

BETWEEN FORGIVENESS AND INDULGENCE: FUNERARY PRAYERS OF ABSOLUTION IN RUSSIA

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The custom of placing a written prayer of absolution in the hands of the deceased right before burial is attested in Russia since medieval times. The text of the prayer varied even after the appearance of printed liturgical books. The essay analyzes the text of the prayer as it crystallized by the 19th century (and is in use to this day) and compares it to Eastern Orthodox synchōrochartia (patriarchal letters of absolution). The conclusion is that since the late 19th century (if not before) Russians have been buried with an Eastern Orthodox indulgence.

When Tsar Fedor Alekseevich died on 27 April 1682, the funeral rites were conducted by Patriarch Ioakim (in office 1674–1690) with all the customary pomp and circumstance befitting the exalted deceased. Towards the end of the burial rite, and just before the interment of the body in the Archangel Michael Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin, Patriarch Ioakim deposited a prayer of absolution (*molitvu proshcheniia*) into the hands of the departed. Shortly thereafter the body was carried to its final resting place.¹ Ioakim's last action reflected an ancient Russian custom, which gave the

¹ “O prestavlenii i pogrebenii Gosudaria Tsaria i Velikogo Kniazia Feodora Alekseevicha,” 211–212.

spiritual father (or presiding clergyman) a last opportunity to plead for divine pardon on behalf of the dead person through a written prayer. Known variously as “prayers of absolution” (*razreshitel'nye* or *razreshchal'nye* or *proshchal'nye molitvy*),² these absolutionary texts were included in manuscript and printed service books (*trebniki*, lit. ‘books of needs’; sing. *trebnik*) within or immediately after the burial rite.³ The practice has continued to this day and remains characteristic of the burial practices of the Russian Orthodox Church.⁴

² See Brokgauz-Efron, *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar'*, vol. 26, s.v. “razreshitel'naia molitva.” For a discussion of absolution prayers during burial from both an historical and a doctrinal perspective, see Prilutskii, *Chastnoe bogoslužhenie*, esp. 253–259; Bulgakov, *Nastol'naia kniga*, 2: 1357–1359; and Almazov, *Tainaia ispoved'*, 2: 264–271 and 314–318. See also appendix B at the end of this essay for a copy of the prayer as used today in the Russian Orthodox Church.

³ Several accounts by foreigners noted the practice. See, e. g., Olearius, *The Travels*, 275. Olearius adds that the prayer sheets were purchased: *ibid.*, 276. Following is the text in his account: “We, N.N. bishop and priest here in N., do hereby acknowledge and witness that [the deceased] actually lived among us as a genuine, righteous Greek Christian. Though he sometimes sinned, he nevertheless repented of his sins, and received absolution and Holy Communion for forgiveness. He revered God and His saints, and fasted and prayed fittingly. With me, N.N., his confessor, he was fully reconciled, and I forgave him all his sins. Therefore, we have issued him this passport to show to St. Peter and the other saints that he may be admitted without hindrance to the gates of bliss.” Olearius’s text does not appear to coincide with any of the relevant prayers. This version, however, appeared in several other foreigners’ accounts. See, for example, *Posol'stvo Kunraada fan Klenka*, 142–143 (for the Dutch original); 437 (for the text in Russian translation). As early as 1526, Johannes Faber (Johann Fabri, 1478–1541) had claimed that the Muscovites used indulgences: *Moscouitarum religio*, no pagination (my thanks to Jonathan Seiling for pointing out Faber’s reference). Almazov suggests that Faber probably confused Western indulgences with the Russian *razreshitel'nye molitvy*. See *Soobshcheniia*, 40. Faber had never been to Russia and acquired his information from Russian ambassadors. Several scholars have noted that, as a sworn enemy of Protestantism, Faber deliberately downplayed some differences between Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy. Seiling points out Faber’s mistakes and exaggerations, emphasizes the political motivations behind his work and concludes that his portrayal of Muscovite religion was “a counter-reformer’s dream come true”: “The Political and Polemical,” 666. Cf. also Kämpfer, “Herbersteins.”

⁴ And also in parts of Ukraine. See Worobec, “Death Ritual,” 26.

Until the middle of the 17th century, the content of burial absolution prayers to be placed in the hands of the dead appeared in several variants⁵ and it remains unclear when, exactly, the text crystallized in the form that is known from 19th-century service books. Some scholars have argued that the adoption of this form must have occurred in the second half of the 17th century.⁶ As we shall have occasion to see, such a view appears plausible, but it requires close study of published service books from the late-17th through the 19th century to be corroborated. Leaving aside the question of the exact timing of the appearance of the standardized version of this prayer, this essay conducts a close study of its content and the question of its textual origins. My aims are twofold: 1) to offer an analysis of this prayer in its 19th-century form (in use to this day); and 2) to discuss the prototype of the standardized text by comparing it with Eastern Orthodox patriarchal letters of absolution.

The *Razreshitel'naia Molitva* in the 19th Century

The text in question as attested in 19th-century service books is the following:

Our Lord, Jesus Christ, by His divine grace, gift, and authority, given to His holy disciples and apostles, to bind and loose the sins of humans, having said to them: "Receive the Holy Spirit.

⁵ See, e.g., GIM, Synodal Collection, No. 378 (898): 16th c. *Trebnik*, ff. 392–393. The *Trebnik mirskoi* of 1639 includes a prayer specifically destined to be placed in the hands of the deceased, whether a lay person or a priest. The instructions note that the spiritual father reads the absolutionary prayer in secret (*v tai*) and then places it in the hands of the departed. See *Trebnik mirskoi*, f. 295 (the prayer follows the instructions and is identical to the one found in the *Trebnik inocheskii*, ff. 208–209).

⁶ Cf. the comments of Bulgakov, *Nastol'naia kniga* 2: 1357–1359, and Almazov, *Taincia ispoved' 2*: 274. A random check of the *trebnik* editions of 1680, 1688, 1697, 1763, 1785 confirms that they do not mention the custom of placing the prayer in the dead person's hands. One possibility is that the custom was so widespread that there was no need to refer to it. Another is that since Greek *euchologia* (books of prayers) did not include the practice, the correctors dropped it during the liturgical reforms of the mid-17th c. For a discussion of the changes to, or omissions of, absolutionary prayers (but not necessarily those to be placed in the hands of the dead) during the revision of liturgical books in the mid-17th c., see Sazonova, *U istokov*, 59–60, 212.

If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain them, they are retained.” [John 20: 22–23]. “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” [Matthew 18: 18]. And because this divine Grace was transferred from them to us one after the other, [by this divine grace] through my humble self may He render this spiritual child [blank space to add the name] forgiven in everything that he or she as a human sinned toward God, by word or deed, or thought, and with all his or her senses, willingly or unwillingly, knowingly or unknowingly. And if he or she were under the curse or the excommunication of an archbishop or of a priest, or he or she brought upon himself/herself the curse of his/her mother or father, or if he or she fell under his/her own anathema, or he or she disobeyed an oath, or if, being human, he or she bound himself/herself with other sins, and repented with a grievous [lit. “contritious”] heart of all these [sins]; and may He [i.e., the Lord] absolve him/her of all guilt and bond. And whatever he or she rendered to oblivion because of human frailty, may [the Lord] forgive him or her for His love of humanity [lit. “philanthropy”], through the prayers of the Most Holy and Most Blessed Our Lady Theotokos [i.e. God Bearer] and Ever-Virgin Mary, of the Holy, Glorious and Most-Laudable Apostles, and of All Saints. Amen.⁷

An analysis of this prayer reveals the following: the text begins by emphasizing the “power of keys,” that is, the power of clergy to bind and loose the sins of believers. This is the standard formula in all absolutionary texts in use by the church. Midway through, however, the priest’s role is highlighted as an intercessory one. It is through him that forgiveness comes from God, the ultimate source of absolution. Indeed, the main thrust of the prayer revolves around the spiritual father’s supplication to God to show mercy and offer forgiveness. This, of course, accords well with the traditional Orthodox understanding of the priest’s role in conferring absolution (see below). What is, however, noteworthy in this prayer is the emphasis

⁷ Translation mine. Terms in square brackets are my additions. See: Maltzew, *Begräbniss-Ritus*, 132–133; appendix B for a contemporary copy of the prayer, procured by Father Alexander Lebedeff; original in printed form purchased in Troitse-Sergieva Lavra in August 2005 (personal possession). Cf. “Rémissions des péchés,” 432–433; and *Service Book*, ed. Hapgood, 392. My thanks to Father Alexander Lebedeff for providing me with an electronic copy of the prayer of absolution in use today, and for his helpful comments.

on certain canonically anomalous conditions in which the deceased may have found himself/herself, such as those of a curse or anathema, for example. Even more important is that the prayer petitions for forgiveness for all sins for which one repented with a heart full of contrition. But interestingly enough, the text says nothing of penance or its completion. Furthermore, provision is made for sins that were rendered to oblivion because of human frailty. Effectively, therefore, the prayer is a last-minute attempt on the part of the spiritual father to bring about absolution by imploring God to forgive all the sins of the deceased, both confessed and unconfessed. Simply put, the priest is asking for a blanket absolution of sins.

Pre-revolutionary scholars (including theologians) and clerics confronted a number of challenges when interpreting the meaning of the *razreshitel'naia molitva*. For instance, both S. V. Bulgakov and K. Nikol'skii endeavored to prove that the prayer was not, in fact, a blanket absolution of sins, both confessed and unconfessed. In particular, Bulgakov made the following points: 1) The prayer was intended as proof that the deceased had died in peace with the church; 2) The prayer conferred absolution for sins which the deceased had confessed and for which he or she had repented, but for which he or she had not completed penance; and 3) The prayer lifted any curses or anathemas that may have been imposed on the dead person.⁸ In his manual for the study of the order of liturgical services of the Russian Church, Nikol'skii had argued similarly to Bulgakov, but he had also claimed that such a prayer was beneficial both for the sinful and for the pious, since it never hurts to beseech God for forgiveness.⁹

Earlier in the 19th century, none other than Metropolitan Filaret (1782–1867) had been obliged to deal with the theological meaning of the same prayer on a number of occasions. In 1859, for instance, Filaret received a report on the differences between the Russian and the Greek Orthodox Churches authored by a recent convert from Roman Catholicism to Orthodoxy, identified as Father Constantine. The report touched upon a number of discrepancies in the liturgical and ritual practices of the two sister churches. One

⁸ Bulgakov, *Nastol'naia kniga 2*: 1358.

⁹ Nikol'skii, *Posobie k izucheniu*, 715–745 (discussion of burial rite), esp. 732–734 (on the prayer of absolution).

entry referred to the rejection of Roman Catholic indulgences by the Greeks, but noted that it appeared that the Russians accepted the practice by placing such an indulgence in the hands of the dead before burial.¹⁰ The report must have vexed Filaret enough to warrant a meeting with Father Constantine in which the main topic of discussion was the differing practices of the reception of converts (i.e., with or without rebaptism) among the Greeks and Russians. Noting that time had not permitted consideration of the indulgence question, Filaret instead composed (presumably for the future guidance of church officials) a note on the burial prayer of absolution. In it, he forcefully denied that the prayer was an indulgence, and instead asserted that it witnessed that the deceased was at peace with the church. He also claimed that the prayer could not be an indulgence since it was given by any priest, unlike indulgences, which were granted by the pope alone (and in the latter case, the recipients, therefore, could go on sinning anyway [], according to Filaret).¹¹ In that same year, after receiving another report (this one authored by an archimandrite identified only by the initial “A” in the collection of Filaret’s opinions), the metropolitan composed lengthy written reactions to all the points in this second document. Discussing the use of a *venchik* (a kind of “crown” or coronet, placed on the forehead of the dead), and the placement of a prayer of absolution in his (or her, as the case may have been —NC) hands, Filaret claimed that the prayer signified that the deceased was an Orthodox Christian and that he or she died in communion with the church (*v obshchenii s tserkov’iu*). Obviously annoyed by persistent challenges to the validity of the prayer, Filaret exclaimed at the end of this particular entry: “Why is this habit being subjected to such reproaches?”¹²

¹⁰ *Sobranie mnenii i otzyvov Filareta*, supplemental volume (published 1887): 511–512.

¹¹ *Sobranie mnenii i otzyvov Filareta*, supplemental volume (published 1887): 511–512. Interestingly, some confession questionnaires from the early modern period included drunkenness when reading the prayer as a potential sin: Korogodina, *Ispoved’*, 497.

¹² *Sobranie mnenii i otzyvov Filareta*, 4: 397–409, esp. 406 for discussion of burial customs and quotation. Interestingly, Filaret admits that the order of rites of the Orthodox Church (*ustav*) does not prescribe the use of the *venchik*: *ibid.*, 406.

Filaret's exasperation notwithstanding, the question of the *razreshitel'naia molitva*'s ritual and doctrinal meaning did not disappear. As late as 1894, A. Almazov dealt with the problem in his massive study on confession in Eastern Orthodoxy. Striking a more dispassionate note, Almazov sought to compare the then current burial prayer with that of absolution pronounced at the end of the confession ritual. He correctly asserted that, whereas the prayer at the end of confession conferred absolution for sins confessed, the *razreshitel'naia molitva* was an entreaty to God to grant forgiveness. At least this was the way in which the burial prayer was understood by his contemporary commentators, Almazov admitted. At the same time, however, he went further and argued that such a theological understanding of the burial prayer must have been current in earlier centuries. As evidence for this assertion, Almazov pointed out that in both the confessional and the burial absolutionary prayers of earlier periods (presumably, before the 17th century), clergy employed the deprecatory (as opposed to the indicative) form in absolving the penitent/deceased.¹³ Therefore, the two prayers could be perceived as granting and guaranteeing absolution as opposed to merely pleading for it. Moreover, some service books specifically assigned the task of reading the burial prayer to the spiritual father of the deceased, adding, according to Almazov, to its absolutionary character. Finally, Almazov also indicated that if anathemas could, both in the past and in the present, be lifted posthumously, one could understand the burial prayer as guaranteeing the elimination of such canonical prohibitions, as well.¹⁴

It thus appears that several scholars and clergymen of the pre-revolutionary period understood the prayer in the following two ways: 1) as offering absolution for sins confessed but for which penance was not completed; and 2) as eliminating any curse or excommunication, and therefore, securing reconciliation with the community of believers. Contrary to the above, however, one should note that nowhere in the prayer is there any explicit conferral of absolution. Throughout, there are entreaties to God to grant forgiveness. Thus, it is curious to assert that the prayer does offer absolution in the case of a curse or anathema, but not in the case

¹³ On the adoption of the Latin-influenced indicative form "I absolve you" by some 17th-century Orthodox *trebniki*, see Kraienhorst, *Buß- und Beichtordnungen des griechischen Euchologions*, 302–382, esp. 342–347.

¹⁴ Almazov, *Taincia ispoved'*, 2: 314–317.

of sins left unconfessed due to a lapse of memory or other human frailty. Simply put, as is evident from the persistent attempts of 19th- and early 20th-century theologians to explain away these apparent contradictions, the burial absolutionary prayer has remained theologically on shaky ground.

To begin to understand the meaning of the *razreshitel'naia molitva*, it may be worth examining its textual origins. If the text of the prayer became standardized, presumably sometime between the later 17th and the early 19th centuries, then what was the prototype of this change? To answer this question, we must turn to another form of evidence, the so-called *synchōrochartia* (letters of absolution) for the living that were issued by the Eastern Orthodox patriarchs in the early modern period.

Letters of Absolution for the Living

There is substantial evidence that letters of remission of sins issued by Orthodox hierarchs were quite popular in the Eastern Orthodox world starting in the 16th century.¹⁵ Indeed, it appears that a practice that began among Greeks in the late 15th and early 16th centuries gradually caught on in Serbia, Ukraine, Belarus and, especially after the Time of Troubles, in Russia.¹⁶ The terms used for such documents varied, but the most common ones appear to have been *synchōrochartia* or *synchōrētēria* (documents [lit. “papers”] of forgiveness; sing. *synchōrocharti*) in Greek, and *razreshitel'nye gramoty* or *razreshchal'nye gramoty* (letters of absolution) in Russian. They were granted both to living persons and on behalf of the dead. In the latter case, family members requested and received pardon for their kin who had died under a priestly curse or excommunication.

¹⁵ On *synchōrochartia* in the Orthodox East, see: Brokgauz-Efron, *Entsiklopedicheskii slovar'*, vol. 13, s.v. “Indul'gentsiia”; *Enkyklopaidikon Lexikon Eleutheroudakē*, vol. 11, s.v. “synchōrētērios –ia –on”; Iliou, “Synchōrochartia I,” 35–84; Iliou, “Synchōrochartia II,” 3–44; Danova, “Indulgentsite,” 43–50; Likhachev, “O razreshitel'nykh gramotakh,” 77–99; V. B., “O razreshitel'nykh gramotakh,” 162–163; Loda, “Le indulgenze,” 73–99; Vasil, “Le indulgenze,” *Folia Canonica*, 53–71; Vasil, “Le indulgenze,” *La Civiltà Cattolica*, 451–462; Senyk, “Rites and Charters of Remission,” 426–440; and Nikas, *I primi tentativi di latinizzazione dei Greci di Napoli*.

¹⁶ Iliou, “Synchōrochartia I.” There is evidence that such letters were known in Russia as far back as the late 15th century. See Kobeko, “Razreshitel'nye gramoty,” 270–279.

The content of such handwritten letters shows several variations until their appearance in print. Once produced in printed form, however, the text became standardized.¹⁷ The following is an example of a standardized printed letter issued by Patriarch Dositheos of Jerusalem (in office 1669–1707) in the 17th century:

Our modesty, by the Grace and the gift and the authority of the All Holy and Life-beginning Spirit, given by our Savior Jesus Christ to His Divine and Sacred Holy Disciples and Apostles, that they should bind and loose the sins of humans, having told them: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain them, they are retained.” [John 20: 22–23]. And again, “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” [Matthew 18:18]. And because this divine Grace was transferred from them to us one after the other, we regard as forgiven [*echomen synkechōrēmenon*] our spiritual child [name of recipient], in anything that he or she as a human has sinned, and has transgressed in the face of God, by word or deed or thought, voluntarily or involuntarily, and with all his/her senses, and if he or she be under the curse or the excommunication of an archbishop or of a priest, or of his/her mother or father, or if he or she has fallen under his/her own anathema, or he or she has disobeyed an oath, or if at various times, being human, he or she has been pierced through with other sins, and has confessed these [sins] to his/her spiritual fathers, and has accepted with [all his/her] heart the penance [imposed by them] and has eagerly sought to fulfill it. Therefore, we absolve him/her of the guilt and the bond of all such [sins], and we regard him/her free and forgiven [*eleutheron echomen kai synkechōrēmenon*], by the omnipotent authority and grace of the Divine and venerated Spirit. And whatever he or she has left unconfessed, because of forgetfulness, all these may the merciful God forgive him/her, for His philanthropy [love of humanity, lit. “*philanthropian*”]. By the intercessions of Our All-blessed Lady Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary, and of the Holy, Glorious and Most-Laudable Apostle James the *Adelphotheos*

¹⁷ According to Iliou (“Synchōrochartia I,” 41–42), after the first appearance of printed versions of these documents in the 17th century, it soon became customary for the patriarchs of Jerusalem to issue them for the living, and (by the beginning of the 19th century) for the patriarchs of Constantinople to issue them for the dead. Still, as Iliou also notes (*ibid.*, 49–50), the other two patriarchates, of Antioch and Alexandria, also issued their own manuscript and printed letters for the living, as the example of Patriarch Makarios of Antioch (see below) testifies: Iliou, “Synchōrochartia II,” 3–4.

[Brother of God], and first hierarch of Jerusalem, and of all Saints. Amen.¹⁸

A brief analysis of the letter produces the following conclusions. Despite the initial customary deprecatory term “our modesty,” the issuer immediately asserts the power of keys as founded on apostolic succession and on the relevant biblical passages. Second, the letter makes a distinction between confessed and unconfessed sins: the former are remitted, but final absolution for the latter is reserved for God. This distinction echoes the Eastern Orthodox understanding of absolution as a gift from God in the presence of the spiritual father’s witness.¹⁹ Third, it is noteworthy that the letter makes special mention of several canonical prohibitions (anathema or excommunication, a curse [whether parental, priestly, or self-inflicted], oath taking and its breach). In all these cases, the individual believer ran the risk of finding himself or herself isolated from family and community and ultimately ostracized in the eyes of God and humans. All in all, one may conclude that *synchōrochartia* provided a form of security to the individual believer when facing the vicissitudes of life, the prospect of abrupt death, and the unpredictability of salvation in the afterlife.²⁰

If that was the intended use of these letters, then the question arises regarding how they fit into the general absolutory tradition of the Eastern Orthodox Church. As scholars have repeatedly noted, the Orthodox Church’s penitential practice, as compared to that of the Roman Catholic Church, paid less attention to the formal fulfill-

¹⁸ My translation of one of Patriarch Dositheos’ letters of absolution, from the Greek text as found in Iliou, “Synchōrochartia I,” 64 (and 65 for an image of the actual indulgence). Terms in square brackets are my additions. It should be noted that I use “he or she” because the Greek text uses the neuter term *teknon* (child) as in ‘spiritual child’ (*kata pneuma teknon*); the equivalent in Slavic is *po dukhu chado*. For Greek sample versions of almost identical letters of absolution to the one translated here, found handwritten or printed in Greek *euchologia* or *nomokanones* of the 17th century, see also Almazov, *Tainaia ispoved’*, 3, appendix to vol. 2, part 3:76–77. See also, appendix C for printed *synchōrocharti* issued by Patriarch Hierotheos of Jerusalem in 1875.

¹⁹ See, for example, Hall, “A View from the Foothills,” 120–132.

²⁰ The above is a précis of a more substantial discussion of Eastern Orthodox patriarchal letters of absolution that is the focus of a separate study of mine, currently under preparation and provisionally entitled “Weapons of the Sinful and of Orthodox Hierarchs: The Use of Indulgences in Eastern Orthodoxy.”

ment of penance, and placed more emphasis on the willingness of the penitent to undertake penance.²¹ The Orthodox letters of remission certainly reflect this tradition. As a result, they also share many lexical and conceptual elements found in other Orthodox liturgical and devotional texts, such as the rites of confession and burial, in which the clergy act as mediators in the granting of pardon.²²

Nevertheless, despite their widespread use in the Eastern Orthodox world, *synchōrochartia* never received extensive theological justification. It is noteworthy that the Council of Constantinople in 1727 officially adopted *synchōrochartia* as appropriate and justified equivalents of papal indulgences, but never expounded on their theological and devotional utility with reference to their prior use.²³ (Hereafter, *synchōrochartia* will be referred to as ‘Ortho-

²¹ See, among others, Angelopoulos, *Hē Metanoia*; Androustos, *Dogmatikē*, 376–389; Rhallēs, *Peri tōn mystērion*; Amato, *Il sacramento della penitenza*; Chryssavgis, *Repentance and Confession*; Almazov, *Tainia ispoved’*; Hall, “A View from the Foothills;” Pomazansky, *Orthodox Dogmatic Theology*, esp. 286–294; Smirnov, *Drevne-russkii dukhovnik*; Kraienhorst, *Buß- und Beichtordnungen*; and “Ob epitimiakh i takazyvaemykh indul’gentsiakh,” 406–441. On canon law, see Levin, *Sex and Society*, esp. the introduction; Kaiser, *Growth of the Law*, esp. ch. 2; and Pavlov, *Nomokanon pri Bol’shom Trebnike*.

²² Iliou, “Synchōrochartia I,” 39. For prayers of absolution in the Russian rite of confession, see *Service Book*, ed. Hapgood, 228; cf. *Trebnik* (Jordanville, 1961), pt. 1: 39v–40; King, *Rites and Ceremonies*, 226 (prayer in rite of confession). For prayers in Greek, see *Mikron Euchologion*, 150–151 (prayer in rite of confession). For a substantial number of Greek and Slavic prayers connected with the rite of confession, see Almazov, *Tainia ispoved’* 3, appendix to volume 2, part 2.

²³ The decision of the council reads as follows: “We confess that the authority to absolve sins, which, when given in writing to the pious, the Eastern Church of Christ calls *synchōrochartia*, and the Latins call indulgences (*indoulnketzas*), is given by Christ in the Holy Church, and that their use is one of the most salutary refuges. [We confess] that these *synchōrochartia* are given in the whole Catholic Church by all four most holy Patriarchs, of Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, and Jerusalem. [We confess] that they are given frugally and with spiritual reproach, and to whom and whenever is appropriate, in the exact manner that the Eastern Church follows in such matters, and not in the manner of the Latins, through which develops immeasurable license and misuse, from which [license and misuse] everybody remembers what evils followed in the Western Church. And to say that only the Pope has the exclusive authority to grant such [letters of absolution] is an obvious lie and a result

dox indulgences.) That task was pretty much the work of two 17th-century theologians, Patriarch Dositheos of Jerusalem and the monk Nikolaos Koursoulas (ca. 1602–1652).²⁴ In his history of the Jerusalem patriarchate, Dositheos devoted a whole chapter to a discussion of papal indulgences. In it, he criticized both papal pretenses to exclusive rights in issuing them as well as the main Latin theological positions underlying the practice. In particular, Dositheos attacked the doctrines of the treasury of the church and of vicarious satisfaction, and attempted to show that Latin theologians themselves disagreed on important points.

In the concluding section of his chapter on papal indulgences, Dositheos summarized in five points what he believed to be the Eastern theology of indulgences:

- 1) All patriarchs, bishops, and spiritual fathers, not just the pope, share in the power of the keys, and therefore can offer absolution of sin.
- 2) Christ's sacrifice was the ultimate source of salvation, not any purported treasury of the church.
- 3) Since the patriarchs are in "some extraordinary sense" the successors to the Apostles, they have the authority to issue *synchōrocharia* not only to those who confessed to patriarchs in person, but to any believer.
- 4) A patriarch's absolution letter is not a second absolution of sins (supplementary to one received from a confessor), but rather a more official certificate of repentance, granted as an example for the edification of others by the memory of sins (in other words, the certificate serves as a reminder of sinful behavior for which absolution has been granted). Such a letter eliminates any penance owed, especially "if in any occasion it has not been fulfilled," but presupposes true contrition.
- 5) The Eastern Church accepts "satisfaction" in penance, but not in a sense that lends itself to a doctrine of purgatory.²⁵

of the absurd innovation of the Latins." As cited in: Karmirēs, *Ta dogmatika kai symbolika mnēmeia*, 2:867–868 (translation mine).

²⁴ Here, I provide only a brief summary of their views, specifically focusing on the function of indulgences. For more information, see Chrissidis, "Weapons of the Sinful and of Orthodox Hierarchs." On Patriarch Dositheos, see Dura, *Ho Dositheos Hierosolymōn*; and Podskalsky, *Griechische Theologie*, passim. On Koursoulas, see Podskalsky, *Griechische Theologie*, 242–244.

²⁵ See Dositheos, *Historia*, book. 9, ch. 12, pp. 80–111, esp. 102–103 (on satisfaction: Dositheos emphasizes its medicinal/therapeutic, rather than

Dositheos was clearly conversant with the Western theology of indulgences, but disagreed with certain elements. For him, the crux of the matter centered on two points: negation of papal exclusive prerogative in granting indulgences, and rejecting temporal punishment in the form of penance when the penitent showed true contrition. According to Dositheos, then, Orthodox indulgences were public certificates of contrition that absolved the penitent from sins and eliminated the need to fulfill penance.²⁶

Koursoulas's view was quite similar. A graduate of the Greek College of Rome, Koursoulas was heavily influenced by Latin theology. After providing a detailed theological explanation of the concept of satisfaction, Koursoulas mentioned that those requesting such Orthodox indulgences wished to appeal (*enstatikōs*) to a higher authority in the church, and firmly concluded that patriarchal indulgences eliminated any canonical penance. But he also added that the penitent would be better off if he tried to fulfill penance anyway, as a caveat against falling into the same sins.²⁷

Synchōrochartia in the Eastern Church equipped the living with official proof of absolution and helped them to eliminate penance. They may even have been utilized as a safeguard against the possibility that sudden death might prevent the fulfillment of penance. But what if one had not been able to procure such a formal declaration of absolution and had died without prior confession, or, even worse, in a state of canonical prohibition? It is to these matters that we now turn.

punitive, value) and 109–111 (concluding remarks summarizing Orthodox teaching on *synchōrochartia*). For sample Orthodox critiques of the doctrine of satisfaction, see, e. g., “Ob epitimiiakh i tak nazyvaemykh indulgentsiakh”; and Androutsos, *Dogmatikē*, 387–389.

²⁶ In this context, Dositheos' views on the purgatory are pertinent: Early on in life, Dositheos seems to have accepted some sense of purgatorial expiatory punishments after death. Later on, especially from the 1690s onward, he switched his position and rejected their existence. He also denied that there was any distinction between guilt and temporal punishment. He thus concluded that if the first is forgiven, then the latter is remitted as well, leaving no need for satisfaction in the Western sense. See Ware, *Eustratius Argenti*, 150–151; Karmirēs, *Hē homologia tēs orthodoxou pisteōs*.

²⁷ Koursoulas, *Synopsis tēs Hieras Theologias*, 2: 425–426. Koursoulas' theology remained unpublished in the early modern period, but was quite popular in manuscript form in the 17th through the 19th centuries. See Iliou, “*Synchōrochartia I*,” 40n9.

Indulgences for the Dead: The Case of the Greek Orthodox East

There is very little evidence that the Greeks employed a practice of placing a written prayer in the hands of the dead comparable to the custom practiced in Russia.²⁸ The Greeks did, however, ask for remission of sins posthumously for their dead relatives. They addressed all such requests to the patriarch of Constantinople, who then issued an extensive synodal letter of absolution. As in the case of letters of absolution for living persons, the indulgence for the dead became standardized with the appearance of large print runs (in this case, in the beginning of the 19th century). The following is a sample of such a letter.

Our Modesty, praying together with the Most Holy and Most Blessed Patriarchs, dear in the Holy Spirit and most beloved brothers and co-celebrants, and together with the most sacred fellow brothers Arch-hierarchs and Honored ones, by the divine grace and authority of the Most Holy, Life-Giving and Mystery-Presiding (*teletarchikou*) Spirit; [which authority was] given by our Lord, God, and Savior Jesus Christ to his divine and holy Disciples and Apostles, that they should bind and loose the sins of humans, having told them, "Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain them, they are retained." [John 20: 22–23]. And again, "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." [Matthew 18: 18]. And because this divine and never-emptying Grace was transferred from them to us one after the other, we regard as forgiven [blank space for name(s) to be added] and absolved of all psychic and bodily sin, both at the present time and in the time to come, in any-

²⁸ For example, the *nomokanon* of Manouël Malaxos includes a sample prayer that the father confessor would write out and place in the hand of the deceased "for the fear of *telōnia* [i.e., toll houses, where the demons stood interrogating the soul] of the air": see *Nomokanon Manouël Notariou*, 462. But the practice does not appear to have caught on among the Greeks. In fact, the text rarely appears in *euchologia* of the early modern period. See Almazov, *Tainaia Ispoved'*, 2:253–254. On the other hand, there is some evidence that patriarchal indulgences for the living may have functioned in a similar manner. See the comments in Iliou, "Synchōrochartia I," 42, esp. 42n14. On at least one occasion from the second half of the 20th century, a *synchōrocharti* was placed on the mouth of a deceased woman before burial: she had acquired it while on pilgrimage to Jerusalem in the 1950s (personal communication with Prof. Antonis Liakos, University of Athens, Greece, August 2006).

thing that they, as humans, sinned and transgressed in the face of God, by word or deed or thought, voluntarily or involuntarily, knowingly or unknowingly, openly or stealthily (*aphanōs*), and in all their senses. And if they were under the curse of their Mother or Father; or if they fell under their own anathema; or if they took an oath and broke it; or if they swore a false oath; or if at some time they received an Ecclesiastical curse and excommunication by a Priest, or Arch-hierarchy or Patriarch for whatever reason and, due to sluggishness, they did not receive forgiveness; or if they embittered one of the clergy by word or deed, and they received from him an insoluble bond; or if their tongue jumped ahead of their mind, and they said and verbalized what they ought not have; or if they did not steer a course in accordance with God's will and their Christian profession; but if they went astray and they acted publicly (*epoliteusanto*) in a manner that was not just; or if they neglected and broke faith with his Divine commandments and legal commands; or if they were overtaken by pride, and they decided beyond what they ought to have, and they imagined great things about themselves, having taken on as second nature the stealthy suggestions of the avenging spirit (*physiothentes hypovolais tou alastoros*); or if they were the subject of written Ecclesiastical documents of penance, issued at different times and for diverse sensible reasons, and hence they were subjected to a bond of penance; or if they lied by mouth and lips at some point because of base love of profit, or for another reason; or if, bearing malice, they developed insistent wrath against someone and managed to bring about harm and damage on that person; or if, because of their greediness and their hardened souls, they did not give alms to the poor; or if, slackened by indifference (*akēdeia*), they neglected their prayer and the established rituals of the Church; or if they did not observe the fasting days although they [suffered no] bodily need; or if they did not keep the holidays [by not working]; or if they blackened the beauty of their souls and they soiled the divinely woven uniform of divine Baptism through absurd memories, thoughts and gestures that did not befit their Christian profession; or if they engaged in witchcraft, trickery, and satanic songs; or if they disobeyed their spiritual fathers, and they looked down upon and transgressed those things that they promised to keep; or if they were pierced through by other emotional sins and transgressions at various times, and in various places and modes during their lifetime in any way whatsoever; and they fell down as is customary among humans; and if, having repented about all these things, they confessed everything to their spiritual fathers and they whole-heartedly accepted the penance imposed by them, and they eagerly sought to fulfill it, but they did not manage to perform [penance completely], because they were snatched away by fate [i.e., death] and hence they did not receive forgiveness. Therefore, we absolve them of the guilt and

the bond of all these, their known and unknown sins and transgressions, and we consider them free and we restore them forgiven by the gift, omnipotent authority and grace of the Most Holy and revered Spirit. And if, because of forgetfulness or some other human frailty, they left unconfessed some things, all these may the merciful and human-loving God forgive them, for His philanthropy and extreme goodness. Yes, Master, all-merciful Lord Jesus Christ, our God, may your immeasurable mercy and your incomparable philanthropy be victorious, and may You not overlook your own creation so that it is swallowed by destruction. But hearken unto us, your sinful supplicants, pleading on behalf of these, your servants who have fallen asleep [blank for names] and absolve them of all psychic and bodily bond which hang over them in any way. And forgive them compassionately all the things that they did badly and senselessly, overlooking everything sympathetically and philanthropically according to your ineffable mercy and the multitude of your goodness. Place the abyss of your mercies against the multitude of their sins. And wipe off all their acts of lawlessness. For you have a plenitude of streams of mercy, and a sea of sympathy, and an abyss of compassion. And relieve them of the eternal punishment, and make them worthy of your kingdom, and of standing to your right. And dissolve their bodies to what they were made of, and consent that they become earth. For you said, Lord, “You are earth and you will go into earth.” And place their souls in the land of living and in the houses of the just, and count them together with your select ones, where the light of Your face stands guard and pleases all your saints from all time. Bent by compassion and by our warm pleadings and requests, which we were appointed to offer without hesitation both for our sins and for the ignorance of lay people, who were ransomed from the curse of law through your honorable and undefiled blood. Oh human-loving and all-merciful Lord, through the intercessions and supplications of your Undefiled mother, Our Mistress Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary; of the honorable and glorious Prophet, Forerunner and Baptist John; of the Holy, Glorious and All-Laudable Divine Messengers and spirit-carrying Apostles, and of all saints who have pleased you since the beginning of time. Amen.

[Date. Signatures follow.]²⁹

The above text shares certain similarities with Orthodox indulgences for the living. First, it makes a forceful assertion of the power of keys and absolves the dead of any sins that they had confessed and for which they had undertaken penance. Similarly,

²⁹ Iliou, “Synchōrochartia I,” 65–69.

it presupposes sincerity and true contrition at confession, as well as the willingness to undertake penance on the part of the believer while alive. However, as is obvious, it also differs markedly from the letters of absolution for the living. First and foremost, it is more extensive, going beyond the simple assertion of absolution for all sins that were committed by word or deed or thought, to include an enumeration of a multitude of canonical lapses. Second, despite the assertion of the power of keys, and the offering of patriarchal absolution, the letter is markedly more pleading in tone. In fact, the last third of the text is characterized by direct petitions to God to grant His mercy on behalf of the dead. Nevertheless, the text avoids any references to a vengeful God and instead emphasizes God's generosity and mercy. Noticeably, the word "mercy" and its derivatives appear multiple times throughout the text. In that sense, as in the case of indulgences for the living, patriarchal letters of absolution for the dead also reflect the Orthodox emphasis on the benevolent and magnanimous characteristics of God. At the same time, by the very fact that only the patriarch of Constantinople could issue indulgences for the dead, these letters reconfirm the patriarch's authority as the supreme mediator, who pleads before God on behalf of his dead flock.³⁰

Little, if any, theological discussion of these letters has been undertaken in modern Greek theology.³¹ Neither Dositheos nor Koursoulas touched upon them specifically and, therefore, their views on the matter, if any, remain unknown. However, given that the texts contained posthumous absolution of confessed sins for which penance had been assigned, it would appear that they can be legitimately called Eastern Orthodox indulgences for the dead.³² But since these texts became codified much later, in the beginning of the 19th century, it seems reasonable to assume that they did not influence the form of the *razreshitel'naia molitva* in

³⁰ It should be added here that a good part of the text comes from a prayer for resolving any curse or excommunication, which appears in Greek *euchologia*. This similarity probably points to the original function of these letters: they were initially issued in behalf of those who died while excommunicated. Therefore, it was their relatives' obligation to secure their posthumous pardon.

³¹ It should be emphasized that indulgences for the dead attempted to cover a plethora of potential canonical lapses, and not just excommunication. For a discussion of excommunication in particular, see Michaēlares, *Aphorismos*.

³² Iliou also makes this argument: "Synchōrochartia I."

Russia. In any case, the actual text of the latter is clearly closer to the text of the patriarchal indulgences for the living, in both length and, more importantly, in content. It is to this issue that we now turn.

Comparison between *Razreshitel'naia Molitva* and *Synchōrocharti* for the Living

A comparison between the *razreshitel'naia molitva* used in Russia on behalf of the dead and an Eastern Orthodox *synchōrocharti* for the living produces the following observations (see appendix A, for the two texts with their textual similarities underlined): Both prayers are primarily an ultimate attempt by a spiritual father to implore God to offer forgiveness. The Orthodox indulgence for the living guarantees absolution in the here and now for all sins confessed, even though the penance may have not been completed. The Russian prayer's tone is a pleading one; the indulgence's alternates between positive certainty of absolution for some sins and hope that others will also be forgiven.

At the same time, however, the similarities between the Russian prayer of absolution for the dead and the patriarchal indulgence for the living are striking:

1. Both texts begin with a forceful assertion of the “power of keys.”
2. Both texts emphasize canonically anomalous situations that heavily influence the individual's standing within the Christian community (understood as one encompassing both the living and the dead) and before God.
3. Both texts underscore the importance of true contrition in confession.
4. Both texts implore God to confer absolution even for sins that were left unconfessed because of forgetfulness connected to human frailty.

Already in 1900, the Archpriest Kl. Fomenko discussed what he called the “absolatory liturgies” performed on the request of pilgrims in the Church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem. According to him, Greek bishops presided over the proceedings, which included the reading of an “absolatory prayer” above the head of the believer. A pilgrim furnished Fomenko with such a printed prayer issued by Patriarch of Jerusalem Nikodēmos in 1890. The printed prayer reminded Fomenko of *antimēnsia* (altar cloths), with

the text occupying the place where Christ's burial would normally be in an *antimēnsion*. The text's Russian translation was not without its problems, Fomenko remarked, and cited it verbatim. More importantly, he noted that the text was that of the absolutionary prayer placed in the hands of the dead during burial in Russia. Thus, the origin of the prayer was not Russian, but rather, a translation of a Greek prayer. Finally, Fomenko expressed his concern over the potentially incorrect interpretation of the absolutionary liturgies.³³ Father Vasilii Prilutskii also remarked on the similarities of the two prayers. In his in-depth study of certain rites of the Russian Orthodox Church of the 16th and early 17th centuries, Prilutskii, following Fomenko, suggested an "eastern origin" (his term) of the burial prayer of absolution.³⁴

The above comparison provides support for Fomenko's remarks. It is, therefore, certain that the text of the *razreshitel'naia molitva* that Russians have placed in the hands of the dead since at least the late 19th century (if not before) is in fact an almost verbatim rendering of the text of an Eastern Orthodox *synchōrocharti* for the living. The 19th-century form of the burial prayer of absolution is certainly much closer textually to a *synchōrocharti* for the living than it is, for example, to the equivalent prayers of absolution in Russian service books of the period before the middle of the 17th century.³⁵

A question arises regarding the reason for the adoption of this particular Greek text by the Russian Orthodox Church. Assuming that this adoption transpired sometime between the second half of the 17th century (as some scholars have argued) and the

³³ Fomenko, "Zametka," is based on his experiences as a pilgrim to the Holy Land.

³⁴ Prilutskii, *Chastnoe bogosluzhenie*, 254, fn. 3.

³⁵ With regard to burial prayers of absolution up to the mid-17th century, Prilutskii distinguishes two categories: those to be read above the coffin (*nad grobom*) and those to be read above the body of the deceased and then placed in his/her hand before interment. In practice, however, there appears to have been far more variation, as prayers of the first category were prescribed to be placed in the hands of the dead on many occasions. Further, Prilutskii distinguishes two main variants of the second category, and speaks of another three secondary variants. See *Chastnoe bogosluzhenie*, 248–263. As indicated above (note 34), Prilutskii had rejected a Russian origin for the burial prayer of absolution of the second category.

beginning of the 19th, I would propose that this borrowing was conditioned by *at least* two developments: 1) the widespread popularity of patriarchal indulgences in Orthodox Slavdom in the early modern period; and 2) the Russian tsarist court's gradual adoption of the custom of accepting indulgences from itinerant Greek Orthodox patriarchs. Let us consider each of these factors in turn.³⁶

Patriarchal indulgences became popular in Slavic communities of the Balkans starting in the 16th century, and certainly in Ukraine and Belarus by the early 17th, if not before. As for Russia, one scholar has suggested that such letters do not appear to have circulated widely, and contemporary witnesses confirm this view.³⁷ For example, in the mid-17th century, Juraj Križanić (the Croatian traveler and thinker) lamented that the ex-patriarch of Constantinople, Athanasios Patellaros, was peddling indulgences to important people (*nobilibus*) in Ruthenia (*per Russiam*) having printed them in Kiev in Ruthenian Slavic (*lingua Russiaca*) without any mention of confession or of penance. He further remarked that the poor souls who received the documents treated them as great treasures and ordered that the indulgences accompany them to their graves. He also reported the case of one metropolitan who continually advertised absolution letters to people of means. Having succeeded in convincing a well-to-do individual to purchase one, Križanić continued, the metropolitan went to the penitent's home, blessed it with holy water, and read above him the absolution letter without any prior confession.³⁸

A perusal of Paul of Aleppo's well-known travelogue confirms Križanić's observations and complements them further. On their way to Moscow and back, in the mid-17th century, Paul and his father, Patriarch Makarios of Antioch (in office 1647–1672), were, to

³⁶ A third and potentially important factor may have been the Nikonian reform of liturgical books. I intend to examine this issue in a separate study.

³⁷ Senyk, "Rites and Charters of Remission," 436–437.

³⁸ What he means by *Russia* in this particular case is not entirely clear. However, at this point in his account he enumerates a number of Orthodox clerical practices that he considers harmful. In the immediately previous entry (on the ordination of people who were virtual strangers to the itinerant Greek patriarchs and metropolitans) he refers to *Russia* again, but then specifies *Minorem* and *Albam* (i.e., Ukraine and Belarus). He does not make a similar qualification on *Russia* in his discussion of indulgences. Križanić, *Russkoe gosudarstvo*, 2:191–193.

their pleasant surprise, continually pestered in Ukraine and Belarus for indulgences by nobles, Cossacks, monks, nuns, and townspeople of all ages and of both genders. In other words, the demand for them in the Ruthenian “market” came from all social strata.³⁹

In Muscovite Russia, however, the situation appears to have been different. If Paul of Aleppo is again to serve as our source, then granting such charters was confined to the circles of the royal court. Right before Makarios’ departure, the tsar had an audience with him and asked him to provide letters of absolution for himself and members of his family, as well as for members of boyar families. Makarios duly obliged, and Paul distributed them accordingly. In his account, Paul specified that these were letters Makarios had printed in Kiev.⁴⁰ There is evidence that this was not an isolated incident. The occasion of another departure, that of Patriarch Paisios of Alexandria (in office 1657–1678) in 1669, served similarly as an opportunity for Tsar Aleksei and his family to receive written remissions of sins.⁴¹ Moreover, lay people were not the only believers interested in them. The same Patriarch Makarios granted indulgences to the nuns at the New Maiden (Novodevichii) Monastery. As Paul notes, however, this cloister was largely populated by Ukrainian and Belarusian nuns transferred there by the tsar.⁴² Given the constraints (limited freedom of movement and only

³⁹ See Paul of Aleppo, *Puteshestvie*; and Senyk, “Rites and Charters of Remission.” Paul of Aleppo referred to three kinds of indulgences: folio for the elite people (*vel'mozh*) in the Russian translation; middle-sized letters for the common people (*naroda*), and small sizes for women: Paul of Aleppo, *Puteshestvie*, 2:59; and Senyk, “Rites and Charters of Remission,” 435–436. Senyk conveniently has collected almost all references to indulgences in Paul’s account. She appears to have missed only one (see Paul of Aleppo, *Puteshestvie*, 2: 116), which referenced the occasion of a grant of written remission to the *voevoda* of Putivl', Nikita Alekseevich Ziuzin. On Ziuzin, see also *ibid.*, 3:160; and Barsukov, *Spiski gorodovykh voevod*, 190. As Paul observes, and as is well known from the history of the conflict between Patriarch Nikon and Tsar Aleksei, Nikita Ziuzin was a close associate of Nikon.

⁴⁰ Paul of Aleppo, *Puteshestvie*, 4: 158.

⁴¹ Likhachev, “O razreshitel'nykh gramotakh vostochnykh patriarkhov,” 78. Citing the witness of V. O. Eingorn, who had studied the *grecheskie dela* of the Muscovite Chancellery of Foreign Affairs, Likhachev quotes him as saying that “references to such indulgences (*razreshitel'nykh gramot*) are not rare.” *Ibid.*, 78, fn. 3.

⁴² Paul of Aleppo, *Puteshestvie*, 4: 152.

within the circles of the royal court) under which Patriarch Makarios had to operate while in Muscovy, it is probably not surprising that he did not have the opportunity to distribute indulgences to individual Muscovites of other social strata, assuming that a demand existed.⁴³ Unless more information is uncovered, our current state of knowledge would suggest that letters of absolution were catching on in Russia from the top down, through the contact of high-ranking Greek and Arab clerics with the Muscovite elite, and through the influence of Ukrainian and Belarusian monastics.

Indisputable, however, is that in the middle of the 17th century, Moscow's Printing Office (*Pechatnyi Dvor*), which was under the supervision of the church, became a major alternative outlet for Greek (and Serbian) prelates in search of printing presses for their charters of remission. Specifically, in 1653, the former patriarch of Constantinople, Athanasios (the same Athanasios of Križanić's account), petitioned the tsar to allow the printing of 500 indulgence letters in Ruthenian Slavic (to distribute in Ukraine among Cossacks, as the patriarch specified).⁴⁴ In 1655, the Serbian patriarch, Gabriel (in office 1648–1655), succeeded in having 1,000 of them printed with the consent of Patriarch Nikon. In 1668, Patriarch Makarios of Antioch printed 2,000. In 1669, Patriarch Paisios of Alexandria printed 1,000 for men and 500 for women.⁴⁵ None of these orders appears to have raised any eyebrows in Moscow, at

⁴³ There is evidence that Jerusalem prelates were sending letters of absolution to Russia even before the 17th century. For instance, Patriarch Ioakim informed Grand Prince Vasilii Vasil'evich (before 1462) that his representative to Moscow was ready to distribute such letters to anyone desiring them; and in 1586, Patriarch Sophronios sent a written remission of sins to Tsaritsa Irina, the wife of Tsar Fedor Ivanovich. See Kobeko, "Razreshitel'nye gramoty Ierusalimskikh Patriarkhov."

⁴⁴ Likhachev, "O razreshitel'nykh gramotakh vostochnykh patriarkhov," 78–80.

⁴⁵ For letters of absolution from the patriarchs see Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts (RGADA), Fond 1182, Moskovskii Pechatnyi Dvor (Muscovite Printing Office), opis' 1, No. 57, ff. 38–39v (Gabriel); No. 58, f. 177 (Makarios); No. 66, f. 24 (Paisios). See also Likhachev, "O razreshitel'nykh gramotakh vostochnykh patriarkhov," 78–81. It should be noted that Likhachev also refers to a printed indulgence issued in the name of Paisios Ligarides, one of the well-known protagonists in the deposition of Patriarch Nikon. Likhachev does not specify to whom the letter was offered: *ibid.*, 83. For a first attempt at compiling lists of print runs since the 17th century, see Iliou, "Synchōrochartia I" and "Synchōrochartia II."

least openly, among the higher clergy.⁴⁶ Had the letters been seen as theologically suspect, the highest ecclesiastical authorities of the Russian Church would surely have prevented the completion of the printing orders. The deciding factor among the Muscovite pious seems to have been the extent to which they valued the spiritual guidance, and respected the status, of Orthodox itinerant prelates from the Balkans. Muscovites seem to have accepted Eastern indulgences as valid certificates of their good standing before God.⁴⁷

A further venue that potentially facilitated the transfer of the text from the Greek Orthodox Churches to the Russian in the early modern period may have been the utilization of patriarchal *synchōrochartia* in the burial services of the Russian royal family. In at least one case, there is evidence that a patriarchal letter was sent specifically to rest with a Russian princess in her grave. Indeed, the description of the burial ceremony of Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich's sister, Tsarevna Tat'iana Mikhailovna (died in 1706), specifically mentions that both the *razreshitel'naia molitva* of her spiritual father and a Greek patriarchal indulgence (specified as "sent by the Greek patriarch," although he remains unnamed) were placed in her hands before her interment.⁴⁸ It would, thus, be reasonable to

⁴⁶ Of course, opponents of Patriarch Nikon's reforms were quick to show the doctrinal error and the economic motives behind the distribution of such indulgences by Greek clerics. But it is interesting that this was done only anonymously and within the context of general opposition to Greek meddling in Russian affairs. See, RGADA, Fond 27, op. 1, No. 558: "Spisok s anonimnogo pis'ma tsariu Alekseiu Mikhailovichu o pritesneniakh dukhovenstva ot patriarkhov Iosifa i Nikona...o razreshitel'nykh gramotakh vostochnykh patriarkhov..." (dated 1668), esp. f. 24.

⁴⁷ According to Likhachev, the absence of many surviving examples of indulgences from Russia may stem from the practice of placing them in the hands of the dead during burial. See "O razreshitel'nykh gramotakh vostochnykh patriarkhov," 81. It should also be noted here that starting in the 18th century, many pilgrims to the Holy Land from the Russian Empire received such letters. See *ibid.* 86–87; and Kobeko, "Razreshitel'nye gramoty Ierusalimskikh Patriarkhov," 278, 278n4 (indulgence given to the well-known traveler Vasilii Grigor'evich Barskii). This practice may have been a further contributing factor to the adoption by the Russian Orthodox Church of the indulgence text for the burial absolutory prayer.

⁴⁸ See Talina, *Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich*, 115–117. According to Talina, "napisannuiu na liste molitvu arkhierei podpisivali i vkladyvali v ruku pokoiniku vmeste s 'listom ot grecheskogo patriarkha.'" See the descriptions of Tsarevna Tat'iana's funeral: "O prestavlenii i pogrebenii Tsarevny

propose that a custom initiated by the Muscovite court contributed to the Russian Church's adoption of a modified version of an Eastern indulgence as its text for the *razreshitel'naia molitva* for all Russians.

A last, maybe immodest, note is in order here: in the pre-Revolutionary period, Russian Orthodox scholars realized that the text of the prayer of absolution put in the hands of the dead could be theologically problematic. And they made every effort to explain it away. Conceivably, their uneasiness resulted partially from a certain unwillingness of Orthodox clergy and scholars to countenance a text whose theological analysis could render results mirroring Roman Catholic absolutory beliefs and practices. It is to be hoped that the Orthodox Churches (both Greek and Russian) will move beyond their defensive anti-Catholicism, and will engage in a substantive discussion of the theological implications of both the *razreshitel'nye molitvy* and the *synchōrochartia*.

Tat'iany Mikhailovny," 214–216 (with the erroneous date 1658); and also, "Chin pogrebeniia Tsarevny Tat'iany Mikhailovny," 111–122 (with the correct date, 1706).

BETWEEN FORGIVENESS AND INDULGENCE

Appendix A

Prayer of Absolution	Eastern Orthodox Indulgence
Our Lord, Jesus Christ,	Our modesty,
<u>by his divine grace, gift and authority,</u>	<u>by the Grace and the gift and the authority of the All Holy and Life-beginning Spirit,</u>
<u>given to his holy disciples and apostles,</u>	<u>given by our Savior Jesus Christ to his Divine and Sacred Holy Disciples and Apostles,</u>
<u>to bind and loose the sins of humans,</u>	<u>that they should bind and loose the sins of humans,</u>
<u>having said to them: “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain them, they are retained.” [John 20: 22–23]. “Whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” [Matthew 18:18].</u>	<u>having told them “Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain them, they are retained.” [John 20: 22–23]. And again, “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” [Matthew 18:18].</u>
<u>And because this divine Grace was transferred from them to us one after the other,</u>	<u>And because this divine Grace was transferred from them to us one after the other,</u>
[by this divine grace] through my humble self may he render this spiritual child [blank space to add the name] forgiven	we regard as <u>forgiven</u> [<i>echomen synkechorēmenon</i>] <u>our spiritual child</u> [name of recipient],
<u>in everything that he or she as a human sinned towards God, by word or deed, or thought, and with all his or her senses, willingly or unwillingly, knowingly or unknowingly.</u>	<u>in anything that he or she as a human has sinned, and has transgressed in the face of God, by word or deed or thought, voluntarily or involuntarily, and with all his/her senses.</u>

Prayer of Absolution	Eastern Orthodox Indulgence
<p><u>And if he or she were under the curse or the excommunication of an archbishop or of a priest, or he or she brought upon himself /herself the curse of his/her mother or father, or if he or she fell under his/her own anathema, or he or she disobeyed an oath, or if, being human, he or she bound himself/herself with other sins,</u></p>	<p><u>and if he or she be under the curse or the excommunication of an archbishop or of a priest, or of his/her mother or father, or if he or she has fallen under his/her own anathema, or he or she has disobeyed an oath, or if at various times, being human, he or she has been pierced through with other sins,</u></p>
<p>and repented with a grievous [lit. “contritious”] heart of all these [sins];</p>	<p>and has confessed these [sins] to his/her spiritual Fathers, and has accepted with [all his/her] heart the penance [imposed by them] and has eagerly sought to fulfill it.</p>
<p>and may He [i.e., the Lord] absolve him/her of all guilt and bond</p>	<p>Therefore, we absolve him/her of the guilt and the bond of all such [sins], and we regard him/her free and forgiven [<i>eieutheron echomen kai synkechorēmenon</i>], by the omnipotent authority and grace of the Divine and venerated Spirit.</p>
<p><u>And whatever he or she rendered to oblivion because of human frailty, may [the Lord] forgive him or her for his love of humanity [lit. “philanthropy”], through the prayers of the Most Holy and Most Blessed Our Mistress Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary, of the Holy Glorious and Most-Laudable Apostles, and of All Saints.</u></p>	<p><u>And whatever he or she has left unconfessed, because of forgetfulness, all these may the merciful God forgive him/her, for His philanthropy [love of humanity, lit. ‘<i>philanthropian</i>’]. By the intercessions of Our All-blessed Lady Theotokos and Ever-Virgin Mary, and of the Holy, Glorious and Most-Laudable Apostle James the <i>Adelphotheos</i>, and first hierarch of Jerusalem, and of all Saints.</u></p>
<p>Amen</p>	<p>Amen</p>

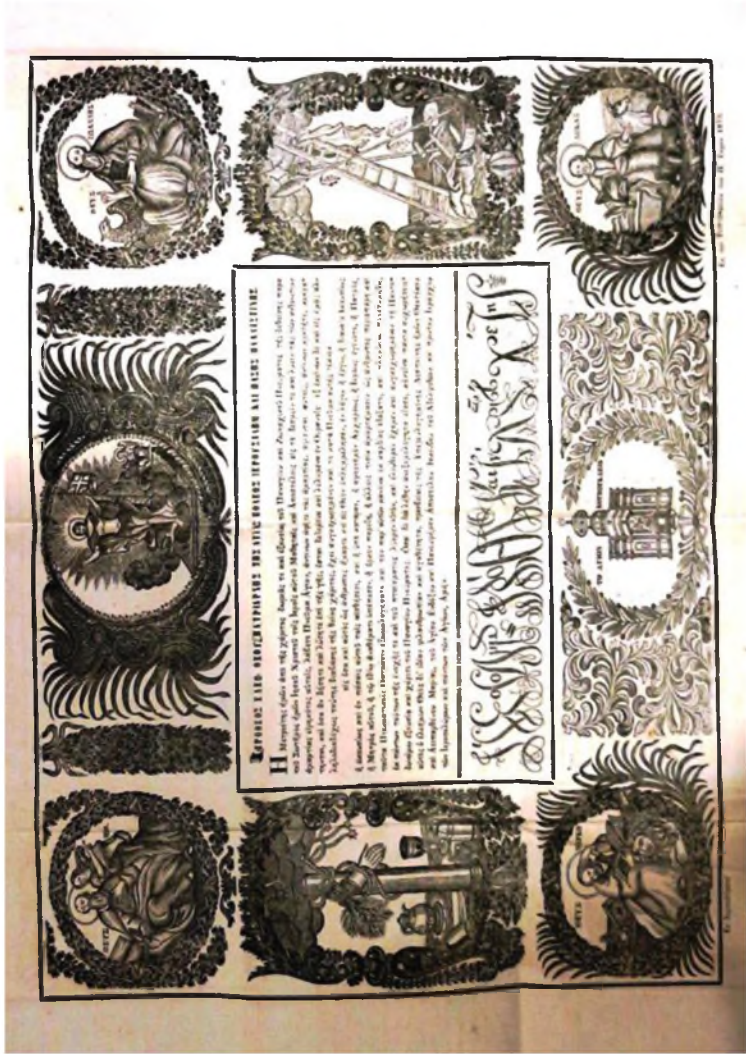
Appendix B



РАЗРЪШИТЕЛЬНАЯ МОЛИТВА.

Гдѣ нашіхъ іисѣхъ хрѣтоѣхъ, кѣеѣственномъ своѣмъ заповѣданію,
 данномъ стѣмъ егѡ ученикомъ и апломъ казати и
 рѣшити грѣхи челоѣковъ [рѣкъ бо имъ: прѣимитѣ дѣа стѣаго,
 и мѣже шѣщитѣ грѣхи, шѣщитѣ еѣ имъ: и имѣже держитѣ,
 держатѣ: и еѣлика ѣще свѣжетѣ и разрѣшитѣ на земан,
 бѣдѣтѣхъ свѣзана и разрѣшена и на небесѣ]. Ѡ ѡнѣхъ же и на ны
 дрѣгѣ дрѣгопрѣиматѣльнѡ пришедшѡ блѡдатію, дѣромъ же и
 властію да сотворитѣ чрезѣ мене смиреннаго прощѣю и еѣ по
 дрѣхѣ чѣдо [имѣрекѣ] Ѡ всѣхъ еѣлика, ѣкъ челоѣкѣхъ, согрѣши
 бѣсѣ словомъ или дѣломъ, или мыслію, и всѣмн своѣмн
 чѣстѣвы, колѣю или неколѣю, вѣдѣнѣемъ или невѣдѣнѣемъ:
 ѣще же подѣ каѣтѡю или шѣлѣченѣемъ архѣерѣекнмъ или іерѣн-
 екнмъ быетѣ, или каѣтѣсѣ Ѡтца своѣгѡ или мѣтерѣ своѣѣ
 навѣдѣ на еѣ, или своѣмѣ прокѣтѣю подпадѣ, или каѣтѣсѣ
 прѣстѣпнѣ, или ннѣмн нѣкнмн грѣхи ѣкъ челоѣкѣхъ свѣзѣса:
 но Ѡ всѣхъ еѣхъ еѣрдѣемъ сокрѣшеннмъ покѣса, и Ѡ тѣхъ
 всѣхъ кнны и ѡзѣ грѣхѡвнмъ да разрѣшитѣ егѡ [ѡ]:
 еѣлика же за нѣмѡшь еѣстѣтѣлѣ забкѣнѣю прѣдадѣ, и тѣ кѣѣ
 да прощѣтѣ еѣмѣ [ѣн] челоѣколѣѣтѣ радн своѣгѡ, мо-
 лнтѣамн прѣстѣлѣ и прѣблѡгословѣннмъ влѣцѣ на-
 шѣѣ еѣцѣ и прѣодѣвѣ мѣрн, стѣхъ слаѣ-
 ннхъ и кѣсѣвѣальннхъ апѡстѣлѣ,
 и всѣхъ стѣхъ.
 ѣминѣ.

Copy of the contemporary prayer of absolution
 placed in the hands of the dead



Synchōrocharti (Orthodox indulgence) for the living, 1875, issued by Patriarch Hierotheos of Jerusalem

Author's personal collection

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