularisation and liberal democracy on the other. Yet paradoxically his failures surmount the categorical limits of both sides. Roerich fully embodied the paradox of modern societies, which are "torn in two directions: archaism and futurism, neo-archaism and ex-futurism, paranoia and schizophrenia".⁶⁰ _____