

SUMAROKOV THE ORTHODOX PLAYWRIGHT

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Aleksandr Petrovich Sumarokov was born in 1717 near Villmanstrand (Lappeenranta, now in Finland) in a noble family. Raised in St. Petersburg, he received in Cadet Corps in 1732-1740 not only a military education, but also a broad scientific, literary, and linguistic education. He began writing in the Corps, in particular, songs, which became quite popular at that time. He was appointed in 1742 an adjutant of count A. G. Razumovskii, a secret husband of tsarina Elizabeth I, and he was in charge of *leib*-company. In 1756-1761, he became the first director of the first permanent theater in Russia. He spent the last years of his life in Moscow as a professional writer. He died in poverty in 1777.

Sumarokov is primarily remembered as a founder of the Russian theater: he wrote 20 plays, two operas (first Russian operas), and the first Russian ballet. He was a gifted poet; his poetry, much of it spiritual, used a wide range of genres, which includes a poetic paraphrase of the Psalter (1774), over 370 fables, and some 130 songs. He was an editor of Russia's first private literary journal, *The industrious bee*, which lasted for only a year (1759). Also, along with his contemporaries, Lomonosov and Trediakovskii, Sumarokov participated in forming the Russian literary language.

Sumarokov was keenly interested in religious issues, and his religious views found an outlet in many of his articles, in poetry, and also in his theater.

G o d

About the principal theological matter of the existence and attributes of God Sumarokov had very little to say. Sometimes he was simply satisfied with the statement that "God certainly exists" (*Some articles on virtue* 6.250; *The time of death* 1.236).¹ He said in *The foundation of philosophy* (1772), "I do not doubt at all, who is God, seeing Him everywhere in nature" (6.283). He

¹ References are made to A. П. Сумароков, *Полное собрание всех сочинений в стихах и прозе*, Москва: Университетская тип. у Н. Новикова 1781-1782, vols. 1-10.

elaborated very little on that point just by stating that God revealed His wisdom in the makeup of the world. He pointed to the change of seasons, and to day and night as examples of God's work, and he saw the wisdom of the makeup of the eye, the ear, the senses, and the limbs as the expression of supreme wisdom that shaped human body. He also mentioned the Sun which is made out of aether and gives life to humans, animals, and plants (6.287), the Sun which – according to the *Hymn about wisdom of God in the Sun* (1760) – is “the life and the beauty of nature, / The source of eternity and an image of the divine”, “the purest, stormy fire, a lamp before the eternal” that “proclaims the glory of God / Praising the Creator in all the earth” (1.224-225). With these brief remarks, Sumarokov endorsed physico-theology forcefully expressed by Lomonosov and elaborately presented by Trediakovskii in his *Theoptia*.

Sumarokov also stated that “no Philosopher doubted about Him”² and summoned the names of Spinoza, who “felt Him in his spirit, being the best of men” (*The foundation of philosophy* 6.283), and Epicurus, who thought that God created the world and did not care afterwards about it (284).³ This is in a stark contrast to Trediakovskii's vitriolic criticism of Spinoza and Epicurus.

Natural reason can discover God in or rather through nature; at least philosophers of all ages agree on that. However, natural reason cannot fathom the essence of God (6.283). That requires revelation, and this is an area that Sumarokov did not want to enter. When discussing eschatology, he asked, “What will be after our end? Good to the good, bad to the bad. Would not someone think that I am thereby confirming the [existence of] heaven and hell? No, heaven and hell do not belong to natural reasoning, and I am not writing about revelation, but I am doing metaphysics in natural way: this is a matter for the clergy, although I have no intention to write anything contrary to sacred scriptures, and I do not include in the foundation of my philosophy even a single word contrary to religion” (286). Sumarokov accepted Orthodox theology and left theological matters to Orthodox theologians limiting himself to what can be discovered about religious matters through the use of natural reason. On the other hand, he wanted the clergy to be equally tolerant in respect to the natural reason: in his utopian vision, he saw a clergy to be

² Not only philosophers, but “except for those who lost their mind, everyone under the Sun believes” in God (*Mother, daughter's rival* 2:1/6.78).

³ Epicurus never claimed it. The view better fits Plato, whose Demiurge molded the world and submitted the rest of the creative work to the gods he first shaped. Epicurus, however, did believe in the existence of gods in the *intermundia*: A. Drozdek, *Greek philosophers as theologians*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 2007, ch. 18.

equally nonintrusive in the matters of science (*A dream: a happy society* 6.385).

God can be discovered not only in nature, but also in oneself, in one's own conscience. Conscience is "a spark of God" in us that is "always opposed to wrongdoing: and this talent given to us by God for the conduct of life tells us both who God is, what virtue should be, and also what is reward and punishment after death" (*Speech on the love of neighbor* 2.344; *Some articles on virtue* 6.249; *On a new philosophical sect* 10.143). Is the concept of God and of virtue inborn? In the article *On human understanding according to Locke*, there is a strong rejection of any inborn concepts (6.322-325). However, the article seems to be nothing else but a summary of Locke's views, with no discussion of its validity, with no rejection, but also with no endorsement. The article should be treated as though it were written by Locke himself.⁴ Even if Sumarokov did endorse Locke at that point, Sumarokov's own discussion of conscience indicates that conscience itself, the ability of having the concept of God and of virtue, is inborn and, even if the concept is not inborn, then this faculty is so constructed that it inevitably engenders the concept of God and of virtue. Sumarokov always could call on Paul's statements indicating universality of such functionality of conscience (Rom. 2:15).

One outcome of some understanding by conscience of who God is, is the belief in the resurrection. First, Sumarokov simply stated that God revealed Himself in nature as merciful (6.286), which presumably stems from orderliness of the world and thus God's care about how the world functions and thus about his mercy toward His creation. Then, as Sumarokov explained in his *Speech on the love of neighbor*, people can be certain of the resurrection of the dead even if the Scriptures did not speak about it, since it would not be compatible with God's mercy that He created humans for a short time, gave them the desire for eternal life, and yet they would "come back into eternal nonexistence" (2.341, *The foundation of philosophy* 6.286, 288). As expressed in the poem, *The time of death*,

Was I, my God, created by you
To taste this fear [of death]
And turn into dust?
The generous and omnipotent power
– It cannot be, that it could endure anything more cruel;

⁴ The "article is presented as a statement of Locke's opinion rather than Sumarokov's": M. C. Levitt, *Early modern Russian letters: texts and contexts: selected essays*, Boston, Academic Studies Press, 2009, p. 160; "a translation-summary, that may or may not reflect the ideas of its translator", p. 161.

I will rise again;
 But, is it possible to perish and to rise again?
 When there is God – it's possible:
 And God, of course, does exist, we truly know about it (1.236).

“Our eternal life is above our understanding, and our eternal death is contrary to our understanding” (*Speech on the love of neighbor* 2.341-342). There will be resurrection followed by reward and punishment. Who avoids lawlessness because of fear of eternal suffering and does not love God, he does not yet become a child of God. He may not act in an evil way, but his thought will be evil. People should not do any evil to others not because of the prospect of punishment, but because they submit themselves, having purified their hearts (342), to virtue and, loving God, they love others, having taught their souls compassion and love of men. The only offering people can give God is their love of man, and this is the only thing He wants from them (343).

The ultimate fate of each human soul will be determined during the Last Judgment. First, however, the end of the world will come announced by trumpets of angels; the dead come from their graves; the Savior of the world will appear in clouds and will exclaim, as described in *On terrible judgment*:

Oh, the lawless!
 You saw my supreme wisdom
 In the space/world made by me
 And in the order of things
 You saw my power . . .
 You saw my love; . . .
 I gave you reason, I gave you the will
 I only did not make you the gods,
 I did not give you perfection. . . .
 You heard my voice proclaimed by your conscience,
 But you did not want to pay any attention to it;
 You considered happiness to be a lie;
 Suffer because of the truth:
 Step to eternal fire (1.237-238).

Those who preserve the truth go to the paradise where some mysteries will be revealed, and they will learn the reason for the brevity of earthly life and of suffering (1.238-239). Therefore, people should wait for the afterlife to learn more about some mysteries, but not all. Human knowledge will be incomplete also in the better world. It is certainly incomplete now, and thus they should concentrate on what they can do, keeping in mind the *memento mori* warning. To find oneself on the right side of the judgment, the earthly life should be characterized by virtue.

Virtue

Conscience is the seat of virtue: if it does not provide the fully formed concept of virtue, it at least seems to contain a principle that we should look solely on virtue when directing our steps. However, because of the sinfulness of the world, either the voice of conscience can be suppressed or the concept of virtue should be developed. Sumarokov seems to accept both views and discussed the problem in *Some articles on virtue*.

Education of virtue is needed, but it should be accompanied with support in learning and in decent discussion and good models. Learning includes physics, mathematics, and logic, since they are pursuing truth, and truth is indispensable for virtue, and without truth, virtue cannot become a habit (*Some articles on virtue* 6.250). Incidentally, it is quite remarkable that Sumarokov gave a high position to logic, physics, and mathematics which he considered to be “sources of supreme wisdom,” “overflowing rivers of knowledge, virtue, usefulness, and even more so, of the knowledge of God and man,” as expressed in *On superstition and hypocrisy* (10.160). The knowledge of God and man can be found in physics, which would point to physico-theology, but also in logic and mathematics, domains of abstract knowledge, probably because the highest level of orderliness is to be found there, orderliness expressed in perfection of objects analyzed by mathematics, which includes geometry, and perfection of logical rules as expressed in syllogisms. By wedding mathematics and the divine Sumarokov continued time-honored philosophical tradition that goes back to Pythagoras and Plato. However, physical and mathematical knowledge is also needed for very practical purposes. In his article, *On the word ‘morality’*, Sumarokov asked a rhetoric question, “may Morality be as needed; does it follow from it that Morality alone is needed to the world? If the entire human race were decent and all quarrels, dissensions, battles, fights, wars, and all that is directed against God and man would stop and we would see only happiness in the world and we would all be decent, this happiness [would be] too little for general usefulness. Other knowledge is needed, without which societies cannot survive” (10.153). Moral values by themselves are insufficient for the proper workings of a society. Practical knowledge is also needed: how to build houses, how to cook, how to organize social and political structures, etc., are indispensable for the existence of a society. Knowledge of, say, astronomy can lead to the appreciation of harmony of motions of celestial bodies, and thus to the appreciation of the greatness of the Creator of this harmony, but, on practical side, it also allows for time measurement and thus for proper planning of individual and social lives.

This context allows for a proper understanding of the statement from *On a new philosophical sect* that “without knowing the being (существо) of God virtue cannot exist, and thus we cannot hold on to it, since it [virtue] is

the basis of knowledge of God's majesty, and it is the source of decent human conduct, the spark of our conscience and the imitation of perfection" (10.143). Sumarokov must have meant by *существо* being or existence rather than essence if he wanted to remain within the bounds of apophatic theology of the Orthodox church according to which the essence of God can never be known. However, we can know manifestations of God's activity and only in this sense is God known. Sumarokov thus stated that virtue must be based on the knowledge of God and thus morality without a theological foundation is illusory, but this foundation can be built, at least to some extent, by science, by the world on the natural reason which comes to God through the observation of nature.

Virtue encompasses a principle of honesty, "do to others, what you want for yourself." "Short and simple is this teaching," but it appears to be hard to accept. This is where education plays its role, since education prepares a way for its acceptance (*Some articles on virtue* 6.251). The Golden Rule, given in somewhat different wording, is repeatedly stated by Sumarokov as the foundational principle. In the *Ode on virtue*, he wrote that all conduct should be based on the principle "Do not wish to others the fate ... That you would not [wish] for yourself" (1.223); in *A dream: a happy society*, a dreamed up society has a very slim book of laws, which begins with "what you do not want for yourself, do not wish to others," and ends with "reward for virtue, punishment for lawlessness." (10.386); in the poem *On the love of virtue*, he somewhat facetiously stated, "I do not pester others; do not pester me" (1.231).

Virtue should increase in leaders and writers. Leaders, particularly the monarchs, reward and penalize for deeds and misdeeds. Also, those close to monarchs should be virtuous. Virtuous nobility means a virtuous nation, but, at that time, many among the nobility were anything but virtuous (*Some articles on virtue* 6.252). Vague criticism as it is, it is nevertheless criticism of potentially powerful men. Sumarokov was keenly aware of that. He proclaimed his courage in that respects and advised that the cowardly moralist should not take the pen to defend virtue (253).

"Love of man is the first article of virtue and the source of all goodness" (6.253). However, love of man should not be directed toward those who are devoid of it: thieves, robbers, murderers (254). That is, virtue is destroyed not only by revenge but also by forgiveness. True, the repented should be forgiven. "Mr. Voltaire says: to sin is human, but to forgive transgressions is divine."⁵ But it is not divine when the unrepentant are forgiven; since even

⁵ Sumarokov mistakenly ascribed the adage of Alexander Pope ("to err is human, to forgive divine") to Voltaire.

God does not forgive the unrepentant. Revenge should not be taken upon the one who scolds me and admits his fault before me; but can even the repentant be forgiven who kills my parents, wife, and children? Such a forgiveness does not belong to virtue, but to its destruction” (266-267). This statement means that mercy is not unconditional and there are limits of forgiveness. Sumarokov did not want to abolish altogether the eye for an eye principle.

Not doing evil is good, but it is not virtue: “virtue is doing good to people, whenever possible” (6.256). Everyone can do that, but most people do not (257). The self-loving person does not get involved in affairs of others, which is not virtuous. Some people live as though they did not exist, out of sight of others, which is not virtuous either. Wrongdoing is bad, but living for oneself only is also bad (267). Here are the foundations of virtue: honoring God, zeal for the monarch, love of fatherland, being decent, neutrality, fulfilling one’s duties, compassion, and friendship (268). We live to praise God and to help one another. Who cares only about himself, is an enemy not only of people, but also of God (271-272). Passivity in respect to the virtue means being its enemy. It is thus most praiseworthy when we contribute to the happiness of others, in which we most of all become like God, since He is most concerned about our happiness (2.339).

In Sumarokov’s deliberations, virtue becomes the central category of his applied theology and ethics. Virtue should be understood in the context of Orthodox religion and theology which are simply assumed by Sumarokov as the foundation of his reasoning. Therefore, whenever Sumarokov referred to virtue, it should be understood as Christian virtue, even if it is spoken of in an apparently non-Christian context. This is best exemplified by his dramatic works, the centerpiece of his literary achievements, and a few of these works are now presented.

Dramatic works

There are three of Sumarokov’s plays that are overtly Christian: the *Hamlet*, *Dimitrii the Pretender*, and *The hermit*.

In the *Hamlet*, that only very faintly resembles Shakespeare’s original, Gertrude is tormented by visions of hell because of her murder of her husband. Hamlet, her son, advises her to ask God for forgiveness, but she is afraid that God will never forgive her: “What forgiveness can expect such a sinner? / I just cannot escape eternal suffering” (1:3/3.69).⁶ However, Ar-

⁶ The abbreviation “1:3” means “act 1, scene 3.”

mans, a confidant of Hamlet, assures her that “Confession of guilt leads to forgiveness, / Who cries over [his] sin, he feels [the burden] of his sin” (1:3/3.68) and that

However great is your sin, His mercy is greater.
Commit yourself, commit unto His all-powerful will
Temper your fear, raise your voice unto heaven
And with humility ask [God] for forgiveness (1:3/3.69).

This is because

The Immortal is merciful and His anger will be mitigated,
When the sinner before Him will be contrite with all his heart.
Repent, and although you caused your husband’s death,
Exceed your wrongdoing by blessed deeds (1:3/3.70).

And when Gertrude expresses her fear that she may never see her Maker and spend eternity without Him, Hamlet assures her that

When you consider this punishment to be worst of all
You come to the Creator by the shortest route.
An evildoer is also afraid of grim suffering,
He is groaning in his sin [only] about his soul,
Not because he angered God
By who he became in the world and that he remains in the world,
And instead of working and serving the Creator
He cares only about his happy life;
But he prepares coal for his head
And through short-lived happiness he prepares an eternal woe (1:3/3.71).

When Gertrude asks, how can such gift of life – that “we have our being out of nothing” – and the gift of forgiveness be repaid, Armans proposes leaving the world for some wilderness – the life of a hermit is thus a means of expressing gratitude to God for life and His mercy. Gertrude’s spiritual suffering was not in vain. She experienced spiritual renewal and the reality of God’s forgiveness when “humanness returned to her evil heart” by confessing her sin (2:2/3.76).

In the *Hamlet*, Ophelia is a saintly character whom her father would want to marry Claudius after Gertrude, his wife, and Hamlet, loved by Ophelia, are killed. She lived all her life with virtue (3:1/3.86) which was accomplished by putting her trust in God, who poured virtue into her being and rooted her in it by His revelation (3:1/3.87). She prevented Hamlet from killing her father, Polonius, who killed himself to spite his daughter: he did not want to owe his life to the pleading of his daughter. The play ends with Ophelia’s words,

I did all that a daughter should do,
You, heavens, punished Polonius today!

You, my God, were long-suffering in his case;
I respect your decisions! Your wrath is just! (5:6/3.119).

In the happy ending, Ophelia is united with Hamlet. Ophelia's trust in God paid off, she visibly sighed with relief that Polonius' fate was sealed with his own hand and hers, and Hamlet's hands remained clean.

In the *Dimitrii the Pretender*, Sumarokov reviled the eponymous tsar not only for his cruelty, bullishness, and insensitivity, but also for his reliance on Poles rather than on Russians and for being on the wrong side of Christianity. Dimitrii not only wanted to subjugate Russia to the rule of Poles, but also – on account of the predominant religion in Poland – to Catholicism. However, said Sumarokov through Parmen, the esteem for the Pope in Europe is not genuine, but hypocritical and “The Pope must not consider all people to be cattle; / A reasonable man thinks sensibly about God” (1:1/4. 71). A reasonable man would refer to someone who thinks along the lines of physico-theology approved by Sumarokov, but such thinking was very popular in Western Christianity and Sumarokov may not have known that Kantemir and Trediakovskii rendered in Russian the *Traité de l'existence et des attributs de Dieu* of the French Catholic cardinal Fénelon. So the suggestion about blind obedience of Catholics is not quite justified. As to obedience – Sumarokov himself left theological issues to Orthodox theologians in obedience to the authority of the Orthodox church. In any event, all Christians would agree that wisdom is not offensive to God and that

Filled with it, He created the universe
And gave life and reason to lifeless substance.
Wherever we look, we see His supreme wisdom. [...]
The limits of the [human] mind are narrow to understand it,
But the acts of God in the creation are clear (1:1/4.71-72).

A total doom of Russia would come from subjugation to the Pope. What Catholicism did in the new world, can arrive to Russia: “Whatever happened to them, they sudden fate / Will befall on you Russia, from the Pope” (2:1/4. 84). Russia, however, needed not wait for an import from Western Europe of religious persecution, as the history of Russia had plenty of its own and, for example, persecution of Old Believers (schismatics) under Peter I is one such example, which Sumarokov, an admirer of Peter I, would have preferred not to be mentioned.

The play alludes a few times to a perfect image of a monarch, in total contrast to Dimitrii's character:

Blessed is on earth the purple-wearing man
Who does not suppress freedom of our souls,
Who elevates himself through the benefit of society
And with humility adorns the rank of the monarch

Giving the subjects happy days
Of whom only evildoers are afraid (2:1/4.83).

When in the kingdom “virtue is not perfectly honored”, the monarch’s glory is but an empty dream (3:1/4.94), since virtue is the only place where God’s laws are to be found (4:4/4.111). Dimitrii violently defies these laws and thus virtue, and everyone turns against him: his soldiers, his allies, the entire nation. His only escape was suicide.

The hermit is a short, one-act play, in which Evmenii defends his right to be a hermit, since in the world, “vices rule and virtue suffers” (scene 1/4.283). The problem is that his friend, his brother, his parents, and his wife would like to have him back home. The parents argue that he should do that out of love and respect for them, i.e., they invoke God’s commandment. The wife also said that he should return out of love for her and because the marital oath should not be broken, thereby calling on the sacrament of marriage. Evmenii remains unfazed. He is convinced that no offering is good for God, except for one: while

following the mind,
To ask Him to purify the heart
And to bring the pure heart as an offering (scene 3/4.287)

Presumably, such purity can be accomplished best in separation from the corrupted world. Eventually, parents and brother reluctantly give up. However, wife, after a dramatic attempt of committing suicide, has an equally dramatic change of heart and wants to abandon the world “to live in desert according to the Higher will” (scene 6/4.301). God’s will is done in the lives of everyone involved and God is not just an observer of events but intervenes when need be and particularly dramatically testified in Evmenii’s wife’s call for hermetic pursuits. God who created the universe out of love (scene 2/4.285) expresses this love also on individual level in human lives.

To the category of religiously motivated work belongs *The sanctuary of virtue*, an allegoric ballet. Virtue is looking for a place for herself on earth, a place in which there is “a happy state,” and “true judging is blooming,” where “truth is not harmed” (scene 2/4.201), where “the law given by nature is preserved” (202). She visits Europe, Asia, Africa, and the New World only to discover corruption of morals. Interestingly, Europe is where Virtue’s throne once stood and people listened to her (scene 1/4.196), but now, “You, Europe, are a tormentor of the entire nature / Inhuman nations live in you,” (scene 4/4.210). Virtue wants to go back to heaven, but Minerva appearing in form of a Russian woman urged her to

Go to the Monarch of the third world,
Where Elizabeth now rules generously:
Under her scepter joy is blooming (210).

Russia is “the northern world” where “the human race is happy” and “mortals do not know misfortunes” (211). The ballet immediately brings to the mind of the viewer the idea of Moscow as the third Rome⁷ and the conviction that only Orthodoxy conveys the true version of Christianity, and thus, Europe and America are in darkness because of remaining in snares of heretical Catholicism and no less heretical Protestantism, and Asia and Africa are in the darkness of pagan religions. The tone of *The sanctuary of virtue* is not simply nationalistic or even jingoistic, but primarily religious, where religion is manifested in the person of Virtue. This religious tone is also manifested in the treatment of the monarch: Peter I at all times, and a particular monarch during their reign. A monarch is not only a gift from heaven, not only the anointed of God, but also above men, as stated by Neptune about Peter I and Elizabeth in the prolog to the ballet, *New laurels* (4.185) and – as stated about Peter I – someone of the divine status (1.263, 266; 2.4; the birth-place of Peter I is the Russian Bethlehem, 6.321-322).

It is, however, puzzling, how Sumarokov could seriously consider that Russia is the only place on earth in which virtue can feel at home. As an example of corruption of morals in Europe, he showed a woman who is forced by her father to marry a rich man she does not love. Did he seriously think that Russia was free from such a vice? Sumarokov himself depicted more than once fathers’ attempts to force their daughters (*Hamlet*, *Sinav and Truvor*, *Dimitrii the Pretender*) or sons (*Iaropolk and Dimiza*) to marry an unloved person for a political gain.⁸ For Asia, Sumarokov gave an example of prevailing vice a jealous husband who killed his innocent wife suspecting her of cheating. No, Russia was surly free of such acts. In Africa, a man wanted to sell his wife separating her from her children. Was there no selling of people in Russia, the country of entrenched serfdom? Sumarokov himself showed in his later comedy, *The imaginary cuckold*, how a nobleman paid 500 rubles for a maid (although it was for a good cause, since this enabled the buyer’s servant to marry the maid). As an example of American vices, Sumarokov showed a Spanish conqueror who deposed a local ruler of his power so that the ruler and his wife commit suicide. However, expansionism was a constant policy in Russia and Peter I, so venerated by Sumarokov, was the best example of enforcing this policy. By such allotment of sinfulness to the world outside Russia, *The sanctuary of virtue* turns from a religious exal-

⁷ Cf. A. Ewington, *A Voltaire for Russia: A. P. Sumarokov’s journey from poet-critic to Russian philosophe*, Evanston, Northwestern Univ. Press, 2010, p. 108.

⁸ Sometimes parents pressed their children to marry or not to marry someone because of pecuniary reasons, as, for instance, in the *Tresotinius*, *The grotesque*, and *A quarrel about nothing*.

tation of Russia into blatant sycophancy and obsequious idolatry of tsarina Elisabeth.

In Sumarokov's first tragedy, *Khorev*, Khorev loves Osnel'da held hostage by Kii, a Russian monarch, and his love is reciprocated. She does not want to marry Khorev since he is a brother of Kii, her enemy, which causes a conflict. The play has a supremely un-Christian solution, namely the suicide of Osnel'da and of Khorev. The action takes place in pagan times, but there are almost eerie adumbrations of Christian thinking. Khorev muses in front of Kii,⁹

Mercy multiplies praise in victories
And expresses humanness in the souls. [...]
Deliberately we drink our blood in barbarity
When out of duty we fight one another
And confuse defense with revenge
And we elevate brutality under the guise of courage
What name you, crude flattery, gave to evil?
Killing and robbing you called heroism! (2:2/3.18).

Khorev sees his barbarian times as barbarian, opposing them to what should be, presumably, with future times when barbarism will be subverted by Christianity.

In the *Sinav and Truvor*, two brothers from the title love Il'mena who loves Truvor, but her father Gostomysl promised her to Sinav, the monarch. The unhappiness of all involved and the clash between love and duty lead to the exile and suicide of Truvor, which is followed by Il'mena's suicide upon learning the news. This takes place in spite of unmistakably Christian pronouncements made by figures of the play. In Il'mena's words: "Rulers of heavens that we worship so much / Want that we be like them" (3:3/3.156). Because of the pagan times of the setting, the rulers of heavens are spoken of, although the statement fits much better the Ruler of heaven as understood in Christianity. However, Il'mena did not have enough strength to follow her statement. She hoped to join her beloved in the afterworld, in which "The will stops to be disobedient to reason / Hearts are strong there and thought is magnanimous" (5:3/3.178). As Gostomysl stated, "There is no happiness on earth: it is in the heavens / Left for the gods, not given to mortals" (5:1/3.173), where we should read "angels" instead of "gods". The tragedy is caused by the ambitions of Gostomysl who wanted his daughter to be on the throne, and one justification he gave was for her to be a positive force behind her

⁹ "The soul of Khorev" is an example of "a lofty soul" which is filled with "moral presentiment" of Christianity: И. Вишневская, *Аплодисменты в прошлое: А. П. Сумароков и его трагедии*, Москва, Литературный институт им. А.М. Горького, 1996, с. 104.

intended husband. When on the throne, she should “sow blessing everywhere.” The monarch should “root out the lie and consolidate the truth”; she should prevent the oppression of the innocent (4:2/3.163), remove from the retinue the merciless and include in it the true and reasonable and honest, and be protectress of orphans and widows (4:2/3.164), which is a clear Biblical allusion. The tragedy is also caused by Sinav who married Il'mena in spite of her protestations and knowing that she did it out of obedience to her father. He knew that “in love, duty brings little joy” (2:2/3.141), i.e., when marriage is the result of dutiful daughter marrying an unloved man, and yet forced himself on her: “not once tyranny was a result of love” (2:1/3.138). However, in the last scene he recognized that it was “evil love” and cried out to heavens to punish him for what he had done (5:4/3.183).

The principal subject of the *Semira* that takes place in the pagan past of Russia is the conflict between duty and love. Rostislav, son of Oleg, current monarch of Russia, loves Semira, sister of the former monarch, Oskold, who wages war against Oleg. Oskold is captured and Semira asks Rostislav to let Oskold escape (“Oh, duty, give up today your place to love!” sighed Rostislav, 3:7/3.301). This means treason, but love prevails over duty. Rostislav lets it happen and confesses it to his father, which spells Rostislav's death sentence: the father's sense of justice and duty prevails over his love for his son. At this juncture, Semira says to Oleg:

No one will live without error,
We are mortals: there is no perfection in any of the mortals.
Let your heart be firm in judgment against evil,
But look mercifully on human weaknesses (4:6/3.315).

In other words: may mercy and love prevail over the monarch's duties. Oleg does not relent, but because freed Oskold tries to conquer Kiev, Rostislav is summoned for help and saves the day. Fatally wounded, Oskold blesses Oleg as the monarch while asking to set free his troops (“Mercy to prisoners is the highest victory, / And nothing surpasses mercy”, 5:9/3.326) and Rostislav as Semira's betrothed. The play ends with Rostislav's plea:

O heaven ...
End sorrowful days during which we suffered,
And make our hearts to overflow with love without tears (3.329).

Love does conquer all and is the only hope in any situation, sorrowful and tragic as it may be. It is not only, Sumarokov seems to say, because love is the highest human emotion – true love, that is, not evil love – but because love has a divine dimension stressed particularly in Christianity that believes that God is love.

In the *Iaropolk and Dimiza*, the monarch Vladisan wants to force his son Iaropolk into marriage for political expediency, although Iaropolk loves

Dimiza. To avoid problems, Vladisan wants to force Dimiza into another marriage just to cool down his son's passions. Iaropolk's love remains the same and he says to his father,

I am your son, I should be obedient to you,
But should you forget that I am your son
And take away from me my greatest joys?
Obey, o lord, your parental laws
And I, your child, am ready to obey mine (3:1/3.367).

Vladisan's favorite says also to the monarch that he should

only follow the precepts of conscience
The ruler of souls, the spark of the divine
Living invisibly inside of being!
Scepter is not given into one's hand
To cause fatal griefs and sufferings ...
Not for yourself you have the rank of the tsar
It was given to you by the gods for common good" (4:4/3.385).

Vladislav wants Dimiza to be executed; Iaropolk draws his sword to execute the executioner, but, in the face of death, Dimiza says, "Try in everything to master yourself by honor / And in everything to obey virtue" (5:4/3.393). And the virtue did triumph. Vladislav has a change of heart and the play ends with his words,

I will not ever forget
That although I am a tsar, I am also human
And that I see multitude of mortals under my feet
I am, like them, a dust before the gods (5:6/3.396).

It is justified to say that "the didactic character of the tragedy makes the persons to be pure defenders of particular moral foundations".¹⁰ What is understood by Sumarokov is that it is Christian morality that is meant here projected to ancient times, or rather, the universal part of this morality that can – and should – be found among all people with its core concept of virtue and the core precept expressed in the Golden Rule.

In the very first play, *Khorev*, it is stated that "the heaven gives to everyone both happiness and problems" (2:2/3.20) and the last play *Mstislav* – where Olga says to Mstislav: "Thank you, and I thank the Creator / That he saved me through you from cruel misfortunes" (5:6/4.179) – ends on the similar note: the Creator exercises His control over the world and accomplishes His will through ordinary means, through people and their actions. Su-

¹⁰ E. Vetter, *Studien zu Sumarokov*, Berlin, Reuter, 1961, S. 111.

marokov wanted to convey the message that God's invisible presence is not far from anyone.

In his plays, Sumarokov did not spare advices for monarchs describing what an ideal monarch should and should not do. Therefore, his plays were considered as political statements.¹¹ To some extent this is true, but these plays are primarily religious statements and political rules should be understood as being part of the religious framework. True, the monarch should do certain things for the common good and because it is beneficial for the monarchy, but primarily because the monarch is an anointed of heavens (e.g., *Artistona* 2:5/3.221, *Vysheslav* 2:3/4.21) and because the rules of behavior are justified by God's will and the monarch is representative of divine powers on earth (e.g., *Vysheslav* 5:2/4.50; *Iaropolk and Dimiza* 5:1/3.389; *Mstislav* 3:6/4.158) and by violating rules of proper governing the monarch sins directly against God.

Out of the nine Sumarokov tragedies, the first two, *Khorev* and *Sinav and Truvor*, are really tragedies in that the innocent commit suicide. Somehow Sumarokov decided that tragic finale, particularly by suicide, does not properly convey the message he intended, and this message, arguably, is the adherence to Christian morality, even if the action takes place in pre-Christian times or in non-Christian society (Persia in *Artistona*). Suicide of the innocent can make for a good play, but it is not a good and uplifting example, even if it is a negative one, i.e., an example of what should not be done. As Gertrude expressed it in the *Hamlet*, if she only could end her life without sin to join her killed husband in the afterworld, she would gladly do it, but "the law [of God] prohibits shortening one's own life / And pays with suffering those who take their lives" (2:4/3.82). However, suicide does not disappear altogether from the scene, but it is limited to villainous characters, which partially opens the way to happy endings. Another way to arrive at a happy ending is when evil characters turn around by drastically changing their mind and expressing contrition for the woes caused to others, and sometimes both suicide and contrition in the last moment take place (Fedima in the *Artistona*). Contrition can be accomplished by positive attitude, by opening the way for the heavens to exercise a positive influence on someone. Only the

¹¹ "All in all, the tragedy [*Hamlet*], devoted to the battle for the throne, had political character": Ю. Д. Левин, *Трагедия А. П. Сумарокова "Гамлет"*, in Г. А. Лапкина (ed.), *Сумароковские чтения: материалы всероссийской научно-практической конференции*, СПб., СПбГИ[Т]МиК, 1993, с. 48. In his late plays, Sumarokov wanted to give "political lessons to Elisabeth and her successor, and also her subjects" and this political education Sumarokov considered to have been his highest duty, П. Н. Берков, *Александр Петрович Сумароков 1717-1777*, Ленинград, Искусство, 1949, сс. 45-46.

deliberate siding with the evil bars the way. And so, Polonius' last words before his suicide are an expression of his regret that he could not bring the downfall of Hamlet and Ophelia (*Hamlet* 5:6/3.118). Dimitrii the Pretender exhibited an equally hardened heart by saying when killing himself, "Go, my soul, to hell, and be forever captive! / Ah, if only the whole universe perished with me!" (5:5/4.126). However, although Fedima said to herself, "May my heart be filled with deadly poison ... May the remnant of conscience be excised from my thought ... I come to you, the gods of eternal darkness" (*Artistona* 4:1/3.228), thereby turning her back to a beneficial touch of heavens, yet after taking poison she in the last minute asked her intended victim for forgiveness (5:7/3.252).

A frequent topic of Sumarokov's plays is a conflict between duty and love, but why should there be any conflict at all if duty lies in virtue (6.250) and a virtuous life is an expression of honoring and loving God and men? That is, duty is an expression of love; love leads to the fulfillment duties. Whence the conflict? When a father urges his daughter to marry a man she does not love, and she does that, she fulfils her filial duty of honoring her parent. However, what is the motivation behind the father's demand? Is it his selfless love to his daughter? This is where the problem is – the demand is motivated by self-love, self-interest rather than unblemished love and hence the conflict. The father should not make such a demand to begin with. The conflict that arises between a daughter's duty to obey her father and love, or rather lack thereof, for the man forced upon her is secondary to the reason behind the father's demand. The conflict between daughter (un)love and duty stems from the unloving source of the duty. "Happy is man who follows a precept / Which in [fulfilling] his duty brings him joy" (*Artistona* 2:3/3.209). The precept should, however, have a loving foundation, a motive which is dictated by the interest of the other's, not of one's own, the love of neighbor, not self-love, and true love of neighbor can only be rooted in love of God.

Not only Sumarokov's tragedies, but also his comedies have for the most part a very pronounced moral message.¹² In this, he was true to his own precept given in his *Epistle about poetry* to a prospective playwright:

Do not write farces for knowledgeable people;
To amuse without reason is a gift of the base soul.
Do not present what can be pleasing for me only for a moment,
But so that I would remember for a long time this action.

¹² Out of eleven Sumarokov comedies, the *Three rival brothers* seems to be the only comedy that was written for pure fun, a rather simplistic comedy of errors.

An attribute of comedy is to improve morals by mockery;¹³
To amuse and to be useful is its first law (1.340).

Comedies should strive for an improvement of morals and a moral message should be rooted in the religious framework. This is frequently done in an explicit manner by calling upon God and His precepts when the situation requires. Sometimes, when a play character makes a pronouncement seemingly religious yet contrary to religion, this is immediately countered by an orthodox statement. For example, after trickster Chuzhekhval says that nothing happens without God's will, so he is evil according to the will of God, he is met with the response that "God does not help cheating and gave man the will to choose between good and evil; He promised to reward for one and threatened with punishment for the other" (*The guardian*, scene 4/5.14-15) and Chuzhekhval's complaint that "If God were merciful, there would not be any need for suffering" is answered with this image: "had that been such a merciful shepherd whose dogs would bite the sheep all the day long and he would have only stroked them, would the sheep say that this shepherd is a merciful man?" (scene 12/5.29). When Kashchei urges Isabella to lie and swear on God since "God is merciful", she responds: "Honor is sacred and God is just" (*The usurer* 2:1/5.87). Gerostrat's supposition that God is so great that He does not care about human affairs, so, anything goes, is countered with the statement that God is supremely just and will not treat our bad and good works the same way (*The venomous man*, scene 7/5.171).¹⁴

Normally, Sumarokov's comedies defend virtue in variety of circumstances. Sometimes, they concentrate on a particular vice – greed in *The usurer*, preoccupation with one's own appearance in the *Narcissus*, stinginess in *The dowry [gotten] by deception* – and the tone of the play is a condemnation of the vice. However, there is always more or less an explicit moral and religious message. Thus, through his plays, and generally, through his poetry, Sumarokov wanted to accomplish the goal that priests want to accomplish through their preaching: the moral improvement of their contemporaries. In this mission, Sumarokov was not alone. Virtually all literary figures of the eighteenth century were interested in theological and religious matters, but to a different extent. To consider only Lomonosov, Trediakovskii, and Sumarokov, all of them were believers and wrote about religious matters, but their understanding of God was different from one another, which gave a different

¹³ "Who laughs at people or satirizes them not to improve them, he abandons the bounds of decency" (*Some articles on virtue* 6.280).

¹⁴ Gerostrat represents Emin, Г. А. Гуковский, *Эмин и Сумароков*, "XVIII век", 2 (1940), 87-89.

coloring to their writings. For Lomonosov, God was primarily the Creator, for Sumarokov, God was mainly the Father, and only Trediakovskii viewed God as both the Creator and the Father. This reflects different level of interest in abstract reasoning, which was the highest in Lomonosov and lowest in Sumarokov, who was primarily interested in the practical side of religious issues.¹⁵ His literary work was for him the best outlet of such interests.

¹⁵ E. Vetter, *Studien zu Sumarokov*, cit., S. 52, counted Sumarokov among those, who were “more interested in practical philosophy, such as morality, education, social morality and politics, and finally the problem of relation to religion and the church. And thus, Sumarokov get out of the way of metaphysics”.