

Olga's Occult: Bézobrazow's Formation of Spiritualist Feminism in the *Revue des femmes russes* during France's Fin de Siècle

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I have personally translated all the French content I have used for my thesis—both primary and secondary source material.

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Introduction:

The signs of the times are Spiritualist and feminist, as the definitive success of the one will make that of the other. These are two new forces which come to society from the same principle.

These words, affirming a new era for society marked by the co-emergence and co-dependence of feminism with Spiritualism, were published by Russian émigré Olga de Bézobrazow in the February 1897 edition of her Parisian periodical, *La Revue des femmes russes et des femmes françaises* (“The Review of Russian and French Women”). Spiritualism¹ is an esoteric belief system—considered a religion, or a science, or both—that in France emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, asserting the individual soul’s continued existence after death in a higher, spiritual body. French Spiritualism believes in the evolution of the “spirit” towards ultimate perfection through reincarnation in various states or lives, as well as the ability of living “human channels” called mediums to meaningfully communicate with the deceased’s spirits. The founder of modern *Spiritisme* (the French term at the time for Spiritualism) in the 1860s, Allan Kardec, formalized the doctrine by connecting the *individual* soul’s reincarnation with the corollary progressive evolution of society towards ultimate *social* perfection, in this way transforming it into a broader movement for social and political justice in the nineteenth century. By 1897—when Bézobrazow² fused *Spiritualisme* with feminism—the doctrine had evolved into an occult faith distinct from, but still closely connected to, *Spiritisme*, due to the abundantly popular occult revival³ and the emergence of modern psychiatry in France’s *fin de siècle*.⁴

¹ “Spiritualism” with a capital “S” refers to the doctrine or movement, whereas “spiritualism” is a philosophical term affirming the existence of a human spirit or soul (as opposed to “materialism”, which denies the spirit’s existence).

² In the interests of flow, I refer to Mme. de Bézobrazow without the “de” that indicates her noble status in French.

³ The “occult revival” involved a rediscovery and popularization of ancient pantheistic religions in the Middle East, the Western esoteric (hidden/secret) Renaissance practices of alchemy, magic, and Kabbala—and the combination of these with the *fin de siècle*’s nascent psychical research. Occult systems like Spiritualism, Theosophy, and neo-Martinism fulfilled French urban society’s increasing pursuit of spirituality in the search for meaning in “modern” *fin-de-siècle* life. *Spiritualisme*, combining most tenets of Kardec’s hugely popular *Spiritisme* with new occult elements and practices, appealed most to *fin-de-siècle* French society. David Allen Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment: Occultism and Politics in Modern France* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2005), 96.

Like Spiritualism, feminism in Third Republic France (1870-1940) was also concerned with socio-political justice, and occupied a significant place in the cultural discourse of the moment—hence Bézobrazow’s remark that both doctrines reflected France’s “signs of the times”. While the term “*féminisme*” itself originated from the 1830s (decades before the English equivalent), women’s rights in the first country to conceptualize universal rights during the Enlightenment still lacked the popular support enjoyed by their American or British proponents:⁵ French womanhood had largely been defined by the deeply patriarchal and repressive dictates of the 1804 Civil (or Napoleonic) Code which still considered women minors under the ownership of men by law. Meanwhile, political empowerment through suffrage was widely considered impracticable and incompatible with French social mores, with women only gaining the vote in 1945.⁶

Nonetheless, as Bézobrazow noted, the *question féminine* (“female question”) assumed great significance as a “new force” in fin-de-siècle discourse, driven largely by a nascent mass culture, a depopulation “crisis”, and increased female literacy, employment, and sexual independence.⁷ The organized feminist movement emerged in this moment to propose ways forward for modern French society: by the mid-1890s, proponents of different doctrines like suffragism, Christian feminism, and socialist feminism were articulating disparate, often conflicting visions for women’s education, suffrage, sexual independence, and familial role.⁸ At the same time, France was split on the place of faith in society, amidst a resurgence of Catholic

⁴ See Sofie Lachapelle, *Investigating the Supernatural: from Spiritism and Occultism to Psychological Research and Metaphysics in France, 1853–1931* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011) and Brady Brower, *Unruly Spirits: The Science of Psychic Phenomena in Modern France* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010).

⁵ Jennifer Waelti-Walters and Steven Hause, *Feminisms of the Belle Époque: A Historical and Literary Anthology* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994), 2-3.

⁶ Steven Hause, *Women’s Suffrage and Social Politics in the French Third Republic* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), introduction.

⁷ See Karen Offen, *Debating the Woman Question in the French Third Republic, 1870-1920* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018), and Hause, *Women’s Suffrage*, introduction.

⁸ Hause, *Women’s Suffrage*, 14-16.

and occult faith, a progressively secularizing public education, and the emergence of “empirical” modern sciences like chemistry, biology, and psychiatry. In the 1890s, with conflicting visions of what constituted knowledge and justice being staked on increasingly existential grounds, Spiritualism, like many occult movements, styled itself as a religious “science” in its reliance on the observation of psychic phenomena and the natural world.

Bézobrazow, a feminist and a Spiritualist in 1890s Paris—the intellectual “capital of the nineteenth century”—perceived fertile ground for synthesizing both into a single doctrine.⁹ This thesis understands her statement “the signs of the times are Spiritualist and feminist” as observational and deliberately propagandistic, as a call-to-arms to the fin-de-siècle French reading public. Between 1896 and 1897, she would formulate an intellectual Spiritualist-Feminist hybrid addressing France’s disputes over faith and women; from 1897 to roughly 1912, she would attempt to deploy her doctrine in seeking societal improvement through legal, cultural, and moral progress. Actively entering France’s mass press in 1896 by establishing the *Revue des femmes russes* (from here on referred to simply as the *Revue*) from her house in Neuilly-Saint-James, Paris, she outlined in its pages her nascent Spiritualist Feminist¹⁰ doctrine through treatise-style essays, novellas, poetry, and sociological inquests.

With her new visibility in France’s press, Bézobrazow subsequently attempted to *practically* mobilize her Spiritualist Feminism, founding a society dedicated to its ends, speaking

⁹ Dissemination of knowledge is an inherent aspect of a doctrine (its archaic origin literally means “teaching” or “instruction”). Concerns about the cultural and psychological potency of disseminating knowledge through a mass media emerged in precisely this same historical moment in France: such works as sociologists Gabriel Tarde’s *Laws of Imitation* (1890) and Gustave Le Bon’s *Psychology of the Crowds* (1895)—later influencing Freud, Lenin and Hitler—represented the first codifications of propaganda, collective psychology, and the instrumental capacity of the media to change the public mind. See Susannah Barrows, *Distorting Mirrors: Visions of the Crowd in Late Nineteenth-Century France* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) and Vanessa Schwartz, *Spectacular Realities: Early Mass Culture in Fin-de-Siècle Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 3.

¹⁰ Although the argument could be well made that Bézobrazow’s doctrine was more inflected by occult than feminist tendencies, and thus merited the title of “Feminist Spiritualism” rather than “Spiritualist Feminism”, this thesis has chosen to use the latter, in the interests of preserving Bézobrazow’s own historical voice as much as possible, as it is how she referred to her own doctrine.

in seminal turn-of-the-century conferences, and championing her ideas in the popular French press in its “golden age” of circulation and consumption.¹¹ Moreover, the press took her seriously, acknowledging Spiritualist Feminism as a doctrine aimed at significant societal and moral change in an intellectual *zeitgeist* defined by the issues she sought to address.¹² Bézobrazow and her doctrine thus became important cultural agents in a historical period (*fin de siècle*) and place (Paris) considered the “epicenter” of modern European culture.¹³

Why Olga Mikhailovna Bezobrazova, a Russian expatriate of noble lineage born in 1856 in Saint Petersburg, permanently settled in France in 1893 (she would die unmarried in France’s South at sixty-five in 1921) is impossible to verify.¹⁴ However, having studied in Belgium and travelled frequently to the “birthplaces” of Western occult faiths like Greece and North Africa, she clearly enjoyed financial and physical freedom, and being inspired by other cultures to produce intellectual works (initially, poems and essays).¹⁵ An aspiring poet and writer, Bézobrazow was perhaps incentivized by the “rapid increase” of publications by Russian writers in France—after the French “discovery” of contemporaneous Russian literature in 1886—to settle in France and join an expatriate community of aristocratic Russian intellectuals that was small but influential in both Paris and the south of France throughout the nineteenth century.¹⁶

¹¹ De la Motte, Dean, and Jeannene Przyblyski, ed. *Making the News: Modernity and the Mass Press in Nineteenth-Century France* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999), 6-7.

¹² See “Batailles de l’idée” in *Revue scientifique et morale du spiritisme*. Paris: (March 1908); *Polybiblion: revue bibliographique universelle*. Paris: (January 1909)

¹³ Christophe Charle, *Paris fin de siècle: culture et politique* (Paris: Editions Du Seuil, 1998), 10–12, 15.

¹⁴ Bézobrazow’s brothers were among the most significant actors in late Imperial Russia: Aleksander was Russian Counselor of State and had incited the Tsar’s Army into a disastrous 1905 war with Japan, which led to the 1905 Russian Revolution. Vladimir, meanwhile, was Nicholas II’s closest friend (according to Solzhenitsyn), and was Cavalier General and Commandant of the Russian Imperial Guard during the First World War.

¹⁵ See SPERO, “Poèmes Mystiques de Mme. de Bézobrazow” in *Revue spirite*. Paris, (May 1902); A. Mortier, “Les Livres” in *Mercure de France*. Paris, (May 1895). In 1897, Bézobrazow visited the frontlines of the Greco-Turkish War, pointing to her adventurous spirit. Her overseas, Francophonic education in the West was also common practice by the Russian nobility in the nineteenth century. Barbara Alpern Engel, *Mothers and Daughters: Women of the Intelligentsia in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 3, 15-17.

¹⁶ Nikita Struve, Helene Menegaldo in Krauss, Charlotte, and Tatiana Victoroff, ed. *Figures de l’émigré russe en France au XIXe et XXe siècle: fiction et réalité* (New York, NY: Rodopi, 2012), 24, 62 respectively.

With the assistance of popular French feminist Clothilde Dissard, Bézobrazow self-funded, edited, wrote in, and published—on a monthly, bi-monthly, and once even tri-monthly basis—the consciously didactic *Revue* between May 1896 and April 1897. On any given page of any edition, one could find an esoteric poem, an installment from a contemporaneous novella, a polemic, a literary review, a legal, sociological, or historical inquest, or an overview of international or local current affairs in literature, society, and politics. The *Revue*'s stated purpose was to arrange a plurality of voices from diverse national and cultural backgrounds (although the vast majority of contributors were French and Russian writers claiming noble lineage) “for the active exercise of feminine propaganda”.¹⁷



M^{me} O. DE BEZOBRAZOW

Fig. 1: The only extant photo of Olga de Bézobrazow, taken from the 1903 Revue Moderne

The periodical's heavy Russian inflection could not be insignificant within the fin de siècle's deepening Franco-Russian cultural ties and the formation of a new political alliance between the Third Republic and the Russian Empire in 1892–1894. In early 1897, Bézobrazow wrote that the *Revue*'s positive reception by the Russian and French press served “to reproduce once more the good agreement between two great peoples”—a likely allusion to the Franco-

¹⁷ La Direction, “Féminismes russes et français” in *La Revue des femmes russes et des femmes françaises* (February 1897), 5.

Russian rapprochement which could equally frame the *Revue* as an organ of transnational propaganda, of cultural “soft power”.¹⁸ At certain points, this thesis attempts peripherally to weave the Russian dimension into its elucidation of Bézobrazow and her Spiritualist Feminism, but a fuller treatment of the theme necessarily lies beyond its scope.¹⁹

Meanwhile, Bézobrazow and Spiritualist Feminism are remarkably absent in the current historiography. Lynn Sharp’s book *Secular Spirituality: Reincarnation and Spiritism in Nineteenth-Century France* is one of only two works on nineteenth-century French history to identify a conceptual “Spiritualist Feminism” with agents behind this idea: Bézobrazow, and the Frenchwomen Olympe Audouard, Lucie Grange, and Julia Becours.²⁰ Sharp asserts that Bézobrazow “went much further in combining spiritism [*sic.*] with feminism” than her contemporaries, but only vaguely accounts for what this meant: namely, that Bézobrazow believed future feminisms “would blend science and religion” and that women’s education in Spiritualism was imperative for their emancipation from the patriarchy.²¹ This does insufficient justice to Spiritualist Feminism as Bézobrazow’s contemporaries understood it—i.e., as a deliberate fin-de-siècle *doctrine*. Although Sharp notes that feminism and Spiritualism converged forcefully in the 1890s, highlighting Bézobrazow as evocative of this moment, she

¹⁸ La Direction, “Féminismes russes et français” in *La Revue des femmes russes et des femmes françaises* (February 1897), 7-8. See George F. Kennan’s *The Fateful Alliance: France, Russia, and the Coming of the First World War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984).

¹⁹ The Russian community in nineteenth-century France is surprisingly under-researched, at least in French and English. Faith Hillis’ recent article “The Franco-Russian Marseillaise” examines the link between the development of the French political right and Russian expatriate conspiracy in 1880s and 1890s France, and represents one of the first attempts to critically evaluate this history. Among other things, it notes these communities’ frequently shared adherence to French occult beliefs of the period. See Faith Hillis, “The ‘Franco-Russian Marseillaise’: International Exchange and the Making of Antiliberal Politics in Fin de Siècle France”, *The Journal of Modern History* 89 (March 2017): 39–78. For Franco-Russian history, see *Figures de l’émigré russe*; Jean Bonamour, “La littérature russe en France à la fin du xix^e siècle: la critique française devant ‘l’âme slave’”, *La Revue russe* (1994): 71-79; and Georges Nivat, “La rencontre franco-russe au XIX^e siècle”. *Editions esprit* (2010/2011): 63–71.

²⁰ Sharp, *Secular Spirituality: Reincarnation and Spiritism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2006), 169-172.

²¹ Sharp, *Secular Spirituality*, 169-172.

never ultimately provides a historical explanation *why*; nor does she really treat Bézobrazow as a historical personality, citing her instead as an illustrative example of a tangential phenomenon.

However, *Secular Spirituality* does highlight avowed Spiritualists' advocacy of feminism, the tendency of women to be compelling mediums, and a general affinity in Spiritualist theory for social justice traceable to the 1830s; these factors form the basis of Nicole Edelman's *Voyantes, guérisseuses, et visionnaires en France (1785-1914)*.²² Edelman extensively features Lucie Grange as a "medium-prophetess" but never mentions Bézobrazow or a "Spiritualist Feminism".²³ Examining how feminism and Spiritualism intersected in Grange, she stops short of ever calling Grange's beliefs or actions a doctrine—likely because even at the time, the French press considered Bézobrazow as the "apostle" who "founded *her* [emphasis added] Spiritualist Feminist doctrine", imbuing her with a cultural hegemony over the neologism.²⁴

Bézobrazow, her *Revue*, and her Spiritualist Feminism are similarly marginal in the works of historians of French feminism.²⁵ Klejman and Rochefort, in *L'égalité en marche: le féminisme sous la Troisième République*, note the historical *fact* that Bézobrazow founded a Spiritualist Feminism—adding that she inspired Frenchwomen like Claire Galichon to

²² Sharp, *Secular Spirituality*, introduction. Other scholars also allude to the overlap of gender and esoteric faith, but never as particularly significant in its own right. See: John Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith: Mesmerism, Spiritism, and Occultism in Modern France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008); Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment*; and Bernice Rosenthal, ed. *Occultism in Russian and Soviet Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997).

²³ Edelman, *Voyantes, guérisseuses, et visionnaires en France 1785-1914* (Paris: Editions Albin Michel, 1995), 154-55, 208-216.

²⁴ "Batailles de l'idée" in *Revue scientifique et morale du spiritisme* (March 1908); Philippe Casimir, "Une apôtre: Mme. O. de Bézobrazow" in *Revue spirite*. Paris: (November 1904).

²⁵ For a comprehensive history of Third Republic feminism, see Joan Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer: French Feminists and the Rights of Man* (Cambridge, MA : Harvard University Press, 1996); Offen, *Debating the Woman Question*; Hause, *Women's Suffrage*; Laurence Klejman and Florence Rochefort, *L'Égalité en marche: le féminisme sous la Troisième République* (Paris: Presses de la fondation nationale des sciences politiques des femmes, 1989); and Mary-Louise Roberts, *Disruptive Acts: The New Woman in Fin-de-siècle France* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017).

subsequently espouse this doctrine.²⁶ They also point to three other fin-de-siècle figures, namely Leopold Lacour, Celine Renooz, and Jules Bois, who displayed “esoteric” tendencies in their feminist engagements.²⁷ However, they are uninterested in analyzing the underpinnings of the historical intersection of esotericism and feminism, let alone in considering Bézobrazow (as contemporaries did) as a conscious, influential “apostle” of this phenomenon.²⁸

Thus, the purpose of this thesis is to simultaneously define and historicize a new fin-de-siècle doctrine of Spiritualist Feminism as Bézobrazow’s deliberate fusion of current French feminist and spiritualist ideas: she presented her doctrine at once as a system of faith, a vehicle for social justice, an intellectual epistemology, and an individual project for cultural agency in the mass media around the turn of the century. It demonstrates how Bézobrazow first articulated Spiritualist Feminism in the pages of her *Revue* between 1896 and 1897, and argues that through her synthesis of two wholly current ideologies, she sought to resolve some of the driving contemporaneous social, political, and intellectual contests of Third Republic France. These included intensifying debates over the roles of science, faith, and women in French society, as well as broader existential anxieties relating to the turn of the century. It also seeks to resurface a historically neglected agent of fin-de-siècle intellectual culture in Bézobrazow, until now relegated at best to a footnote despite her significant visibility and activity in France.

Chapter one traces the genealogy of Spiritualism alongside the evolving Third Republic debate on the role of faith in French society, and its embrace of the emergent psychical sciences to try and transcend the intellectual battlegrounds on belief and knowledge in the 1880s and

²⁶ Klejman and Rochefort, *L'Égalité*, 174

²⁷ Klejman and Rochefort, *L'Égalité*, 118. Bézobrazow cited Lacour and Renooz as intellectual inspirations, with both contributing to her *Revue*.

²⁸ James Allen looks at how the Neosophist Renooz’s “prophetic vision of social justice and spiritual renewal” comprised her eclectic worldview of history, biological theory, and bourgeois feminism, but he argues that Renooz’s ideas were idiosyncratic and personal, not doctrinal. James Allen, “The Language of the Press: Narrative and Ideology in the Memoirs of Celine Renooz (1890-1913)” in *Making the News*.

1890s. It considers Bézobrazow's 1896 treatise *La Religion nouvelle* in line with these issues and concomitantly as a source for her Spiritualist Feminist doctrine. Chapter two examines Bézobrazow's "sociological" feminism in the early editions of her *Revue* and locates her position within a network of influential contemporaries advancing their own feminist visions. It demonstrates how her sociological feminism's treatment of the "Femme Nouvelle" ("New Woman") in her eponymous 1896 novella in the *Revue* engendered an early synthesis of feminism with Spiritualism. Chapter three begins in early 1897, demonstrating Bézobrazow's full intellectual formalization of Spiritualist Feminism: first through her repurposing for its ends the idea of *humanité intégrale*, and second in her historical treatise *Le Matriarcat*, as further evidence of her crystallized doctrine. Chapter four considers the decade after the *Revue*'s conclusion, examining the *practical* dimensions of Spiritualist Feminism as an ideology: it demonstrates how Bézobrazow's creation of a Spiritualist Feminist society, her delivery of speeches at the most significant feminist and spiritualist conferences of 1900, and her forceful presence in the occult press bespeak her conscious attempt to make Spiritualist Feminism an active force in French society—and in so doing, to remake French society itself.

Chapter 1: A New Religion: Spiritualism, Science, and Faith in Fin-de-siècle France

A striking claim was made by prominent neo-Martinist²⁹ Papus (a.k.a Gérard Encausse) in an 1895 edition of his periodical *L'initiation*: France was on the verge of an “apocalyptic crisis” that would begin in 1896.³⁰ The “chronic instability of the Third Republic”, its social division, would produce a “domestic crisis” resulting in “violent civil war in France itself”.³¹ Deliverance from this war would ultimately come from France’s ally, the Russian Tsar Nicholas II, who would then preside over an optimistic “period of universal peace” and social renewal.³² Meanwhile, in 1891, the self-styled Rosicrucian³³ “Mage” Joséphin Péladan, had predicted a “fatal and imminent rotting” to ultimate demise of a decadent French society “without God” in the next few years.³⁴ French (and European) social regeneration would similarly be accomplished by the “Slavic race”.³⁵ Both visions bespeak an undeniable fixation within France’s occult movement—at the height of its popular revival—on the idea of a profound *internal* national crisis (for Péladan, a “putrefaction”), attributable to godless materialism, to which the only solution lay in moral and social renewal.³⁶

Unbeknownst to Péladan and Papus, a Russian noble (admittedly, not the Tsar) sharing an occult worldview, a vision of current French society as “fractured”, and a desire for moral and spiritual regeneration *was* initiating her project in Paris at this very moment, with the

²⁹ Neo-Martinism was a mystical Christian occult doctrine founded by Papus in 1888 based on the rituals and teachings of late eighteenth century occultist leaders Martinez de Pasqually and Louis-Claude de Saint Martin. It is based on initiation—the process of education in the esoteric (secret) traditions—and revealing the unity of all cults in a single religion of Christ. Neo-Martinists insisted on Christian prayer and individual charity. The doctrine subscribed to ancient Egyptian Kabbalah, astrology, and alchemy, and like Spiritualism, believed in the scientific observation of the invisible world and its laws.

³⁰ Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment*, 145–46.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ Rosicrucianism was another Catholic occult faith—even more secretive than Neo-Martinism—inspired by the mystical German tradition, and was linked to the practices of Kabbalah, hermeticism, and alchemy.

³⁴ Koenraad Swart, *The Sense of Decadence in Nineteenth-Century France* (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands Springer, 1964), 164.

³⁵ *Ibid.*

³⁶ These moral sentiments were also shared by France’s Catholics. See Sharp, *Secular Spirituality*, 66.

commencement of her feminist *Revue* in 1896.³⁷ Several months into its publication, Bézobrazow contributed an ethical-philosophical treatise titled *La Religion nouvelle* (“The New Religion”), which sought to establish a fundamentally *moral* Spiritualist base of knowledge, distilled from a combination of contemporary scientific research and ancient esoteric and Christian theology, and promising to resolve French intellectual divisions over the relationship between science and faith. This would lay the partial foundations for a broader regeneration of a society she and others—like Papus and Péladan, but also Émile Zola and Émile Durkheim for example—saw as decadent and degenerating towards self-destruction.³⁸

Bézobrazow’s decision to argue for a “New Religion” within the context of France’s perceived social division and godlessness leads us to one of the Third Republic’s most entrenched, defining, and divisive cultural contests: the antagonism between anticlerical, anti-spiritual liberal Republican *laïcité* (secularism) and a civic revival of religious belief in a rapidly modernizing, increasingly materialistic (industrial, scientific) France.³⁹ This battle would only be ultimately resolved politically with the 1905 Separation Law enshrining the constitutional separation of Church and State.⁴⁰ Nonetheless, France’s religious revival would socially continue unabated until the outbreak of the First World War, and encompassed not only conservative Catholicism but also occult doctrines (such as Spiritualism) evolving from earlier *Spiritiste* precedents.⁴¹ Indeed, the Spiritist Kardec’s *Livre des esprits* (considered the formative text of

³⁷ Bézobrazow, “La Religion nouvelle” in *La Revue des femmes russes* (01 September 1896), 325.

³⁸ Charle, *Paris fin-de-siècle*, 8-9; Swaart, *The Sense of Decadence*, 190.

³⁹ René Rémond usefully defines Republican ideology as being inseparable from the political dimensions of *laïcité*, i.e. “separation of the religious and of the profane, absolute independence of the State with regard to the Churches, freedom of the individual conscience, non-interference by clerics... in public affairs [or] of religious considerations in the political motivations and beliefs of the citizens.” See René Rémond, *L’Anticléricalisme en France: de 1815 à nos jours* (Paris: Fayard, 1999), 14.

⁴⁰ Sharp, *Secular Spirituality*, 3; Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith*, 199-250; Rémond, *L’Anticléricalisme*, 171-197.

⁴¹ Sharp, *Secular Spirituality*, xiii–xxi, 167. The terms “Spiritism” and “Spiritualism” are confusingly often used interchangeably—both by scholars, as well as contemporaneous observers of the doctrine—when describing what was by the 1880s a very heterogeneous doctrine that had lost the ideological unity and clarity Kardec had established with his *Spiritisme*. Kardec formally coined the term *Spiritisme* in the 1860s to transform the popular

Spiritist doctrine) and his popular periodical *La Revue spirite* continued to enjoy significant commercial success after his 1869 death; there was at the same time a resurgence of Catholic miracle-making and pilgrimages to such holy sites as Lourdes and La Salette; and in the 1880s there was the “occult revival” of new doctrines, sects, organizations, periodicals, and gatherings, continuing into the following decade and arguably peaking during Bézobrazow’s period of prominence.⁴²

Indeed, the ostensibly secular Third Republic itself emerged from the 1870-71 Franco-Prussian conflict⁴³ into an environment of “surg[ing] piety” stemming from the Church’s demonstration of national loyalty during the war and the common perception that France’s humiliation had resulted from spiritual neglect and excess materialism.⁴⁴ The early Third Republic “Government of Moral Order” thus wedded itself to the Catholic Church, reinstating its primacy in French political and civic society.⁴⁵ In reaction, the Republican movement’s leaders—Quinet, Gambetta, and Ferry—adopted even more aggressively secular rhetoric and policies upon gaining power in 1877, including advocacy of compulsory, free, science-based education for French children without Church influence (ultimately enshrined in the Ferry Laws of 1880-82),

trend of asking the spirits to turn tables as proof of their existence—imported from the United States in the 1850s—into a movement, connecting the spirits’ messages teaching the successive reincarnation of the soul as it moved progressively towards divinity and decreasing materiality. Bézobrazow consciously used the term “*Spiritualisme*” rather than *Spiritisme*, but her beliefs aligned well with *Spiritisme*. Most scholars group “Spiritualism” as an identifiably occult faith by the fin de siècle; this is corroborated by Bézobrazow’s own writings, which invoke esoteric theories not present in classic Kardecian *Spiritisme*. *Spiritisme* had also become inflected by occult theory and practice in the 1880s, which this thesis understands as the originary moment of fin-de-siècle “Spiritualism”.

⁴² Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment*, 98; Monroe, “Cartes de Visite from the Other World: Spiritism and the Discourse of Laïcisme in the Early Third Republic”. *French Historical Studies*, 26, No. 1, (2003), 123.

⁴³ France’s Emperor Napoleon III suffered a humiliating military defeat in 1870 by the Prussian army, which resulted in the establishment of the French Third Republic. The new government briefly continued the Franco-Prussian war until its capitulation in 1871. This defeat produced the short-lived but deadly Paris Commune in 1871, in which a radical socialist commune took over Paris for two months, creating a political crisis only resolved with the Third Republic Army’s successful although bloody siege of the city.

⁴⁴ Monroe, “Cartes de Visite”, 120, 138; Rémond, *L’Anticléricalisme*, 9-10.

⁴⁵ Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith*, 152; Sharp *Secular Spirituality*, 78-79; Rémond, *L’Anticléricalisme*, 9-10, 171.

and open denunciation of the Church as “the enemy of the people”.⁴⁶ They too explained 1871 in terms of morality, an alternative one blaming the clergy for having “made bad French people”, “denationalized the youth” and taught them principles anathema to “modern society”—i.e. to the republican “cult” of scientific knowledge and empirical, individual reason.⁴⁷ Faith and worship were “aberrations of the human mind”, diagnosable signs of irrationality and madness.⁴⁸

This pathologization of faith—inextricable from “empirical” scientific belief, as both John Monroe and Lynn Sharp have demonstrated—was deployed in some of the earliest secular-religious battles on Spiritist terrain. After the death of Kardec in 1869 and the trauma of 1870-71, the French Spiritist movement began to stagnate; it also underwent a fundamental structural upheaval in the 1880s because of the occult revival and the 1875 *Procès spirite* (“Spirit Trial”).⁴⁹ Spiritists had in the early 1870s consciously courted Republican values of science, reason, and progress, by maintaining Kardec’s positivistic formulation of the belief as a philosophy-science—rather than religion—with “an empirical basis in spirit phenomena”.⁵⁰ For example, Pierre-Gaëtan Leymarie, now *de facto* leader of the movement, sought to empirically, objectively “prove” the existence of talking spirits and reincarnation through spirit photography: here, the spirits of dead people were photographed by mediums, who through their mediumship could “produce” the

⁴⁶ Rémond, *L’Anticléricalisme*, 4-7, 33, 176, 184; Sharp, *Secular Spirituality*, 102, 129, 165. That said, some have suggested that Republicans’ “coherent belief system” itself “effectively amounted to a religion.” Ralph Gibson, “Why Catholics and Republicans couldn’t stand each other” in Tallett, Frank, and Nicholas Atkin, ed. *Religion, Society and Politics in France Since 1789* (London; Rio Grande, Ohio, U.S.A.: Hambledon Press, 1991), 108.

⁴⁷ Rémond, *L’Anticléricalisme*, 31, 172-173, 177.

⁴⁸ Rémond, *L’Anticléricalisme*, 49, 188, 191. The work of French neurologist and pathologist Jean-Martin Charcot, according to Monroe, “provided a way of conceiving susceptibility to intense religious experience as a sign of mental disease” thus “pathologizing” religion and presenting *laïcisme* “as a form of social hygiene.” Monroe, “Cartes de Visite”, 143.

⁴⁹ The *Procès spirite* occurred in June 1875, when a photographer, an American spiritualist medium, and Leymarie, were tried and found guilty of making and selling fraudulent spirit photographs. The case was enormously popular in the French press. Monroe, “Cartes de Visite”, 120.

⁵⁰ Kardec argued that Spiritism “superseded religion by encompassing all religions.” He positioned reincarnation as “scientific” due to “its repeatable quality: all souls progressed toward intellectual purity and all souls passed the same points in a series of reincarnations.” Sharp, *Secular Spirituality*, 123, 128.

visualization of the spirit, as in this portrait of Leymarie with a “devoted Spiritist who had recently died of cancer”:⁵¹



Fig. II: Spirit portrait of Leymarie, taken from Monroe, “Cartes de Visite from Another World”.

However, the 1875 *Procès spirite*—which exposed such photographs as fakes and jailed Leymarie for a year for his involvement—severed this tentative alliance between Republican ideals and Spiritism, leaving the latter exposed to unequivocal rejection by both the Catholic right and the Republican left; both camps criticized to different ends the unwavering belief of the Spiritist witnesses at the trial in the scientific veracity and objectivity of the photographs.⁵² The trial in this way reproduced the broader Third Republic contest over the legitimacy of belief and its place in society—on not only political but also moral and epistemological grounds, for to profess faith was to deny science (and thus the Republic’s very foundations). Spiritism’s former doctrinal and organizational unity fractured—with Leymarie, for example, attempting to

⁵¹ Monroe, “Cartes de Visite”, 123, 133.

⁵² According to Monroe, Catholics argued that in Spiritism’s “desire to unite faith and reason on reason’s terms”, it was “much closer to the ‘reasoning mania’ of the secular Republican left than it was to [devout Catholics’] deep-seated religious conviction”. Republicans, meanwhile, saw in the Spiritists’ refusal to acknowledge the fraudulency of the photographs a fundamental irrationality and detachment from the “Truth”. Materialistically embracing emergent psychological theory, Republicans attacked both Spiritism and “faith” in general, presenting both as products “either of ignorance or... outright mental pathology.” Monroe, “Cartes de Visite”, 122, 142.

synthesize Spiritism with novel occult theories and movements like Martinism, Theosophy, and Mesmerism.⁵³ But by the late 1880s and early 1890s, carried on a broader tide of surging French spirituality, its largely occult fragments—like the Spiritualism Bézobrazow embraced—were flourishing. Thirty new Spiritist/occult periodicals were established in the final two decades of the century; by 1889, the first *Congrès spirite et spiritualiste* (“Spirit and Spiritualist Congress”) had representatives from fifty towns and cities; new international occult networks were forged; and—significantly—Spiritist/occult phenomena like trance writing, moving objects, and hypnotism underwent new scientific investigations by “elite researchers” from the fields of “physics, chemistry, physiology, medicine, literature, and philosophy”.⁵⁴

This last development in particular was promising for Spiritualists, as the nascent field of psychical research had yet to settle into its eventual, more orderly division among physiologists, neurologists, neuroanatomists, psychiatrists, psychologists, and philosophers.⁵⁵ Emerging in the 1880s as a study of “mental phenomena” like hypnotism, somnambulism, hysteria, and trance writing, psychical research in France was developed by Jean-Martin Charcot, a major influence on Freud.⁵⁶ According to Brady Brower, psychical research offered “an extreme argument for the autonomy of the mind” by presenting “an investigation of phenomena which are often... attributed to minds apart from material organisms”—like the unconscious.⁵⁷ By 1890, Charcot, along with Charles Richet and Paul Janet, had institutionalized psychical research by founding

⁵³ Mesmerism, or animal magnetism, espoused German doctor Franz Mesmer’s theory of the existence of a “magnetic fluid” possessed by all living things. Connected, like Spiritism, to French utopian theorizations of reincarnation in the 1830s, Mesmerism in the 1880s viewed the serious scientific investigations into the phenomenon of hypnotism as proof that this fluid could be transferred between individuals through hypnosis, in this way enabling the “exercise [of] a sort of psychic power over one another”. See Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment*, 97.

⁵⁴ Sharp, *Secular Spirituality*, 163-174, 178; Monroe, *Laboratories of Faith*, 200-203; Brower, *Unruly Spirits*, xvi.

⁵⁵ Brower, Brady. *Unruly Spirits*, xv-xvi. Charcot was a fundamental skeptic of Spiritism and occultism, although he studied their phenomena extensively over the 1880s, especially hysteria and magnetism.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

the *Société de psychologie physiologique* (“Society of Physiological Psychology”).⁵⁸ It provided “an independent organizational basis for a general psychology” in exploring different scientists’ “experimental, clinical, and philosophical approaches” to the field, and had also sponsored the First International Congress of Physiological Psychology in 1889.⁵⁹ Despite psychical research’s institutionalization in the fin de siècle, cynical public perceptions (residual from the *Procès spirite*) of table rapping, clairvoyance, spirit materializations, and telepathy as “middle-and lower-middle-class religiosity” persisted.⁶⁰

Nonetheless, the discursive visibility in the 1890s of “scientific” psychical study was significant (as symbolized by psychologists, psychiatrists, Spiritists, and occultists all presenting together under one banner at the 1900 fourth international Congress of Psychology).⁶¹ In this context, Gabriel Delanne—a notable contributor to Bézobrazow’s *Revue*—founded the *Revue scientifique et morale du spiritisme* (“Scientific and Moral Review of Spiritism/Spiritualism”);⁶² and while he pursued an ever more ambitious scientific agenda, others, like Leymarie and Léon Denis, emphasized Spiritism’s spiritual and mystical elements, mirroring contemporaneous occult spin-offs from Catholicism such as Papus’ Neo-Martinism and Péladan’s Rosicrucianism.⁶³ The occult movement in France—flourishing amidst more doctrinal freedom, relaxed press laws which facilitated ease of publication, and greater scientific attention—had by Bézobrazow’s 1896 intervention with her “New Religion” at once become both “more scientific and more religious”.⁶⁴

⁵⁸ Brower, *Unruly Spirits*, xix, 41-42.

⁵⁹ Ibid. For the comprehensive history of psychiatry in nineteenth-century France, see Jan Goldstein’s *Console and Classify: The French Psychiatric Profession in the Nineteenth Century* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1987).

⁶⁰ Brower, *Unruly Spirits*, xi.

⁶¹ Sharp, *Secular Spirituality*, 163–178.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid. Although Catholicism had become less hegemonic in French culture and society—best symbolized by its 1890 *Ralliement* (“unity”) policy publicly accepting and supporting the Third Republic’s agenda of *laïcité*—it evidently continued to appeal to adherents of the occult. Rémond, *L’Anticléricalisme*, 173, 197.

⁶⁴ Sharp, *Secular Spirituality*, 163–178.

Arriving at this fertile intellectual moment in 1893, it is likely that Bézobrazow brought with her to Paris already-developed Spiritualist sympathies. Spiritualism had reached Russia by the 1860s from France, particularly appealing to middle and upper-class Russian society (to which Bézobrazow belonged): Tolstoy introduced it into his literature after an 1857 trip to Paris, and in the 1870s, Aleksandr Aksakov—Russia’s pre-eminent Spiritualist—developed a scientific Spiritualism (inspired by Kardec’s empirical *Spiritisme*), which he promoted by founding the journal *Rebus* in 1881, thus moving the concept “out of private parlors and into the press”.⁶⁵ Papus’ works were translated into Russian, attracting a “mass audience”, as the French occult revival in the 1880s was directly “imported” into Russian intellectual circles.⁶⁶ Even more so than in France, the Russians combined Spiritualism with Christian mysticism, personal experience, and native popular culture and practices—fusions the Orthodox Church did not discourage due to its own reliance on Gnostic elements from the sixth century.⁶⁷

Bézobrazow’s intellectual heritage was thus symptomatic of broader elite European culture in the fin de siècle, where national and intellectual boundaries were fluidly negotiated; familiar with France’s intellectual contours, it would have been natural by 1896 for her to embark on a project addressing some of France’s most pronounced anxieties by establishing a “New Religion”. Indeed, the French community of ideas was at the time highly atomized—a phenomenon Bézobrazow herself identified as “the anarchy of thought”, and synonymous with Papus and Péladan’s “conflict”.⁶⁸ For these thinkers, French society was godless, decadent,⁶⁹ and

⁶⁵ Rosenthal, “Introduction” in *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*, 8–9, 12; Maria Carlson, “Fashionable Occultism” in Bernice Rosenthal, ed. *Occultism in Russian and Soviet Culture* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 135-138.

⁶⁶ Rosenthal, “Introduction” in *The Occult in Russian and Soviet Culture*. 8-9.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Bézobrazow, “La Religion nouvelle” in *La Revue des femmes russes* (01 September 1896), 325.

⁶⁹ Ibid. For a fuller portrait of “decadence” in France’s fin de siècle, see Michel Winock’s *Decadence fin-de-siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 2017), and Swart’s *The Sense of Decadence*, which briefly mentions occult interactions with the

polarized with the beginning of the Dreyfus Affair (1894–1906).⁷⁰ By publishing her 1896 treatise on social faith and epistemology, Bézobrazow sought to fill this void and initiate her readers into her own occult episteme—her “New Religion”—thus beginning her attempt to regenerate society.

The essay’s purpose, according to Bézobrazow, was to “reconnect the interrupted thread of antique knowledge” (i.e. ancient religions from the near East) with modern “experimental physiology and its study of unknown physical forces”, seeking—like Papus and Delanne, and in line with the occult practice of concordances⁷¹—to reconcile scientific practice and the “multiplicity” of “diverse religions” into a single, “regenerated”, “*scientific* religion”.⁷² Lamenting the “darkness of [Republican] materiality” in which “the idea of God is... the most controversial”, Bézobrazow argued that Republican materialism was irreconcilable with “systemic truth”—the “renewed knowledge”—revealed by “experimental science”.⁷³

Indeed, scientific theory was integral to Bézobrazow’s entire cosmic view in her *Religion nouvelle*: understanding the universe and the human body, soul, and mind as an aggregate of the same indestructible, regenerative “matter”, she inferred a Mesmerist communicability between these different configurations of the same universal matter.⁷⁴ The “transmission of thoughts” through “different states or degrees of hypnosis”—proven by “phenomenological psychology” and the “experimental demonstrations of the existence of psychic forces”—demonstrated the scientific *fact* that “the mind can receive communications from other paths than the ordinary

trope of “decadence” current across Europe at the time, but most pronounced in Paris. Commonly-held signs of French society’s decadence included rising alcoholism and a declining birthrate. Barrows, *Distorting Mirrors*, 162.

⁷⁰ See: Douglas Johnson, *France and the Dreyfus Affair* (New York: Walker, 1967).

⁷¹ According to Harvey, concordance comprises “one of the defining features of the esoteric tradition”. Concordance entails establishing parallels between epistemological traditions (religious, philosophical, or scientific) “which are then taken as proof of the veracity of [these epistemes’] revelations”, and thus demonstrates the “underlying unity beneath the apparent diversity of world religions”, science, and philosophy. Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment*, 84.

⁷² Bézobrazow, “La Religion nouvelle” in *La Revue des femmes russes* (01 September 1896), 325, 327-28.

⁷³ Ibid. “The most important thing that our century was given to know”, Bézobrazow asserted, was “the examination of the action outside the limits of the psychic body”, thus assigning prime historical importance to current psychical research.

⁷⁴ Bézobrazow, “La Religion nouvelle” in *La Revue des femmes russes* (01 September 1896), 329-331.

paths of the [bodily] organs”.⁷⁵ Thus, Spiritualists could infer both the material and intelligent (spiritual) constitution of the universe because it was located within themselves, too; intelligence, existing “outside of [physical] matter” and only individualized during man’s “terrestrial [corporeal] stage”, was likewise indestructible and regenerative (“pre-existing” the composition and succeeding the decomposition of bodily matter).⁷⁶ In short, physics and physiological science proved Kardec’s Spiritist theories on reincarnation and the continued existence of the spirit after death.⁷⁷ Furthermore, because this knowledge that “man is the image of the universe”—proven by contemporary biological, psychical, and astronomical research on matter—had already been demonstrated for Bézobrazow in “the [esoteric] wisdom of centuries”, modern science also confirmed occult theory.⁷⁸

In *La Religion nouvelle*, Bézobrazow specifically cited “universal Palingenesis”—or the “theory of continued creation [which] gives as its immediate consequence the belief in the preexistence of the soul, in its migrations... towards the door of Divinity”.⁷⁹ Each human soul through Palingenesis sequentially transformed itself across a preordained “series of existences”, “from one nature [world] to another”.⁸⁰ The spirit thus reincarnated according to an “ascensional law” of progress, ultimately achieving perfection and reaching “the door of Divinity”.⁸¹ The ascensional law of reincarnation for Spiritualists entailed a corollary pursuit of progressive *moral* perfection during man’s Earthly existence: thus, Bézobrazow wrote that “the task of man is to...

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Bézobrazow, “La Religion nouvelle” in *La Revue des femmes russes* (01 September 1896), 329-331. Bézobrazow did not exempt current science from criticism, attacking the “agnosticism of modern science, disorganizing for the lure of partial truths the total of Eternal Truth” and “limiting explanation of physical phenomena to physical laws” the act of which “shunned God, shunned the promise and the responsibility carried by the immortal soul”.

⁷⁹ Bézobrazow, “La Religion nouvelle” in *La Revue des femmes russes* (October 1896), 447-48. Palingenesis was a term common to nineteenth century understandings of preordained evolution and reincarnation. Sharp, *Secular Spirituality*, 1.

⁸⁰ Bézobrazow, “La Religion nouvelle” in *La Revue des femmes russes* (October 1896), 334-35, 447-48.

⁸¹ Ibid.

get closer indefinitely to the principle of the perfect by the perfectibility of his actions”.⁸² A Spiritualist in their human life was thus morally obliged to perfect themselves and others—by occult initiation, and by improving the lot of individuals and society through philanthropy.⁸³

This fundamental belief in a “series of existences” and its concomitant moral obligations, originated from Kardec’s Spiritism.⁸⁴ True to the evolution of Spiritualism from Spiritism in the 1880s, however, Bézobrazow’s understanding of reincarnation had also come to assume an esoteric dimension: she wrote that Palingenesis, in its affirmation of the “permanence of the soul” could be located in “the priests of high Egypt”, the “theology of Orpheus and of Pythagoras”—and even archaic Christianity.⁸⁵ She asserted that “the first two teachers of Christianity at its cradle”, namely Matthew and Mark, “believed in the anterior souls of the body in connection with intelligence”, and that their Gospels reflected this belief in reincarnation.⁸⁶

Bézobrazow’s invocation of Christianity was pivotal. She celebrated it as “logically predestined to become the definitive religion of humanity by the moral revolution of a new era”, because its “spirit of universality and perfectibility” was “supported by the [ascensional] order of things”, i.e. perpetual progress realized through reincarnation; “progress”, she wrote, “is in the seed of Christianity”.⁸⁷ By promoting charity, “unity of conscience”, and “the communion of nations”, Christianity in this way shared the same “pulse of spiritual life” as Spiritualism.⁸⁸ At the same time, she argued that contemporary Christianity, (mis)practiced as “dogma” rather than “religion”, was flawed and in need of its dogmatic errors included a clerical misunderstanding of the Gospel, as well as its belief in Hell—a concept incompatible with Spiritualist reincarnation

⁸² Ibid.

⁸³ Sharp, *Secular Spirituality*, 15.

⁸⁴ Bézobrazow, “La Religion nouvelle” in *La Revue des femmes russes* (October 1896), 445.

⁸⁵ Bézobrazow, “La Religion nouvelle” in *La Revue des femmes russes* (October 1896), 447-48.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ Bézobrazow, “La Religion nouvelle” in *La Revue des femmes russes* (October 1896), 452, 455.

and dismissed by Bézobrazow as “anti-physical, anti-moral, thus absurd”.⁸⁹ Only if “applied to social life by knowledge of the universe and of the perfectible”—the knowledge she disseminated in her *Religion nouvelle*—would Christianity succeed in “allying itself to modern civilization”.⁹⁰

In *La Religion nouvelle*, then, Bézobrazow’s polemic on Republican “materialism” and dogmatic Christianity’s misapplication of its truths, alongside her integration of Christianity into a broader Spiritualist and scientific cosmology, attempted to bridge both of the main Christian-Republican divides in the Third Republic: first, through the former’s reformation on Spiritualist terms, the practical, political stakes of *laïcité* would be neutralized—as a Christian Spiritualist “New Religion” would be fundamentally inextricable from modern scientific theory; and second, this very inextricability would address the *epistemological* schism on faith that the *laïcité* debates had only aggravated over the first three decades of the Third Republic—as Spiritualist faith entailed belief in the scientifically “real”, in the objective order of the universe, and to deny this belief as a Republican would be to deny scientific empiricism.

However, Bézobrazow was also conscious of the inadequacy of her “New Religion” alone to regenerate French society—even if realized on the exact Spiritualist terms proposed in her treatise. In *La Religion nouvelle*, she wrote that her Spiritualism reconciled the “insurmountable contradiction” of “the Justice of Reason and the Justice of Faith”, thereby establishing *moral* justice and obeying “the law of progress”.⁹¹ But Bézobrazow knew that progress, integral to her moral cosmology—and even if an adequate antidote to the godless decadence bemoaned by Péladan—entailed not simply reincarnation and the individual improvement of self on earth;⁹² it

⁸⁹ Bézobrazow, *La Religion nouvelle* in *La Revue des femmes russes* (October 1896), 450.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² The idea of a “cult of progress” was particularly pronounced in nineteenth-century France, with Sharp describing the idea as a popular “obsession”. See Sharp, *Secular Spirituality*, introduction, 1-61; Swart, *The Sense of Decadence*. In *La Religion nouvelle* Bézobrazow even deified progress as “God Progress”. Bézobrazow, “La Religion nouvelle” in *La Revue des femmes russes* (October 1896), 453.

connoted also broader societal improvement, which could not be effected by an individual, acting without others. In other words, moral justice needed to be complemented by social justice. The feminist periodical in which she published this essay suggests she had already identified a worthy doctrine to supplement Spiritualism in the endeavor of regenerating society. Bézobrazow's "New Religion" would need also a "New Woman."

Chapter 2: A New Woman: Feminisms of France's Fin de Siècle

In April 1896, Paris hosted a seminal International Feminist Congress, in which present and future spearheads of the French feminist movement witnessed “the first thorough airing of many militant feminist positions”.⁹³ These included abortion rights, sexual independence through *union libre* (“free union”) and, for the first time at any such congress, women’s suffrage. Although all were ultimately rejected in favor of more familiar and moderate claims for women’s social rights in education and the workplace, the vigorous contestation of such radical issues evinced the fervent ideological conflict within an already divided feminist movement. Indeed, the other significant consequence of the 1896 Congress would be its inspiration to action (akin to veritable “conversion experiences”) of fin-de-siècle France’s three most important feminists—Marguerite Durand, Marie Maugeret, and Clotilde Dissard. These figures would establish publications, organizations, and doctrines respectively, through which they articulated their very different visions of the *question féminine* and the role of women in French society.

Just one month after the Congress, Bézobrazow and Dissard initiated in the first publication of the *Revue* a recurring “sociological inquest” into “feminism from a sociological point of view”, which featured in every subsequent edition. This inquest enabled contributors from diverse ideological, national, and cultural backgrounds to provide different answers to questions formulated by Bézobrazow and Dissard concerning women’s rights from the civic, legal, and moral perspectives, to the end of a formulation of universal “human rights”.⁹⁴ For the ambitious Bézobrazow, this collectively-defined formulation would resolve “the current state of division” within 1890s French society and between European nations, thus producing a

⁹³ Waelti-Walters and Hause, *Feminisms*, 29.

⁹⁴La Direction, *Enquête sur le féminisme au point de vue sociologique* in *La Revue des femmes russes*, (May 1896 and July 1896), 129.

“universal peace”.⁹⁵ Shortly thereafter, Bézobrazow would also publish across three editions of the *Revue* her first novella, a self-styled “sociological novel” entitled *La Femme nouvelle* (“the New Woman”), directly referencing the eponymous phenomenon that gripped the French consciousness in 1896 and reflecting its intense anxieties over changing gender roles.

To address these issues and their importance at the time, we need to understand their roots. Nineteenth-century French feminism tentatively originated in the Revolutionary writings of de Gouges and Condorcet, women’s exclusion from citizenship in the 1791 and 1793 constitutions, and the 1804 proclamation of the Napoleonic Code which wrote into law women’s status as “perpetual [civil] minors” until marriage (engendering new forms of servitude itself).⁹⁶ The authority of “two millennia of Roman legal tradition” enshrined in the Napoleonic Code permeated French “institutions and mores” throughout the entirety of the century; the Code embodied, along with *laïcité*, the defining foundations of Republican socio-legal theory and practice.⁹⁷ In the 1830s and 1840s, French feminism organized ideologically, under Saint-Simonians and utopian socialists, with the term “*féminisme*” being deployed for the first time.⁹⁸ Criticizing patriarchal society, these intellectuals called for greater economic and sexual freedom for women and campaigned for their educational rights; they achieved partial success with the 1836 Pelet Law, which enabled the establishment of elementary schools for girls and significantly increased female literacy.⁹⁹

Such moderate gains for French women were nonetheless sparse over the first half of the nineteenth century and especially during the conservative Second Empire (1852-1870). A consistently vocal and visible women’s movement only emerged in the Third Republic under the

⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁹⁶ See Article 1124 of the Napoleonic Code. Hause, *Women’s Suffrage*, 3-6, 23; Rochefort and Klejman, *L’Égalité*, 24.

⁹⁷ Hause, *Women’s Suffrage*, 20.

⁹⁸ Waelti-Walters and Hause, *Feminisms*, 2.

⁹⁹ Hause, *Women’s Suffrage*, 6-7; Waelti-Walters and Hause, *Feminisms*, 55-56.

guidance of Léon Richer and Maria Deraismes—considered French feminism’s founding figures. The 1870s witnessed the first two women’s rights organizations and an International Feminist Congress held in Paris.¹⁰⁰ In 1876, the militant Hubertine Auclert broke away to form the *Droit des Femmes* (Women’s Rights) because of Richer and Deraismes’ unwillingness to formally endorse women’s suffrage.¹⁰¹ Auclert’s ceaseless campaigning through letter-writing and her journal *La Citoyenne* (1881-1891) rendered the 1880s the discursive “epoch of suffrage activism”—although suffrage was a concept so radical in France at the time that it was still disavowed by most feminists.¹⁰² Moreover, while Auclert identified with Republicans’ rational anticlericalism and belief in a fundamental set of rights, she openly abhorred the “lie” they practiced in denying women those same rights, and was thus isolated from them.¹⁰³

By contrast, Richer and Deraismes’ more reserved platform of “social feminism” sympathized with women’s right to the vote but denied French society’s (and the political Republic’s) readiness for such change. In the press and in congresses, they still called for significant reforms for women—in their educational, vocational, and economic status, in their domestic and workplace prospects and conditions, and in the Napoleonic Code.¹⁰⁴ Richer and Deraismes’ social feminism enjoyed broader appeal than Auclert’s suffragism, particularly among the urban bourgeoisie, and experienced concrete success: in 1880, as part of the Ferry Education Laws, the Camille Sée Law was passed, establishing a State system of secular public

¹⁰⁰ Those organizations were Richer’s “French League for the Rights of Women” and Deraismes’ “Society for the Improvement of the Woman’s Destiny”. Marilyn Boxer, “‘First Wave’ Feminism In Nineteenth-Century France: Class, Family and Religion”. *Women’s Studies Int. Forum* 5, No. 6, (1982), 553

¹⁰¹ Scott writes about how Auclert, one of the Republic’s fiercest critics and antagonists, accepted its “reverence for rationalism, positivism, secularism, and science” but simultaneously refused to pay her taxes “on the grounds that she was denied her rights”, illegally ran for office, and boycotted the census. Scott, *Only Paradoxes*, 103.

¹⁰² Scott, *Only Paradoxes*, 102; Hause, *Women’s Suffrage*, 9.

¹⁰³ Scott, *Only Paradoxes*, 90-103.

¹⁰⁴ Social feminists, according to Hause, “came to feminism through years of work in philanthropy” and brought with them campaigns against moral and national degeneration, supporting pacifism and opposing alcoholism, tobacco, pornography, and the poor treatment of prostitutes. They did not appeal to militants like Auclert, but successfully drew non-feminist organizations and moderates to feminism. Hause, *Women’s Suffrage*, 8, 25-26.

mass education for girls that was free and mandatory at an elementary level and optional at a (heretofore unavailable) secondary level. In 1884, meanwhile, legislation made penalties for adultery the same for men and women, and also gave women the option of initiating divorce proceedings unilaterally.¹⁰⁵ (Universal suffrage, meanwhile, was only achieved in 1945).

But due to retirement, death, and marriage respectively, Richer's, Deraismes', and Auclert's primacy in the women's rights movement ended in the early 1890s, ushering in a new era for French feminism.¹⁰⁶ The feminism of the turn of the century was splintered organizationally and ideologically, but flourished in the popular imagination thanks to an emergent mass culture, driven largely by press publications.¹⁰⁷ The *question féminine* thus became integral to French discourse in the 1890s; it was addressed in (and generated) a diverse wealth of writings, *salon*-style societies, congresses, and heated polemics in the press and Senate.¹⁰⁸ It became as pervasive a domain of Third Republic intellectual contest as that of religion and anticlericalism—and like occultists, France's women's rights advocates faced the dilemma of challenging and reforming Republican attitudes without appearing to threaten the fragile Republic reeling from the Boulangist coup attempt of 1889 and the Dreyfus affair.¹⁰⁹

However, feminism as a *movement*, rather than a *discourse*, remained relatively marginal until Marie Maugeret's establishment of a popular "Christian Feminism" in 1896 and the renowned former actress, Boulangist propagandist, and *femme de société* Marguerite Durand's creation of the all-female daily *La Fronde*, in December 1897.¹¹⁰ Both women had attended the

¹⁰⁵ Karen Offen, "The Second Sex and the Baccalauréat in Republican France, 1880-1924". *French Historical Studies*, 13, No. 2 (1983), 252-254.

¹⁰⁶ Waelti-Walters and Hause, *Feminisms*, 119.

¹⁰⁷ Hause, *Women's Suffrage*, 29.

¹⁰⁸ Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*, 6, 11, 132; Waelti-Walters and Hause, *Feminisms*, 4, 7, 56.

¹⁰⁹ Scott, *Only Paradoxes*, 101-106.

¹¹⁰ *La Fronde* generated constant attention and uproar within the Parisian press, and was an integral point of the fin-de-siècle feminist scene. Its staff included lawyer Jeanne Chauvin, one of the first women admitted to the Paris Bar,

April 1896 International Feminist Congress; and Maugeret, horrified by its “preponderance of socialists and freethinkers” and their radical subject matter, founded a periodical entitled *Féminisme Chrétien* and an eponymous organization one year later, thus creating a countermovement of “real” feminism grounded in Christian principles and doctrine.¹¹¹ Maugeret was anxious about the Third Republic’s growing anti-clericalism, the “national drift toward paganism” (i.e. the occult resurgence), and much of Republican feminism’s social program—which advocated not only freer divorce but also birth control, and even at the extreme abortion.¹¹² Catholic feminists did nevertheless demand many civil rights for women, including (remarkably) the vote, while underscoring the significance of equality in education, women’s right to work, paternity suits, and the revision of marriage contracts.¹¹³ As a Catholic movement, *Féminisme Chrétien* unsurprisingly rejected Republicanism and the Napoleonic Code.¹¹⁴

By contrast, Durand’s feminism was resolutely bourgeois and Republican. Describing the 1896 Congress as a transformative moment in her life, Durand opposed, like Richer and Deraismes, the vote for women out of the Republican fear that women were still too influenced by the church to “objectively” exercise a democratic duty.¹¹⁵ (She did, however, provide the platform for ardent suffragists to argue their case in *La Fronde*.) Mary Louise Roberts compellingly demonstrates Durand’s curation of a bourgeois “feminist aesthetics” in *La Fronde*—for example, in her politicization of “dress, charm, beauty” for feminist ends, and her use of an all-female workforce at the newspaper.¹¹⁶

and Clemence Royer, the first woman to teach at the Sorbonne; contributors included Nelly Roussel, Madeleine Pelletier, and Clotilde Dissard. Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*, 46.

¹¹¹ Waelti-Walters and Hause, *Feminisms*, 4-6, 62-66; Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*, 58.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Hause, *Women’s Suffrage*, 30; Waelti-Walters and Hause, *Feminisms*, 62-66.

¹¹⁴ Boxer, “First-Wave”, 557.

¹¹⁵ Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*, 50.

¹¹⁶ Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*, 51-74.

Whether or not the 1896 Congress produced a similar personal revelation for Bézobrazow is difficult to know, but she evidently sensed enough of an opportunity in the moment to launch her *Revue* that same year, inserting her unique voice into France’s feminist debates of the time while informing her predominantly French audience of feminist developments in her Russian homeland. The “sociological inquest” which she had launched from the *Revue*’s first edition provided her with a useful entry point into the press and the Parisian discursive *milieu*. As Christophe Charle notes, the form of *enquêtes* (“inquests”) was common practice for “new reviews” in the Parisian press, as the format facilitated contact with “dominant personalities” in the intellectual scene, thus attracting public attention.¹¹⁷

Bézobrazow’s sociological inquest emphasized the significance of the *question féminine*’s emergence from “words” “to come alive and move in [current French] society itself”.¹¹⁸ It had a conciliatory framework, in that its intended formulation of a clearly-defined “human rights” would enable a “step by step” societal evolution towards “universal peace replacing the current state of division [on the *question féminine*]”.¹¹⁹ In the inquest, Bézobrazow and Clotilde Dissard—herself the pioneering director of the popular *Revue féministe* (Feminist Review) and a leading figure of the French feminist scene—posed four basic questions on the *question féminine* which “a diversity of high minds” were to answer:

- I. *What role do women play in social evolution?*
- II. *What are the reforms that the woman is entitled to claim in the civil code?*
- III. *By what means can women contribute to the elaboration of laws?*
- IV. *How will women remake society?*¹²⁰

¹¹⁷ Charle, *Paris fin-de-siècle*, 93.

¹¹⁸ La Direction, *Enquête sur le féminisme au point de vue sociologique* in *La Revue des femmes russes*, (May 1896 and July 1896), 129.

¹¹⁹ La Direction, *Enquête sur le féminisme au point de vue sociologique* in *La Revue des femmes russes*, (May 1896 and July 1896), 129.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*

Over the ensuing nine months, respondents included the future Nobel Prize winning pacifist Frederic Passy, established French feminists such as Deraismes’ “intellectual mother”—her older sister Feresse—and the movement’s first historian, Leopold Lacour, and many from the French occult scenes, most notably Delanne. Unsurprisingly, a wide variety of beliefs was in evidence: Lacour and the feminist Spiritualist Julia Becours (under the pseudonym Paul Grendel) both asserted that women’s exercise of political rights was “of little use” and even “dangerous” because of their supposed “blind faith” in the clergy, whereas Deraismes endorsed women’s suffrage as imperative for society’s moral development.¹²¹ The pacifist Thiaudière criticised the term *féminisme* as implying a doctrine of female superiority to men, whereas Jean Bernard countered that it connoted “equality of woman next to man, wife next to husband”.¹²² Delanne and d’Ervioux—like Bézobrazow—understood women’s freedom in terms of the Spiritualist project of social regeneration and the search for a “new faith”, while the Russians Pierre de Kapnist and M. Kouznetsoff saw women’s equality resting “in the forgotten principles of Jesus” and Christianity’s theologically egalitarian principles.¹²³

Generally, however, the inquest’s overwhelming tenor—set by Bézobrazow and Dissard—was bourgeois and Republican.¹²⁴ The principles of women’s equality were predominantly advocated in terms of science, the Revolutionary values of universal equality, historical continuities with such figures as Joan of Arc, and/or the need for domestic equilibrium as part of the Republican vision of separate, gendered, private-public spheres. The goals cited most frequently included comprehensively reforming (or abolishing) the Napoleonic Code

¹²¹ Lacour, Grendel, and Deraismes, *Le Féminisme au point de vue sociologique* in *La Revue des femmes russes* (July 1896), 132, 138, 141, 156; (February 1897), 29, 32.

¹²² Thiaudière and Bernard, *Le Féminisme au point de vue sociologique* in *La Revue des femmes russes* (July 1896), 143, and (February 1897), 12-13.

¹²³ Delanne, d’Ervioux, de Kapnist, and Kouznetsoff, *Le Féminisme au point de vue sociologique* in *La Revue des femmes russes* (September 1896), 309; (October 1896), 401; (February 1897), 19; and (April 1897), 203-08.

¹²⁴ At the same time in Russia the conception of women’s rights was equally grounded in bourgeois values of domesticity, maternity, and the family. See Engel, *Mothers and Daughters*, 6-19

(indeed, the inquest's questions took such an aim as a given); the right for women to freely exercise any and every profession, and hold title to their own property, wages and savings; increased political enfranchisement of widows and spinsters; and, most importantly, better access to meaningful education. Improved education was seen as integral to French women's societal advancement in its increase of their moral, spiritual, and familial powers.

The *Revue's* contributors were thus invested to a large degree in what has been termed “familial feminism”—a French feminist ideology coined by Dissard that accepted “the sexual division of labor in society and the family” and used the idea of “equality in difference” to improve women's assigned role in the home.¹²⁵ Rejecting the quixotic suffragism of Auclert, familial feminism sought to create a feminism which invested both with set domestic duties and with the values of philanthropy, class solidarity, and nationalist sentiment.¹²⁶ It supported *l'enseignement ménagère* (education from the home) but espoused equal educational opportunities and equal treatment of working women in French institutions.¹²⁷

Dissard, a self-styled sociologist, participated in the seminal 1896 Congress, and would cement her prominence in the fin-de-siècle feminist movement after the *Revue's* cessation by regularly contributing pieces to *La Fronde* supporting “familial feminism”. She presented in those articles a vision of the Republican Frenchwoman in the “traditional imagery” of nineteenth century gender norms, with woman as the “naturally” more “compassionate”, “moral” sex.¹²⁸ She endorsed “womanly concerns” about alcoholism, “the poor and children”, and celebrated motherhood and marriage.¹²⁹ Within her push for better education for women, including their

¹²⁵ Deborah Silverman, “The ‘New Woman’, Feminism, and the Decorative Arts in Fin-de-Siècle France”, in Lynn Hunt, ed. *Eroticism and the Body Politic*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 148.

¹²⁶ Rochefort and Klejman, *L'Égalité en marche*, 105-06; Silverman, “New Woman”, 155.

¹²⁷ Dissard, *Les Écoles ménagères n'ont pas de sanction!* in *La Revue des femmes russes* (01 September 1896); Offen, “Second Sex”, 269.

¹²⁸ Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*, 101.

¹²⁹ Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*, 104; Hause and Kenny, *Women's Suffrage*, 24-25.

preparation for the *baccalaureat* (the only degree giving access to higher university studies), she included advocacy of “practical” courses “of an elevated [moral] character” like cooking, hygiene, and domestic economy.¹³⁰ In its embrace of the Republican catchphrase, “*la femme au foyer*” (the woman in the house), Dissard’s familial feminism was proposed in terms at once didactic, logistical, and political.¹³¹

While Dissard defined the contours of familial feminism, Bézobrazow in her own writings in the *Revue* pointed it in unique and new directions. The result was a hybrid feminism that unified narrative fiction with Spiritualist theory to produce a nascent vision of a Spiritualist-Feminist doctrine, beginning with the serialization of *La Femme nouvelle* over three 1896 editions of the *Revue*. Set in rural Russia in 1874, it tracks in diary form a “melancholic” young nobleman painter’s development of feelings for a Femme Nouvelle, Vera Petrowna.¹³² Petrowna professes a reciprocal love for the narrator but renounces the possibility ever of acting on it because of her adamant belief as a Femme Nouvelle in the necessity of an independent mind, spirit, and body. Enlisting in a convent to preserve her integrity, she is overcome by the emotion of her declaration of love and dies tragically young from weakness of heart.

Indeed, one of the first aspects to note about Bézobrazow’s novel is its non-French setting: Vera Petrowna is a Russian, a former nihilist, and a lawyer who having studied in Switzerland has returned to her motherland and renounced her noble origins.¹³³ Bézobrazow’s own identity as an aristocratic Russian expatriate obviously cannot be overlooked in her choice of nationality, class, setting and strain of feminism. Her sense of womanhood and women’s rights would have been strongly tied to family relations and upper-middle-class conceptions of

¹³⁰ Dissard, *Les Études secondaires de jeunes filles n’ont pas de sanction!* in *La Revue des femmes russes* (01 September 1896), 430-432 and *Les Écoles ménagères* in *La Revue des femmes russes* (01 September 1896), 337-339.

¹³¹ Rochefort and Klejman, *L’Égalité en marche*, 106.

¹³² Bézobrazow, *La Femme nouvelle* in *La Revue des femmes russes* (July 1896), 33-34.

¹³³ Bézobrazow, *La Femme nouvelle* in *La Revue des femmes russes* (July 1896), 36, 7.

female domesticity.¹³⁴ Hence, the decision to obliquely engage French feminist debates through a Russian setting in her novella appears to have seemed natural to her—or at the very least, aligned with her own background. However, her presentation of the story to a predominantly *French* public through the French press, in the French language, on a contested issue current to France, nonetheless represented a conscious statement. Perhaps France and Russia’s long, rich history of intellectual exchange—particularly the transcultural, Francophilic attitudes of such Russian aristocrats as Bézobrazow (educated in French and likely to have spoken the language with her family)—would have softened the disconnect of addressing broader European discourses through Russian subject matter in a French periodical.¹³⁵

Moreover, in the 1890s, after Eugène Melchior de Vogüé’s popular 1886 work *The Russian Novel* had “discovered” the works of Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky for the French public, Bézobrazow’s novella would certainly have been exciting and wholly accessible to the French reading audience, providing her with both a commercial and an intellectual opening.¹³⁶ This was at the potential cost, of course, of confirming the stereotype of the *Femme Nouvelle* as an alien import: according to Mary-Louise Roberts, “New Women” were seen as arriving in Paris as “pitiful, gnarled travelers with huge chips on their shoulders” from America, Britain, or “the Slavic East” to “study medicine, attend feminist congresses, establish women’s schools, and above all, corrupt the souls of nice French girls”.¹³⁷

Of course, in titling her work *La Femme nouvelle*, Bézobrazow identified it explicitly with this phenomenological figure: “New Woman”. Her decision represented a historically and

¹³⁴ Engel, *Mothers and Daughters*, 6-19

¹³⁵ Engel, *Mothers and Daughters*, 3, 15-17.

¹³⁶ Charle, *Paris fin-de-siècle*, 179-182

¹³⁷ The *Femme Nouvelle* was seen to challenge “Frenchness” to such an extent that Roberts claims Durand’s chief aim (and success) in founding *La Fronde* in 1897 was to create in the *frondeuse* a distinctively “more French, more feminine, and more attractive” *Femme Nouvelle*. Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*, 25, 44-45.

socially pointed statement in France (and in Russia¹³⁸) in 1896: Roberts and Deborah Silverman have both demonstrated how the “New Woman” by the mid-1890s represented in the French cultural consciousness a threat to the Rousseauian bourgeois “ideology of womanhood”—the same ideal of “natural” femininity espoused by familial feminists, which structured “the very foundations of [French] society”.¹³⁹ The *Femme Nouvelle* emerged as a largely urban, middle-class woman choosing to remain single or enter a non-traditional marriage (*union libre*), to work in traditionally male-coded professions like medicine, law, and journalism, and for many to also actively fight for women’s emancipation through feminism.¹⁴⁰

From 1897, *Femmes Nouvelles* would become embodied by the all-women staff of Durand’s *La Fronde* newspaper (“*frondeuses*”, as they would come to be known), whose status as independent female journalists inherently challenged a previously masculinized sphere of work.¹⁴¹ However, such women were never a collectively self-conceived group or movement, rather being defined by their largely hostile reception by the French public and press, who projected their anxieties about women’s changing roles onto this small class of mobile and independent individuals.¹⁴² Against the backdrop of a depopulation crisis, increased feminist mobilization, and general political insecurity within the Third Republic, *Femmes Nouvelles* were seen and portrayed as “man-hating amazons” undermining not simply traditional gender

¹³⁸ The “New Woman” was also a discursive subject in indigenous Russian literature at this very moment. See Rosenholm, Aria, and Irina Savkina “‘How Women Should Write’: Russian Women’s Writing in the Nineteenth Century” in Rosslyn, Wendy, and Alessandra Tosi, ed. *Women in nineteenth-century Russia: lives and culture* (Cambridge: OpenBook Publishers, 2012), 197-200

¹³⁹ Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*, 3–46; Silverman, “The New Woman”, 145-50.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁴² The *Femmes Nouvelles*, according to Roberts, “only rarely invoked a domestic self in their writings”, thus diverging from popular “familial feminist” arguments for women’s legal and political rights couched “in their roles as domestic wives and mothers.” *Femmes Nouvelles* and bourgeois feminists also differed in the latter’s privileging of “national and maternal duties above the claims of the individual.” Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*, 8. Silverman, “The New Woman”, 154.

codes, but indeed the very foundations of French cultural and social identity, the nation, itself.¹⁴³ The fact that the *Femme Nouvelle* often adopted “aristocratic traditions” and was universally perceived as a foreign “import” from Anglophone or Slavic countries only furthered these perceptions.¹⁴⁴ Roberts hence identifies Bézobrazow’s 1896 work as illustrative of the “enormous discursive fixation” in current French society upon the *Femme Nouvelle*.¹⁴⁵

Bézobrazow’s work was thus at the vanguard of new journalistic, literary, and theatrical depictions of the *Femme Nouvelle* during its “banner year”, 1896.¹⁴⁶ Contrary, however, to the common understandings of the *Femme Nouvelle* as a social menace in this moment, Vera Petrowna actually conforms to many of the Republican and familial feminist social precedents that she as a *Femme Nouvelle* ostensibly threatened. She defines her purpose as fighting “against the unjust prejudice” denying women “independence of mind”, echoing the familial feminist belief in the primacy of education.¹⁴⁷ Countering the narrator’s accusation that *Femmes Nouvelles* (the supposed “aspirants to the feminist movement”) are going “out of their way to do without the man”, she asserts that “the real emancipation of the woman... is in the emancipation of desires and of the selfishness of the man”.¹⁴⁸ In this way, she rejects not the institutions of marriage or male-female partnership per se (as the *Femme Nouvelle* was assumed to do), but rather the moral terms of their current manifestation. Moreover, Petrowna also explicitly situates

¹⁴³ Silverman writes that the *Femme Nouvelle*’s aims of “independence and education rather than marriage and home, were interjected into a context where the issues of maternity and family were fraught with special political and national significance.” Silverman, “The New Woman”, 149-50; Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*, 3-8.

¹⁴⁴ In Great Britain, the neologism “New Woman” was first coined by the journalist Sarah Grand in 1894, and had according to Roberts “as much to do with race as with gender, as she used it to push for female sexual purity and eugenics as guarantors of the Empire’s future.” Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*, 5-7, 10, 20-23.

¹⁴⁵ Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*, 23.

¹⁴⁶ This “flood of literature” starting 1896 included occultist Jules Bois’ *L’Eve nouvelle* (1896) (“The New Eve”), Victor and Paul Margueritte’s *Femmes nouvelles* (1899), Marcel Prevost’s *Les Vierges fortes* (1900) (“The Strong Virgins”), and Albert Cim’s *Emancipées* (1899) (“Emancipated Women”). Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*, 23-28, 31.

¹⁴⁷ Bézobrazow, *La Femme nouvelle* in *La Revue des femmes russes* (July 1896), 45.

¹⁴⁸ Bézobrazow, *La Femme nouvelle* in *La Revue des femmes russes* (July 1896-August 1896), 56-57. Roberts, by contrast, claims that the *Femme Nouvelle* never justified her claims to independence “in terms of her moral influence as wife and mother, as did [familial] feminists.” Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*, 21.

the *Femme Nouvelle* in a familial feminist matrix of education and morality: pushing back against stereotype, Petrowna asserts that the *Femme Nouvelle* simply seeks “the development of her faculties independently” of marriage—rather than free love or “pretexts for adventure”.¹⁴⁹ She repudiates the “education of a knowledgeable doll” driving “the majority of young girls to search in marriage an assured position and external advantages”—a critique of the institutional structures *driving* poorly-educated girls to marriage, not the ontology of marriage itself.¹⁵⁰

Petrowna’s other feminist beliefs are progressive: she wants women to “unionize themselves for their upliftment”, to enjoy an equal salary, and quite radically, to win universal suffrage, without which humanity “will delay indefinitely its perfection”.¹⁵¹ But even these progressive beliefs are imbued with the same moralizing force of familial feminism: Petrowna states that she views the *question féminine* as “the *soul* of the possible improvement of the human species”.¹⁵² Even if the material advancement of women juridically and politically enfranchisement were achieved, if it were not accompanied by the “improvement of the consciences”, then the work of Civilization [would] be without guarantee”.¹⁵³ The *Femme Nouvelle*’s purpose, in fighting “social evil in the name of love”, is for Petrowna quintessentially moral.¹⁵⁴ Evidently, feminism for this *Femme Nouvelle* embodies the grander purpose of being “simultaneously the author and the subject of [humanity’s] progress”.¹⁵⁵

This grandiose moral vision of progress cannot but be linked to Bézobrazow’s Spiritualist belief system. Petrowna develops her feminist idiom within the classic Spiritualist values of social Palingenesis—of sequential social self-perfection individually and

¹⁴⁹ Bézobrazow, *La Femme nouvelle* in *La Revue des femmes russes* (July 1896-August 1896), 171.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

¹⁵¹ Bézobrazow, *La Femme nouvelle* in *La Revue des femmes russes* (July 1896-August 1896), 77-78.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*

¹⁵³ Bézobrazow, *La Femme nouvelle* in *La Revue des femmes russes* (July 1896-August 1896), 55, 64.

¹⁵⁴ Bézobrazow, *La Femme nouvelle* in *La Revue des femmes russes* (July 1896-August 1896), 71.

¹⁵⁵ Bézobrazow, *La Femme nouvelle* in *La Revue des femmes russes* (July 1896-August 1896), 80.

collectively.¹⁵⁶ She states that humanity’s “final goal is [its] ascension... towards a new existence” and that “a social reorganization” in which women are intellectually equal to men represents the first step to achieving societal perfection.¹⁵⁷ The role of the *Femme Nouvelle* is similarly Spiritualist: to fight current society’s “scission of souls” divided across gender lines.¹⁵⁸ On her deathbed Petrowna delivers a final testament of sorts, stating that she has “faith in *another day* [emphasis added]”, and consoling the narrator by optimistically claiming that their souls will meet again in a subsequent life: “By death, we return to life”.¹⁵⁹

Where religion and faith are concerned, there are clear echoes of Bézobrazow’s *La Religion nouvelle* (see Chapter 1). Petrowna rejects both the “political apocalypse” of nihilism for its “materialism [which] leads to nothing and explains nothing”, and the “old dogmas” of *official* Christianity, whose limitations have been exposed by an era of science, materialist atheism, and continued social inequality and moral decay (i.e., “poverty and evil”).¹⁶⁰ Christianity should not be dismissed, because the “life-giving reality” of the Gospel is humanity’s “basis of consciousness”; it is up to *Femmes Nouvelles* to “resurrect [the Gospel’s] spirit” by following “the law of evolution”, and affirming “the immortality of causes”.¹⁶¹

In this way, Bézobrazow transplanted her Spiritualist *Religion nouvelle* into her feminist *Femme Nouvelle*, achieving a synthesis of these principles in her earliest work of prose fiction. By the beginning of 1897, this hybrid of systems would become crystallized and deliberate, as she gradually transformed in the *Revue* Spiritualist Feminism into a unified, coherent doctrine.

¹⁵⁶ Bézobrazow, *La Femme nouvelle* in *La Revue des femmes russes* (July 1896-August 1896), 55, 79; Sharp, *Secular Spirituality*, 21-24.

¹⁵⁷ Bézobrazow, *La Femme nouvelle* in *La Revue des femmes russes* (July 1896-August 1896), 55.

¹⁵⁸ Bézobrazow, *La Femme nouvelle* in *La Revue des femmes russes* (July 1896-August 1896), 79, 171.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁰ Bézobrazow, *La Femme nouvelle* in *La Revue des femmes russes* (July 1896-August 1896), 43-44.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.* The laws of evolution would have confirmed for Spiritualists like Petrowna (and Bézobrazow) not simply the theory of Palingenesis, but also the sequential progression of an immortal soul towards ultimate perfection.

Chapter 3: *Humanité Intégrale*: Synthesized Spiritualism and Feminism

In February 1897, Bézobrazow published the *Revue*'s first edition of that year under a modified title, *La Revue des femmes russes et des femmes françaises (organe international de science, art, moral)* from *La Revue des femmes russes (organe du féminisme internationale)*. The “new” *Revue* now also bore an epigraph: *humanité intégrale!*—which can be roughly translated and understood as “humanity in its totality”, or “complete humanity”. In its universalizing invocation of a total “humanity”, *humanité intégrale* symbolized a broadening of the journal’s intellectual scope—as did its repositioning as a “review of art, science, morals” for Russian *and* French women.

This shift was more than just rhetorical, representing a subtle but key evolution in Bézobrazow’s intellectual path towards a unique Spiritualist Feminism. In particular, the notion of *humanité intégrale* from this moment assumed a key role in fusing feminism and Spiritualism into a single doctrine; it became the conceptual pivot around which both feminism and Spiritualism turned. By the conclusion of the *Revue* in April 1897, both Bézobrazow and her collaborators had deployed the neologism in their writings to denote the formalization of this synthesis; for example, in her concluding notes to her “sociological inquest” in the *Revue*'s final edition, she asserted that “the [true] freedom of our civilization” could only be viewed “within the consciousness of *humanité intégrale*, of gender equality”.¹⁶² Featuring on the front page of each 1897 publication of the *Revue*, and with its exclamation point, the neologism could also be understood as a term of action—a propagandistic call-to-arms for its readers to spread the Spiritualist Feminist Word: *Humanité Intégrale!*

¹⁶² Bézobrazow, *Le Féminisme au point de vue sociologique: fin de l'enquête* in *La Revue des femmes russes* (April 1897), 209.

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Humanité Intégrale!

V. GIARD ET BRIÈRE
ÉDITEURS

Abonnements et Vente au numéro

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et dans les Gares de Chemins de fer.*

Fig. III: Cover page of the April 1897 edition of the revue, bearing the epigraph 'Humanité Intégrale!'

The term itself was not invented by Bézobrazow, but emerged more widely in France’s intellectual *milieu* in the mid-1890s, first appearing in December 1895 as the title of occultist Camille Chaigneau’s periodical, “*Humanité intégrale*: immortalist organ”, to denote “the totality of the living and the dead”.¹⁶³ It thus originated in occult circles to describe the belief in the indestructibility of the human soul, which did not die with the human body but rather continued to “live a life beyond earth”.¹⁶⁴ Its second recorded use, however, was in an exclusively feminist context: at the seminal April 1896 Feminist Congress, it was deployed in modified form as *humanisme intégrale* by the feminist, historian, socialist, and contributor to the *Revue*’s September 1896 “sociological inquest”, Leopold Lacour. Lacour had delivered a speech arguing for coeducation, asserting that *humanisme intégrale* as a neologism suited his feminist principles better than *féminisme*.¹⁶⁵ He then recycled the term as the title of his book the following year—*Humanisme intégrale: le duel des sexes – cité future* (“*Humanisme Intégrale: The Duel of the Sexes – Future City*”)—a feminist “treatise of social morality and psychobiological philosophy” which called for the total emancipation of women (including the right to vote), and was tied to the familial feminist vision of the Republican “citizen couple”.¹⁶⁶

Bézobrazow had read both Lacour’s work and Chaigneau’s journal. Chaigneau had exchanged periodicals with her in 1896, while her February 1897 article comparing *Féminismes russes et français* in the *Revue* glowingly cited Lacour’s work as an exemplary feminist work: “the emancipation of women”, she wrote, “is really comprised in *its three states* (psychical, physiological, social) to the ends of this *cité future*” which would “gush forth from the soul of

¹⁶³ Lacour, Léopold. *Humanisme intégrale: le duel des sexes – la cité future*. (Paris: P.V. Stock, 1897), preface.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁶⁵ Klejman and Rochefort, *L’Égalité*, 102; Lacour, *Humanisme intégrale* (1897), preface. Lacour is credited as the “creator of historical feminism” by Klejman and Rochefort. *L’Égalité*, 118.

¹⁶⁶ Waelti-Walters and Hause, *Feminisms*, 197; Klejman and Rochefort, *L’Égalité*, 118.

the liberated woman!”¹⁶⁷ She concluded this essay by asserting that “with relation to the French genius and the Russian genius, the natural action of practical and scientific feminism” was “to maintain minds towards the unity of laws, towards *l’humanisme integrale*”.¹⁶⁸

By this time, Bézobrazow viewed the term *Humanité Intégrale* as essential to her periodical’s mission. And, drawing upon both an occult (in Chaigneau) and a sociological feminist (in Lacour) concept of *Humanité Intégrale*, she melded both to unify feminism with Spiritualism.¹⁶⁹ She would later claim to Chaigneau to have discovered this from the *bouche de la siècle* (“mouth of the century”—i.e., the historical moment of the *fin de siècle*).¹⁷⁰ Combined with her endorsement in the *Revue* of Lacour’s work—which evoked a “future city” arising from the interplay of the sexes—we see that Bézobrazow attached an epochal significance to the term. *Humanité Intégrale*, in her hybrid figuration of the term, had the capacity to yield a new society, a “future [French] city” transcending the seemingly intractable conflicts of the *fin de siècle*.

In the same February 1897 *Revue* publication proclaiming *Humanité Intégrale*, Bézobrazow wrote a seminal treatise “on the legitimacy of female government” titled *Le Matriarcat* (the Matriarchy), which used historical case studies to argue for the competency and even necessity of female political government in society. *Le Matriarcat* was a Spiritualist vindication of the rights of women to participate in the political discourse by “factually” demonstrating the political role of “the prehistoric woman”.¹⁷¹ In her essay, Bézobrazow highlighted the paradox that even though “women’s government [occupied] a vast place in

¹⁶⁷ La Directoire, “Féminismes russes et français” in *La revue des femmes russes et des femmes françaises* (February 1897), 5; Camille Chaigneau, “Correspondances” in *Humanité integrale: organe immortaliste*, Paris, (August 1899), 141.

¹⁶⁸ La Directoire, “Féminismes russes et français” in *La Revue des femmes russes et des Femmes Françaises* (02/1897), 8.

¹⁶⁹ Chaigneau received Bézobrazow’s co-option of *Humanité integrale* frostily, as a publicly-aired 1899 correspondence with Bézobrazow demonstrates. He claimed the “priority of expression as a title” for *Humanité integrale* after reading about Bézobrazow’s frequent use of the term. Chaigneau, “Correspondances”, 141.

¹⁷⁰ Camille Chaigneau, “Correspondances” in *Humanité integrale: organe immortaliste*, Paris, (August 1899), 141.

¹⁷¹ Bézobrazow, “Le Matriarcat” in *La Revue des femmes russes et des Femmes Françaises* (02/1897), 70-71.

history”, current French society, while recognizing the woman’s capacity to *rule*, did not deem her “capable of voting”. Also drawing on familial feminist, Republican logic, she located historical female power in the hearth, claiming that “the family should be the prototype of order [and] social harmony”.¹⁷²

The content of *Le Matriarcat* was also Spiritualist. French occult scholar David Harvey’s concept of the “metahistory” usefully illustrates a Spiritualist component inherent to Bézobrazow’s form. Metahistory, according to Harvey, was an intellectual tendency within Third Republic esoteric doctrines like Spiritualism and Martinism to construct “highly fanciful” historical accounts that sought “less to recount a chronological, fact-based account of the past” than “to present an epic narrative”.¹⁷³ Occult metahistories instead invoked “the authority of history”—as its proponents similarly deployed the authority of science in the 1890s—to deliver a “primarily moral” message.¹⁷⁴ Harvey argues that occult intellectuals used history rhetorically to comment on contemporary events and “social formations”.¹⁷⁵ In this way, metahistories empowered esoteric intellectuals of the fin de siècle like Bézobrazow to make occult narratives more compelling and current for a Third Republic audience.

Indeed, one of the core features of *Le Matriarcat* was its metahistorical pseudo-archaeology of ancient societies’ cult religious and gender-based societal practices. Bézobrazow argued that her genealogy of human society was a simple retrieval of historical “facts” which used to govern the world, and which could be reapplied to morally and socially reorder contemporaneous French society.¹⁷⁶ Briefly, her metahistory argued that female governance in societies had emerged from prehistoric woman’s dominant role during the agricultural

¹⁷² Bézobrazow, “Le Matriarcat” in *La Revue des femmes russes et des Femmes Françaises* (02/1897), 76.

¹⁷³ Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment*, 35-38.

¹⁷⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁷⁶ Bézobrazow, “Le Matriarcat” in *La revue des femmes russes et des femmes françaises* (02/1897), 70-71.

revolution, and with agriculture representing a “more certain source of food than hunting”, the earth had become symbolically conflated with women as society’s “principal guardian of fecundity”.¹⁷⁷ The Egyptians—the first great civilization—had thus divinized women and the earth “in the symbol of the antique Isis”, just as the Greeks would later endow their gods Minerva and Demeter with the roles of “protector of peace” and “founder of agriculture, dispenser of jobs” respectively.¹⁷⁸ From this faith-based system of “economic”, “psychic”, and “moral” governance had emerged the *Matriarcat*, a conjoining of female authority and ancient cultic belief into a moral and institutional framework for governance.¹⁷⁹

This *Matriarcat* also represented a new model for the regeneration of French society, based on the twin pillars of Spiritualism as a “Religion Nouvelle”, and feminism, embodied in the “Femme Nouvelle”—symbiotically acting together as society’s intellectual, economic, legal, and moral anchors.¹⁸⁰ Bézobrazow couched this vision in terms of “human rights”, which she asserted the nineteenth century had uniquely rediscovered (in a likely a nod to the Third Republic’s revolutionary tradition, the Republican declaration of universal male suffrage in 1848, and/or the abolition of slavery in the same year in France and in the 1860s in her native Russia). Human rights, she argued, had to be extended to women, and the cause of current society’s Femmes Nouvelles was thus to “clear the terrain for a new society, based on justice”.¹⁸¹

But, crucially, feminist agitation—and success—would in itself be insufficient unless complemented by adherence to Spiritualism: “the declaration of the Rights of Women and their liberal exercise will not lead to the new era” she noted, unless “destined spiritualists... animate

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Occultism in Europe’s fin de siècle in particular leaned heavily on archaic religions from the Orient, giving special significance to the figures of Isis (Egypt) and Hermes Trismegistus (Greece). Blavatsky titled her foundational Theosophical text “Isis Unveiled” (1877), for example. See: Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment*, and Rosenthal, *Occultism in Modern Russian and Soviet Culture*.

¹⁷⁹ Bézobrazow, “Le Matriarcat” in *La revue des femmes russes et des femmes françaises* (02/1897), 75.

¹⁸⁰ Bézobrazow, “Le Matriarcat” in *La revue des femmes russes et des femmes françaises* (02/1897), 78.

¹⁸¹ Bézobrazow, “Le Matriarcat” in *La revue des femmes russes et des femmes françaises* (02/1897), 75–77.

the light of humanity's heart".¹⁸² For Bézobrazow, Spiritualism was an "eternal science" coming "to enlighten temporal [materialistic] science" through psychical research and her own writings like the *Religion nouvelle*.¹⁸³ Spiritualism would soon be the "pivot of truth" around which the new French society would turn.¹⁸⁴ Once "triumphant of the material law of force", women needed to "stay faithful by the heart and by reason to the Spiritualist law of justice"—the justice of *Humanité Intégrale*.¹⁸⁵ In this way, the New Woman had an additional mission of "spiritualizing", of not only legally (through political activism) but also morally realizing society's progress.¹⁸⁶

Bézobrazow thus argued not just for a fundamental inextricability of the feminist and Spiritualist causes, but for their higher purpose: improving fin-de-siècle society through moral progress. French society was "ripe for understanding, if not for applying", she wrote, "the fusion of these two [feminist and Spiritualist] principles."¹⁸⁷ Bézobrazow's ambitious but concerted attempts to reconcile these different discourses in her works of fiction like *La Femme nouvelle*, her treatises *La Religion nouvelle* and *Le Matriarcat*, and even her *Féminisme au point de vue sociologique*, therefore claimed coherence and significance through the idea of Spiritualist-Feminist *Humanité Intégrale* in a divided fin-de-siècle France.

Having in the 1897 editions of the *Revue* rooted her cause more locally ("*et des femmes françaises*"), and in its contents formulated her intellectual synthesis of feminism and Spiritualism, Bézobrazow would turn increasingly to practical advocacy of her new doctrine. Her activism was so prolific and ambitious that she came to be described as an *apôtre* ("apostle") by fellow Spiritualists, with her works and ideas receiving serious consideration in

¹⁸² Bézobrazow, "Le Matriarcat" in *La revue des femmes russes et des femmes françaises* (02/1897), 78, 79.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid.

this historical moment. As France turned its attention to a new century—and the corresponding possibilities of a new society that this engendered—Bézobrazow, with her increasing influence, sought to exploit her newfound visibility to try and realize such a renovation.

Chapter 4: “The Genius of the Apostolate”—Bézobrazow’s post-*Revue* activity

La Revue des femmes russes et des femmes françaises abruptly concluded as a publication in April 1897. However, the closure of the journal did not represent the end of Bézobrazow’s engagement with the French public, nor even diminish it; indeed, the conclusion of the *Revue* appears to have marked a transition to a more visible, active, and influential role in propagating Spiritualist Feminism to a wider audience. Just two months later, in June 1897, an article appeared in the Mesmerist periodical *La Paix universelle* (“Universal Peace”), describing the formation of an “action committee” for the grand international Spiritualist congress due to take place in 1900 as part of Paris’ *Exposition universelle*, the *Congrès de l’humanité*—more commonly known as the *Congrès spirite et spiritiste internationale* (“International Spirit and Spiritist Congress”).¹⁸⁸ The provisional action committee included Bézobrazow, who beginning in 1898 would publish a series of articles in *La Paix universelle*, including a manifesto of the Spiritualist Feminist society she had just created to promote her doctrine at the 1900 Congress: the *Société uninationaliste des femmes de lettres pour l’éducation éthique et social de la femme* (“Uninationalist Society of Women of Letters for the Ethical and Social Education of the Woman”, herein referred to as the *Société uninationaliste*).¹⁸⁹

Two years of intensive propaganda and activism by the *Société uninationaliste* in the occult press followed; it even gained coverage in the mainstream publications *La Fronde* and *L’Encyclopédie nouvelle*.¹⁹⁰ Then, at the 1900 Congress, Bézobrazow—speaking as a *spiritualiste independante* (“independent spiritualist”)—compellingly delivered the *Société uninationaliste*’s Spiritualist Feminist manifesto, covering “the spiritualist idea in the woman

¹⁸⁸ Sharp, *Secular Spirituality*, 189. The *Exposition Universelle* of 1900 brought as many as fifty-one million visitors to Paris.

¹⁸⁹ La Rédaction, “Le Congrès de l’humanité” in *La Paix universelle: revue indépendante: magnétisme transcendantal – philosophie – physiologie – psychologie*. Paris: (16-30 June 1897).

¹⁹⁰ Bézobrazow, “Manifeste de la Société uninationaliste des femmes de lettres” in *La Paix universelle*. Paris: (16-28 February 1899).

going back centuries” and comparing it to “the contemporaneous woman’s spirit”.¹⁹¹ Three days later, in the Congress’ concluding session—when France’s leading occult figures like Delanne and Papus were delivering their closing remarks—she was selected as its penultimate speaker, behind only its presiding figure Léon Denis.¹⁹² In the same year, she also spoke at Paris’ international feminist *Congrès de oeuvres et institutions féminines* (“Congress of women’s works and institutions”), as a quintessentially “moderate feminist” espousing the *Société uninationaliste*’s familial feminist program of philanthropy and education.¹⁹³

Bézobrazow’s post-*Revue* mobilization of Spiritualist Feminism thus assumed multiple forms. It was propagandistic, in her speeches at these widely-attended conferences, where for the first time she began consciously to repeat the neologism *Féminisme Spiritualiste*. It was organizational, in her founding and supervision of the *Société uninationaliste* from the very same address as the *Revue*’s site of publication and distribution in Neuilly-Saint-James. And it was also logistical, as she self-funded her new endeavors by repurposing, republishing, and actively promoting in the press compilations of her intellectual works which had first appeared on the pages of the *Revue*, like *La Religion nouvelle*, *Le Matriarcat*, and *La Femme nouvelle*.¹⁹⁴

This frenzied activity succeeded in attracting significant coverage in the French press, especially mainstream occult publications in their heyday of circulation: between 1897 and 1907, Bézobrazow featured at least thirty-seven times across as many as eleven separate publications in France alone—as either a contributor or an author whose Spiritualist Feminist works and ideas were promoted or critiqued. She featured in 1903 as a “*femme de bien*” (woman who does good, or good woman) in *La Revue moderne*, and was described as “already very well

¹⁹¹ Bézobrazow, “Manifeste de la Société uninationaliste” des femmes de lettres” in *La Paix universelle*. (16-28 February 1899); Pierre-Gaetan Leymarie, “Congrès Spirite et Spiritualiste” in *Revue spirite* (November 1900).

¹⁹² *Ibid.*

¹⁹³ Klejman and Rochefort, *L’Égalité*, 138.

¹⁹⁴ One such iteration was *L’idée: série féministe-spiritualiste* (“The Idea: Spiritualist-Feminist Series”).

known in France” and an “*apôtre*” (apostle) in the *Revue spirite*—still France’s most popular occult journal since its foundation by Kardec in the 1860s.¹⁹⁵ By contrast, Bézobrazow’s pre-*Revue* works—a vigorous body of Spiritualist poems—had only been cursorily reviewed or featured in just four French publications between 1893-1896. In the “golden age” of the press as an instrument of mass culture, and at its Parisian epicenter, she and her Spiritualist Feminist doctrine had found their niche.¹⁹⁶ Furthermore, how Bézobrazow *practically* mobilized Spiritualist Feminism at her moment of greatest visibility in the press reveals her ideas’ historical significance as a cultural artefact of fin-de-siècle European society.

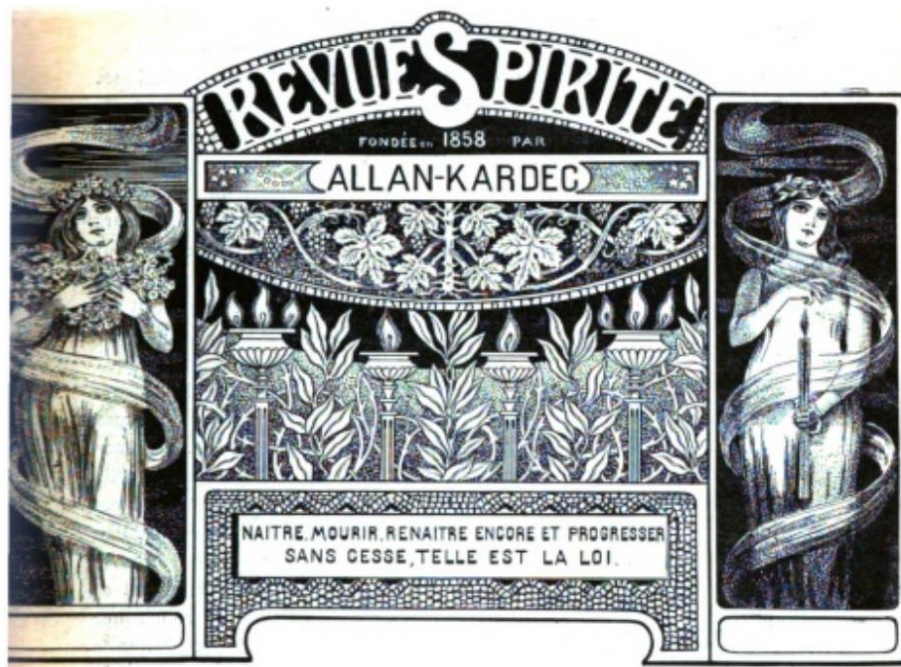


Fig. IV: Cover of the July 1902 edition of the *Revue Spirite*

Of the tools she deployed to this end, the most prominent post-*Revue* endeavor was the *Société uninationaliste*. Bézobrazow’s intellectual club of “women of letters” consciously

¹⁹⁵ Philippe Casimir, “Une apôtre: Mme. O. de Bézobrazow” in *Revue spirite* (November 1904); “Bibliographie: L’Idée (série féministe-spiritualiste)” in *Revue Spirite*, (January 1903); “Femmes de bien: Mme. O. de Bézobrazow” in *La Revue moderne*. Paris: (01 July 1903). <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/cb34404376n/date>. Date accessed: 05/08/2018.

¹⁹⁶ De la Motte and Przyblyski, *Making the News*, 6-7.

sought through propaganda in “books, brochures, [and] conferences” to realise “the improvement of individuals and classes”.¹⁹⁷ Comprising the *Société uninationaliste*’s core leadership were many former contributors to the *Revue*, including de Kapnist, de Kauffmann, and Grendel; like the *Revue*, it had an evidently internationalist scope. This women’s society was also explicitly Spiritualist in its assertion of a “spiritual entente” with theosophists, universalists, and neosophists.¹⁹⁸ To supplement her personal funding of the *Société uninationaliste*, Bézobrazow refashioned Spiritualist Feminist poems, novellas, and essays from the *revue* into an anthology titled *Les femmes et la vie* (“Women and life”); she would then actively promote the sale of this work in the press, as in her September 1899 essay in *Papus’ L’Initiation* entitled “Ma façon de voir” (“My Way of Seeing”).¹⁹⁹

Complementing these focii were the *Société uninationaliste*’s goals of founding “mixed Spiritualist schools” and having women teach “in public establishments, scientific Spiritualism, scientific Faith”.²⁰⁰ As French Society’s progress depended upon “the moral unity of the social and ethical education of women”, the *Société uninationaliste*, in advocating an “international women’s library” and delivering “illuminating” pedagogy to “women workers of all trades”, saw itself as the forerunner of a future emergence of “a vast universal female federation”.²⁰¹ By teaching Spiritualist science, it would impart “universal knowledge”, and by practicing familial

¹⁹⁷ La Tribune des femmes, “Société uninationaliste des femmes de lettres (pour l’éducation éthique sociale)” in *La Paix universelle* (1-15 December 1898). The Tribune des Femmes was a subsidiary of Bézobrazow’s *Société uninationaliste*.

¹⁹⁸ Bézobrazow, “Société uninationaliste des femmes de lettres (pour l’éducation éthique sociale)”, in *La Paix universelle* (16 October 1898) and “Manifeste de la société uninationaliste des femmes de lettres” in *La Paix universelle*, (16-28 February 1899).

¹⁹⁹ Bézobrazow, “Ma façon de Voir” in *L’Initiation* (September 1899).

²⁰⁰ Bézobrazow, “Société uninationaliste des femmes de lettres (pour l’éducation éthique sociale)”, in *La Paix universelle* (16 October 1898).

²⁰¹ Ibid. This unity for Bézobrazow was fundamentally Spiritualist, as it engendered “the continual ascent of the immortal spirit towards the eternal light”.

feminist Philanthropy, it would embody “universal love”.²⁰² The *Société*, through “the education of souls” would produce an “evolved” individual in French society who understood the “universal life” promised by “the eternity of the beyond”.²⁰³ In short, Spiritualist Feminism—an expression of *humanité integrale*—promised existential deliverance and security to the French society it sought to educate.

As already noted, this agenda found a substantial if uneven readership through French publications around the turn of the century, like France’s leading Symbolist periodical, the *Mercur de France*,²⁰⁴ and was taken especially seriously by the most important instruments of the occult press. These included Leymarie’s *Revue spirite*; Delanne’s *Revue scientifique et morale du spiritisme*; the *Revue théosophique français* (the French offshoot of legendary Russian theosophist Helena Blavatsky’s Theosophical Society); *La Paix universelle*; and *L’Initiation*. By contrast, there is little evidence that Bézobrazow or her ideas were given any special or sustained attention by the feminist press, which is likely why Bézobrazow, according to Sharp, “lamented the difficulties she had interesting feminists in things spiritual”.²⁰⁵

Especially after the 1900 Congresses at which Bézobrazow had spoken, her ideas retained greater intellectual currency in occult circles. She was heavily featured in the *Revue Spirite*, where an extensive 1902 review of her esoteric poetry hailed her “Slavic genius”, and a 1903 survey of her *L’Idée: série féministe-spiritualiste* (“the Idea: Spiritualist-Feminist series”) praised the “harmonious synthesis” of her “diverse aspirations of contemporary thought”.²⁰⁶

Months later, the proceedings of her conference “Du féminisme spiritualiste et de l’éducation de

²⁰² Bézobrazow, “Manifeste de la Société unationaliste des femmes de lettres” in *La Paix universelle*, (16-28 February 1899).

²⁰³ Ibid.

²⁰⁴ Swaart, *The Sense of Decadence*, 143.

²⁰⁵ Sharp, *Secular Spirituality*, 171. *La Fronde* did apparently comment in their December 22, 1897 publication on the all-women Parisian Ladies’ Club of which Bézobrazow was an active member, and which she frequently advertised on the front page of each edition of the *Revue des femmes russes*. Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*, 92-93.

²⁰⁶ “Bibliographie: L’Idée (série féministe-spiritualiste)” in *Revue spirite*, (January 1903).

la croyance” (“On feminism and the education of belief”) were printed in full across two editions of the *Revue spirite*. She was considered in France to be “at the forefront of thinkers nowadays”, with writings that “[dominated] the mediocrity of contemporary works”; she was so highly regarded by Paul Adam—one of France’s most acclaimed novelists of the time—that his preface for her work claimed she possessed “the genius of the apostolate”.²⁰⁷ Leymarie, in turn, was sufficiently enamored of Bézobrazow that his publishing house bought rights to her 1907 work entitled *Batailles de l'idée* (“Battles of the idea”).²⁰⁸

Part of the popularity of Bézobrazow and her doctrine around the turn of the century can be ascribed to her acute sensitivity to the historical moment. In her 1898 manifesto for the *Société uninationaliste*, she wrote that society “is on the eve of a social crisis that marks a changing age of civilization”.²⁰⁹ France was “preparing to invite the people to her home” for the Exposition Universelle of 1900 in an atmosphere of “worry”, under circumstances of “division” and “evil”.²¹⁰ She echoed the popular anxieties of the time about French society’s “fallen moral sense”: the “triumph of material progress” in the Third Republic, embodied by empirical science, industrialization (the “obedience of machines”), and urbanization, had only yielded “monstrous, contradictory forces of social demoralization” leading to vagrancy, alcoholism, the “most hideous crimes”, more “penal colonies”, and the continuation of the death penalty.²¹¹

Harvey demonstrates how the “fascination with round numbers” at the century’s close led to “millenarian anxieties”, and consequently dramatic prophecies such as Papus’ 1895

²⁰⁷ “Bibliographie: L’Idée (série féministe-spiritualiste)” in *Revue spirite*, (January 1903); Casimir, “Une apôtre”.

²⁰⁸ “Batailles de l’idée” in *Revue scientifique et morale du spiritisme* (April 1907; January 1908; March 1908); “Femmes de Bien—Mme. O. de Bézobrazow” in *Revue moderne* (01/07/1903).

²⁰⁹ Bézobrazow, “Société uninationaliste des femmes de lettres (pour l’éducation éthique sociale)”, in *La Paix universelle* (16 October 1898), and “Manifeste de la société uninationaliste des femmes de lettres” in *La Paix universelle*, (16-28 February 1899).

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ Bézobrazow, “Société uninationaliste des femmes de lettres (pour l’éducation éthique sociale)”, in *La Paix universelle* (16 October 1898), and “Manifeste de la société uninationaliste des femmes de lettres” in *La Paix universelle*, (16-28 February 1899).

prediction of an imminent civil war in France.²¹² Roberts and Swart meanwhile point to the common perception—held not only by Bézobrazow but many cultural elites at the time—that French society was engulfed by “a multitude of sins” including depopulation, alcoholism, urban crime, labor unrest, political scandal, and sexual transgressions.²¹³ Eugene Weber argues that the conscious use of the term “fin de siècle” connoted “that not just a century but an age, an era, a way of life, a world, were coming to a close”.²¹⁴ Christophe Charle also notes that France’s intellectuals viewed the era’s social and technological developments as responsible for a society “deprived of moral perspectives”.²¹⁵ And beyond the social sphere, the Republic’s political uncertainty had reached its zenith between 1898 and 1904 with the escalation of the Dreyfus Affair—a particularly seismic event in the press, and which gravely shook the existential foundations of the Republic—and the 1905 Law of the Separation of Church and State.²¹⁶

Spiritualist Feminist proselytization was thus essential, in Bézobrazow’s view, because of its timeliness, its destiny in resolving those longstanding Third Republic tensions which by 1900 were threatening to boil over. In 1899, she invoked the spectre of an imminent “social war” resurrected “by the ghosts of ancient hatred”—between the sexes in the fierce debates over women’s role, and between different secular and spiritual epistemologies in the fights over belief and religion in modern France.²¹⁷ But the “new era” initiated by Spiritualist Feminism would “restore a closer union and a deeper solidarity between the sexes” in its implementation of spiritually-grounded “social justice” and equality.²¹⁸ Bézobrazow thus ascribed to her doctrine a dialectical historical impetus, with the harmonious synthesis of man and woman’s

²¹² Harvey, *Beyond Enlightenment*, 144.

²¹³ Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*, 1.

²¹⁴ Weber, Eugene. *France, Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1986), 1-2.

²¹⁵ Charle, *Paris fin-de-siècle*, 181.

²¹⁶ See: Douglas Johnson, *France and the Dreyfus Affair* (New York, Walker 1967) Perhaps Bézobrazow’s description of a contemporaneous “conspiracy of parties” was an allusion to the Affair.

²¹⁷ Bézobrazow, “Ma façon de voir” in *L’Initiation* (September 1899).

²¹⁸ *Ibid.*

“conciliation, reconciliation” guided by Spiritualist values surmounting the unresolved gender and religious tensions of long history.²¹⁹

Against this backdrop of high historical stakes, consciously cultivated by herself and others, Bézobrazow and her Spiritualist Feminism cohorts looked to “Femmes Nouvelles”—the “peaceful combatants” of the era—to overcome society’s “inner agitations, the guilty hostilities, the menacing conflicts”, all through “the ethical and social education of the people” on a Spiritualist basis.²²⁰ Without that basis, “equality of wages, equality of rights, political equality, social equality for women” would all be futile.²²¹ More starkly put, the “materialistic feminism” of Auclert or Durand would “be against [Spiritualist Feminists]” while “the spiritualists of the whole world will be for [them]”.²²² Meanwhile, acutely sensitive to the intense *laïcité* debates submerging French society at the time, Bézobrazow asserted that all the “blows” struck by skeptics of Spiritualism (Clericals and Republicans) only reinforced its inherent truths.²²³ “Today”, she defiantly asserted, “*all* realities are with the spiritualist *fact*”.²²⁴ Emboldened by the certainty of “fact”, Spiritualist Feminists would transcend parochial nationalism in favor of feeling “humanitarian, citizen of the universal homeland”—of an *Humanité Intégrale*.²²⁵

Bézobrazow’s prophecies, simultaneously apocalyptic and utopian in many senses, reflected the *zeitgeist* which had compelled her occult contemporaries earlier in the 1890s to similarly predict the end of days, and France’s regeneration under the Tsar. Unlike those

²¹⁹ Ibid.

²²⁰ Ibid.

²²¹ Bézobrazow, “Société uninationaliste des femmes de lettres (pour l’éducation éthique sociale)”, in *La Paix universelle* (16 October 1898), and “Manifeste de la Société uninationaliste des femmes de lettres” in *La Paix universelle*, (16-28 February 1899).

²²² Again, we here witness some tension between Bézobrazow and the mainstream feminist movement, unreceptive to her occult ideas. She lamented that “it takes courage, sad to say, to be a spiritualist in feminism”.

²²³ Bézobrazow, “Société uninationaliste des femmes de lettres (pour l’éducation éthique sociale)”, in *La Paix universelle* (16 October 1898), and “Manifeste de la société uninationaliste des femmes de lettres” in *La Paix universelle*, (16-28 February 1899).

²²⁴ Ibid.

²²⁵ Ibid.

narratives of crisis, however, Bézobrazow did not place hope in abstract salvation by an absolute monarch, but in a grass-roots doctrine that would agitate for moral and social justice in society through the harmonious principles of Feminism and Spiritualism. With Bézobrazow as Spiritualist Feminism's revelatory "apostle", she thus sought ambitiously to deliver not only France from its scourges around the turn of the century, but a new, *intégrale*, world.

Conclusion:

The world that in fact emerged after the turn of the century was indeed new and unprecedented, though not in the way Bézobrazow envisaged. Despite her best efforts to advance her Spiritualist Feminist vision, the intellectual attention of France had by the middle of the new century's first decade begun shifting towards other concerns and movements. Nonetheless, her ideas appear to have held some traction within the country as late as the 1930s, a decade after her death: in *La Femme vierge*, the 1933 fictional autobiography of Madeleine Pelletier—France's leading feminist of the early twentieth century, who in Bézobrazow's time does not appear to have professed Spiritualist beliefs—the protagonist after her death conveys a message for France's future feminists through one of Pelletier's contemporaries, Caroline Kauffman, who has become a Spiritualist medium.²²⁶ It can be said that the intellectual gravitas of Bézobrazow's Spiritualist Feminist doctrine considerably surpassed its impact on historical events.

But that would be an unfair standard of measurement. A utopian project such as Bézobrazow's is useful to history even if (and to some extent because) its effect on the course of events, or its pertinence to society today, appears limited. (That said, France's continued debate on *laïcité* and the role of religion in society pertaining to the Burqa ban; the visibility and power of social justice movements, especially for women; and the frequent dichotomization between religious and scientific belief in our age of technological change, with the two presented as either diametrically opposed or still reconcilable—these all point to the persistence of the debates which Bézobrazow chose to address.) A more appropriate measure of Spiritualist Feminism might be its impact on the discourses of its time and place—Paris in the *fin de siècle*. On those terms, Bézobrazow emerges as a distinctive and important figure, who within a decade

²²⁶ Scott, *Only Paradoxes*, 160.

of initiation into the French vortex of political, intellectual and cultural disputation, found first a voice and then a vocation as a conscious historical agent. She became an “apostle” of the time who not only spoke compellingly to the anxieties of her moment, but sought to resolve them—in so doing making her mark in an exceptionally fluid period for ideas and social structures within European history.²²⁷

From her arrival to the end of her life in France, Bézobrazow, as both a Russian and a woman, existed as a societal outsider in a Third Republic grappling for much of that period with xenophobic (with the Dreyfus Affair) and patriarchal tendencies; and it is perhaps partly because of this outsider status that her extensive and vibrant body of work has never received the intellectual or historical attention—let alone treated with the depth—it deserves, and that it received from her contemporaries. Despite the liminality in which she operated—or, again, perhaps because of it—she became around the turn of the century a recognized diagnostician of contemporary society’s ills, for which she prescribed remedies as deliberate as they were impassioned and sincere. She forcefully inserted herself into some of the Third Republic’s most historically defining conflicts on the role of faith and women in society by entering its mass press with her *Revue*, and in it articulating a novel Feminist Spiritualist solution for those conflicts.

While France’s fin-de-siècle *geist* has often been characterized as one of pessimism and decay, it also engendered novel possibilities for new historical actors like occultists and “Femmes Nouvelles”.²²⁸ In a modernized Paris of social, intellectual, and political tension, Bézobrazow found the freedom and agency to mobilize new ideas and stake a claim for a better French society in her Spiritualist Feminist image. Although her diagnosis of France’s moral,

²²⁷ Roberts, *Disruptive Acts*, introduction

²²⁸ Teich, Mikulas, and Roy Porter, ed. *Fin-de-siècle and its Legacy*. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 1-3; Weber, *Fin-de-siècle France*, 1-4.

legal, and spiritual climate was unsparing, both her doctrine and her calls to action embraced a fundamentally optimistic vision of a “perfected” society’s future. Indeed, it is telling that in the historical record of Bézobrazow, which this thesis has attempted to resurface, she is judged as a “femme de bien”, a “good woman”, in her ideas as well as deeds. As a feminist whose concern with the condition of her fellow women propelled her to action to improve their lives, and as a Spiritualist, whose ascensional principle of self perfection by helping others reinforced that tendency to do good, Bézobrazow can (and should) be remembered as an “apôtre”, a “Femme Nouvelle”, and a “femme de bien”—in short, a woman of her moment and her convictions.

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**Note: in the interests of space, I have listed here simply the titles for all the periodicals and revues I have cited or analyzed in my thesis, rather than the specific dated, titled, authored editions of each source, as this would increase the bibliography by several pages. Please consult the footnotes of my thesis for the specific date, author, and title of each source I have used. All the periodicals below are accessible on hathitrust in the public domain.*

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