



Skoptysy

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Published: 4th September 2026

Damian Cyrocki. 2026. "The Skoptysy." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements. 7 September 2026. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/the-skoptysy.

Introduction

The Skoptysy were among the most radical religious movements to emerge from the Russian Christian tradition in the eighteenth century, with a belief in the establishment of the millennial Kingdom of God. In some scholarly literature, the Skoptysy are characterised as an ascetic-rational sect, a designation that highlights both the extreme rigourism of their religious practices and the systematic nature of their doctrine and communal organisation. The name 'Skoptysy' derives from the Russian word *скопеец*, meaning 'eunuch,' and was imposed upon the group from outside, most likely by representatives of the Russian Orthodox Church. Its adherents rejected sexuality, marriage, and biological reproduction, viewing them as consequences of Original Sin. Consequently, in the eyes of the tsarist authorities, they constituted not merely a religious problem but also a potential threat to the existing social order. The most distinctive element of Skoptysy doctrine was ritual castration, understood as an act of spiritual purification and a means of recovering humanity's primordial innocence and preparing for the coming of the Kingdom of God. The adherents themselves referred to one another as the "Lambs of God" (*агнцы Божьи*) or "White Doves" (*белые голуби*), while they termed castration "whitening" (*убеление*), understood as a process of attaining spiritual purity.

For a long time, the Skoptysy were portrayed primarily as a religious curiosity or as an example of collective pathology. It was only with the emergence of modern scholarship, particularly in the works of Alexander Etkind, Alexander Panchenko, Konstantin T. Sergazina, and Laura Engelstein, that the movement came to be understood as a complex religious phenomenon rooted in Russian folk culture, the Orthodox ascetic tradition, and the milieu of the so-called Spiritual Christians (*духовные христиане*). At the same time, research on the history of the Skoptysy faces significant source-related challenges. Although a small number of texts associated with Kondraty Selivanov, who is traditionally regarded as the founder of the Skoptysy movement, have survived—notably the *Похождения* ("Travels") and *Страды* ("Sufferings"), which together constitute a two-part religious autobiography attributed to Selivanov, as well as the *Послание* ("Epistle") and several letters attributed to him—the surviving corpus remains limited, and most of these texts are known only through later copies or publications (Панченко 2004, 441–74). By contrast, the overwhelming majority of surviving source material consists of court records, police reports, and accounts produced by state authorities or the Russian Orthodox Church. These sources are frequently polemical in nature, making the reconstruction of Skoptysy doctrine and practices dependent upon their

critical analysis and comparison with the surviving texts produced within the community itself.

The Origins of the Movement

Due to the fragmentary nature of the surviving sources, the early history of the Skoptsy movement is difficult to reconstruct with certainty. Most scholars nevertheless agree that it emerged in the second half of the eighteenth century from the religious milieu of the Khlysty (хлысты) (for further details on what follows, see Cyrocki 2026a and the bibliography cited there), who rejected the authority of the established ecclesiastical hierarchy and emphasised the possibility of direct experience of the Holy Spirit through ecstatic religious gatherings (Cyrocki 2026a). The first reliable evidence of the Skoptsy dates to 1772, when the ecclesiastical consistory in Oryol investigated a group of individuals who had subjected themselves to castration. One of the earliest figures associated with the emergence of the movement was Andrei Ivanovich Blokhin (Ливцов и Абакумов 2019, 315–16), a fugitive serf who, according to the investigative records, travelled with beggars after his escape and through them came into contact with the Khlysty milieu. His religious teacher was reportedly Mikhail Nikulin, described in the sources as a “teacher of the faith.” Blokhin eventually came to regard sexual abstinence as insufficient for the attainment of complete purity and castrated himself by burning his genitals with heated iron, a practice described as “baptism by fire.” He subsequently sought to persuade others to undergo the same procedure. His prominent role in the earliest phase of the movement is reflected in the authorities’ treatment of him. During the 1772 investigation, he was identified as the “initiator of evil” (зачинщик зла) and regarded as the principal instigator of the practices that had come to light. He was subsequently flogged and sentenced to life imprisonment with hard labour in Nerchinsk, Siberia. Another important figure in the early development of the movement was Akulina Ivanovna, a prominent Khlysty prophetess who succeeded Nikulin as a religious teacher. Several of the most active representatives of the first generation of Skoptsy were reportedly members of her group (Engelstein 1999, 26).

The investigation of 1772 also mentions Kondraty Nikiforov (Trifonov) as an advocate of castration, a figure who has been identified with Kondraty Selivanov (c. 1730–1832), who would later become the central figure of the Skoptsy movement. His biography remains fragmentary and surrounded by considerable uncertainty, including the date of his birth. According to one surviving account attributed to Selivanov himself, he was approximately five years old during the reign of Peter I (1682–1725), while at the age of fourteen, during the reign of Anna Ioannovna (1730–1740), he allegedly underwent castration. Other sources, however, place his castration in the second half of the 1760s, when he was already an adult. For much of his life, Selivanov remained subject to surveillance and intervention by the authorities. Following the first investigation, he was sentenced but managed to escape. In 1775, however, he was captured and exiled to Nerchinsk in Siberia. He later escaped and, after spending time in Irkutsk and Moscow, moved to Saint Petersburg in 1797. There, according to Skoptsy accounts, he was interrogated by Tsar Paul I, to whom he reportedly claimed to be the father of Peter III, the emperor who had been killed in 1762. Selivanov was subsequently confined to the asylum at Obukhov Hospital in Saint Petersburg. In 1802, he was transferred to an almshouse attached to the Smolny Monastery, from which he was eventually released at the request of Alexei Yelensky, a Polish nobleman who was probably the first member of the nobility to join the Skoptsy. During his time in Saint Petersburg, Selivanov’s religious authority increasingly acquired a messianic character. He came to be regarded by his followers as a second Christ who gave him the titles “Redeemer” (Искупитель) and “God of gods and King of kings” (Бог богов и Царь царей). The

places in which he resided were likewise invested with sacred significance and referred to by his followers as the “House of God,” “Heavenly Zion,” and “New Jerusalem.” He was also associated with the figure of Tsar Peter III, whose favourable attitude towards religious dissenters was believed by the Skoptsy to have included the granting of religious freedom to the Khlysty (Frick 1978, 453).

Whereas Selivanov’s identification with Christ reflected the religious and eschatological dimension of the emerging movement, his association with the figure of the tsar also gave it a distinct political dimension. In 1804, a proposal was submitted to Tsar Alexander I (r. 1801–1825) for the reorganisation of the Russian state according to Skoptsy principles. It envisaged appointing members of the movement as secret advisers and administrators responsible for particular areas of government (Никольский 1983, 363). The movement also attracted several members of the upper social strata. When Mikhail Miloradovich, Governor-General of Saint Petersburg, learned that two of his nephews, as well as several members of the Guards regiments and naval personnel, were associated with the Skoptsy, he appealed to the imperial government for intervention. In 1820, Selivanov was arrested once again and confined to the Spaso-Evfimiev Monastery in Suzdal, where he remained until his death in 1832. His death, however, did not put an end to the eschatological expectations of his followers, who awaited his return and the establishment of the millennial Kingdom of God. According to Skoptsy belief, this would occur once the number of the “whitened” reached 144,000, a figure drawn from the 144,000 people sealed in Revelation 7:4 (Buss 2003, 78).

Among Selivanov’s close associates was the peasant Alexander Ivanovich Shilov (1712/1713–1799/1800), who would play an important role in the early development of the Skoptsy movement. After abandoning his family, he reportedly set out in search of the true faith and eventually joined the community led by Akulina Ivanovna, where he met Selivanov. Selivanov was reportedly so impressed by him that he blessed him with a cross and presented him with a “cross, candle, and sword,” which came to symbolise his religious calling. He also referred to Shilov as his “beloved little son” and faithful assistant. Shilov was subsequently given the title “Forerunner” (*Предтеча*), reflecting the belief that his mission was to prepare the way for Selivanov’s salvific role, in analogy to John the Baptist’s role in relation to Christ. In 1775, Shilov was exiled to Riga, where he continued to preach the Skoptsy faith and reportedly persuaded several dozen people to undergo castration. In 1797, he was transferred to the Shlisselburg Fortress, where he died in 1799 or 1800. He was initially buried at the foot of Preobrazhenskaya Hill, near the bank of the Neva River. In 1802, however, his remains were transferred to the summit of the hill, where his followers erected a large wooden chapel over his grave. The tomb soon became a place of pilgrimage and a site at which further castrations were performed. The Skoptsy elders subsequently ordered the chapel to be dismantled, and in 1829 a stone monument (bearing the inscription, “In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, amen. Beneath this monument lies the body of the servant of God, Alexander Ivanovich Shilov”) was erected on the site. According to Arsenyev and Petrushevsky, the monument was used for the ritual consecration of the bread consumed by the Skoptsy during communion (Арсеньев и Петрушевский 1903, 569–70).

For further details see Сепгазина, 2023.

The Subsequent History of the Movement

By the late eighteenth century, the Skoptsy movement had begun to spread beyond Oryol Governorate, reaching, among other areas, the governorates of Tula and Tambov. During the nineteenth century, Skoptsy communities were established in Saint Petersburg, Moscow, Riga, Siberia, and parts of the Romanian lands, including Bucharest and Iași. The available evidence does not, however, allow the size of the movement to be determined with any precision. During the reign of Tsar Nicholas I (1825–1855), the authorities intensified their persecution of the Skoptsy, contributing to a decline in the movement's numbers. By the 1860s and 1870s, however, the movement had begun to expand again, including into areas where it had previously had little or no presence. Charles William Heckethorn (1835–1889), an English writer on secret societies, reported that the Skoptsy numbered 5,444 in 1874, including 1,465 women; of these, 703 men and 100 women had undergone castration (Heckethorn 1897, 299). Estimates of the total number of Skoptsy at the beginning of the twentieth century vary considerably, reflecting the difficulty of obtaining reliable demographic data.

The Revolution of 1917 marked the beginning of a new phase of repression. In the early Soviet period, the Skoptsy were at times interpreted within the framework of the *raskol* (*the historic schism in the Russian Church*) and even portrayed as having proto-communist characteristics. This favourable interpretation did not last, however. As Soviet anti-religious policies intensified, the Skoptsy were increasingly persecuted for their religious practices and, particularly in the late 1920s and early 1930s, were accused of counter-revolutionary activity. The movement's remaining communities were subjected to arrests and trials, while collectivisation and the broader transformation of rural society further undermined the social and economic foundations on which many Skoptsy communities had depended. By 1929, their number was reportedly reduced to approximately 2,000. Increasingly forced underground, the remaining communities became highly secretive, leaving relatively little documentation concerning their subsequent activities.

Nevertheless, the Skoptsy did not disappear immediately. During his fieldwork in the Tambov region in the 1970s, the historian and scholar of religion Aleksandr I. Klibanov recorded the presence of individual Skoptsy and, elsewhere, a functioning community in Rostov-on-Don (Клибанов 1974, 61–62). These communities were already highly secretive and consisted largely of elderly members, although Klibanov also recorded attempts to recruit younger people. By the beginning of the twenty-first century, however, no organised Skoptsy communities were known to remain in Russia. The movement is therefore generally regarded as extinct as an organised religious community, although its historical legacy survives in the form of memoirs, scholarly studies, and sites associated with former Skoptsy communities in Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and other parts of Russia.

Theology and Rituals of the Skoptsy

A fundamental element of Skoptsy religious practice was the belief that castration constituted the surest means of attaining salvation (*certitudo salutis*). This did not mean, however, that those who had not undergone castration were excluded from the possibility of salvation, or that other religious practices were considered irrelevant. The Skoptsy placed considerable emphasis on fasting and prayer, observance of the commandments, abstention from profanity, and renunciation of marriage. They also abstained from meat,

tobacco, and alcohol, as well as from forms of merriment and entertainment and the singing of secular songs. These restrictions formed part of a broader ascetic discipline in which everyday conduct was subordinated to the overarching goal of spiritual purification. In this sense, their way of life may be described as “rational” insofar as its various practices were consistently subordinated to a single, overarching religious principle.

The precise motives underlying the Skoptsy practice of castration, however, remain difficult to establish. The Skoptsy sought to legitimise the practice through particular passages of scripture and examples drawn from Christian history, which will be examined in greater detail below. It is nevertheless difficult to determine whether these biblical and historical precedents provided the original impetus for castration or were, at least in part, invoked retrospectively to legitimise an established practice. Their distinctive mode of interpretation must also be taken into account, including the possible role of linguistic associations. One example is the resemblance between the Russian words *искупление* (redemption) and *оскопление* (castration), which may have reinforced an association between redemption and castration. Diarmaid MacCulloch has proposed a further, more speculative explanation: that the practice may have been connected to a misreading of Genesis 1:28, in which the Russian *плодитесь* (“be fruitful and multiply”) was supposedly read as *плотитесь* (“castrate yourselves”) (MacCulloch quoted in Adams 2024).

Castration was highly valued within the movement, but it was not an absolute requirement for membership. The Skoptsy also recognised the possibility of “spiritual castration,” understood as the complete renunciation of sexual relations without undergoing physical castration. Even this form of renunciation, however, did not necessarily follow a uniform pattern, and practices may have varied between communities and over time. Alexandre Dumas, who encountered a Skoptsy community in the Caucasus during his travels through Russia, observed that some members underwent castration only after marrying and fathering a child (Dumas 1859, 216).

The rite of admission into the community was known as *privod* (привод). According to one account, the ritual was performed before an icon and a lit candle. A Skoptsy member would take the novice by the hand and lead him around the space while singing the words, “You who have been baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ,” together with other hymns. The action was repeated three times, after which the novice was led to the cross and instructed to kiss it. He was then taught how he might eventually undergo the “circumcision of nature” (Сепразина 2023, 272). The initiation ritual thus incorporated several symbolic elements drawn from Orthodox practice, including the lighting of a candle before an icon, the processional movement around the space, and the kissing of the cross. The Skoptsy’s relationship with the Russian Orthodox Church was nevertheless complex. Although they continued to participate in Orthodox services, sacraments, and religious feasts, they simultaneously developed a critical attitude towards certain aspects of Orthodox religious practice and ecclesiastical authority. Such participation may, at least in part, have reflected the practical realities of living within an overwhelmingly Orthodox society, as well as a desire to maintain a degree of social conformity and avoid attracting official attention.

Such efforts to maintain a degree of conformity were closely connected with the Skoptsy’s strict rules concerning secrecy. Admission into the community was accompanied by an obligation to keep its teachings and practices confidential. This was motivated not only by fear of persecution but also by the conviction that religious practices and experiences lost their value when disclosed to outsiders. Consequently, Skoptsy members were reportedly required to provide non-members with false information

concerning both castration and the veneration of Selivanov. Secrecy was not limited to relations between the community and the surrounding society. The literature on the Skoptsy suggests that not even all members of the community necessarily had to be aware of the castrations being performed. A principle was apparently observed according to which knowledge of the procedure should be restricted to the person performing it and the individual undergoing it. Castrations did not take place during communal gatherings but were conducted in strictly private settings. This manner of performing castration was consistent both with the principle of secrecy and with the individual character of the Skoptsy's religious transformation (Buss 2003, 78–79).

The Skoptsy distinguished between different types and degrees of castration. Among men, two principal forms were recognised. The first, known as the “first seal” (*первая печать*), “first whitening” (*первое убеление*), or “first purity” (*первая чистота*), involved the removal of the testicles together with part of the scrotum. In the Skoptsy's own symbolic terminology, this was also described as “mounting the piebald horse.” The second and more radical form involved the removal of the penis and was known as the “royal seal” (*царская печать*), “second whitening” (*второе убеление*), or “second purity” (*вторая чистота*); it was likewise described as “mounting the white horse.” The second form could be performed at the same time as the removal of the testicles or at a later stage. When performed separately, the procedures could be separated by an interval of several months, since performing them simultaneously was considered to increase the risk of death. The procedure was accompanied by the exclamation “Christ is risen!” (*Христос воскрес!*), further illustrating the distinctly Christian vocabulary and symbolism through which the Skoptsy understood the practice of “whitening.” In addition to these two principal forms, sources describe other methods intended to render men infertile without removing the external genitalia, including twisting, cutting, or piercing the spermatic cords, as well as a practice described as “artificial hypospadias,” which involved altering the penis (Кутенев 1882, 152–53). The practices of “whitening” also extended to women. Female forms of “sealing” could involve the removal of the labia or clitoris and, in some cases, the breasts. Unlike the procedures performed on men, however, such practices did not necessarily result in the loss of reproductive capacity. The literature on the Skoptsy records cases of women who, despite undergoing such procedures, retained the ability to engage in sexual intercourse, conceive, and carry a pregnancy to term (Эткинд 1998, 83).

Beyond these individual practices of “whitening,” communal religious life was organised around communities known as “ships” (*корабли*). Members gathered in secret assemblies where they performed religious songs, including hymns drawn from the wider Orthodox tradition as well as compositions specific to the Skoptsy. Singing was accompanied by prayers performed while kneeling, ecstatic practices such as self-flagellation, circular dances, and prophetic activity. These gatherings were associated with *радение* (*radienie*), a distinctive form of ecstatic religious assembly inherited from the Khlysty. During such gatherings, prophets were believed to identify the sins of individual members, thereby reinforcing communal discipline. Minor transgressions, such as the consumption of meat, could result in temporary exclusion from the community. Members who had been formally admitted through the *privod* rite but had not yet undergone castration could reportedly be given a choice between submitting to the procedure and leaving the community (Grass 1914, 875). Those who had already undergone the first stage of castration, by contrast, could atone for serious transgressions only by undergoing the more radical form of “whitening.” As among the Khlysty, women could also occupy prominent religious positions within Skoptsy communities. Female religious leaders were known as “Mothers of God” (*богородицы*).

The Skoptsy observed certain Orthodox religious feasts alongside commemorative days associated with significant events in the history of the movement. Radienie was practised, among other occasions, at Easter and Pentecost, as well as on 15 September, which commemorated the punishment of Kondraty Selivanov for his religious activities (Введенский 1907, 128). Skoptsy religious life also included distinctive practices surrounding death and the commemoration of the deceased. Funeral rites involved members of the community gathering around the body of the deceased, wearing so-called *radialnye* garments (радельные рубахи)—special shirts worn during communal gatherings—and singing prayers together. During the prayers, one of the participants would come forward and enter a prophetic state, speaking about the destination of the deceased's soul. Bread and kvass (a fermented bread drink) were also distributed on some such occasions. The graves of prominent Skoptsy leaders were accorded particular veneration (Сергазина 2023, 272).

Biblical and Christian Sources of Skoptsy Practices

Unless otherwise indicated, all biblical quotations in this article are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVue).

The Bible and the broader Christian tradition clearly constituted important sources of inspiration for Skoptsy religious practice. It is more difficult, however, to determine precisely to what extent particular biblical passages and examples drawn from Christian history contributed to the emergence of castration as a religious practice, and to what extent they were invoked retrospectively to provide it with theological justification. There are insufficient grounds to conclude with certainty that Andrei Ivanovich Blokhin, Kondraty Selivanov, or their closest associates first undertook a systematic examination of scripture and Christian tradition and subsequently formulated a doctrine of castration on that basis. It seems more likely that the developing practice was gradually situated within an existing biblical and Christian conceptual framework, which provided successive theological justifications for it.

Significantly, much of the Old Testament legislation concerning bodily integrity appears to speak against castration. The book of Deuteronomy states that a man whose genitals have been injured or mutilated may not enter the assembly of Israel (Deuteronomy 23:1). Similarly, the book of Leviticus excludes animals with certain physical defects from sacrificial offerings, including those whose testicles have been damaged (Leviticus 22:20–25). Priests suffering from serious physical defects were likewise prohibited from performing certain functions associated with Temple service (Leviticus 21:17–23). This does not mean, however, that eunuchs are invariably portrayed in biblical tradition as occupying a marginal or diminished religious status. On the contrary, the book of Isaiah contains a promise that the eunuch who keeps the covenant, observes the Sabbath, and remains faithful to God's commandments will be granted a place in God's house and "an everlasting name that shall not be cut off," greater than that of sons and daughters (Isaiah 56:3–5).

For the Skoptsy, however, particular significance was attached to the account of the Fall of the first humans, which provided a foundation for their distinctive religious anthropology. They believed that sexuality and the sexual organs associated with it had emerged as consequences of Original Sin. From this perspective, Adam and Eve before the Fall existed in a state of primordial innocence, unconditioned by sexuality and the bodily distinctions associated with it. The transgression of God's command was therefore

understood to have transformed the human condition, making sexuality and the sexual organs material manifestations of humanity's postlapsarian state. Their removal consequently did not signify, in the Skoptsy understanding, the destruction of something belonging to humanity's original nature; rather, it represented an attempt to recover that nature. Castration was thus understood as a means of restoring a state as close as possible to the original condition of Adam and Eve before the Fall and, consequently, of overcoming the effects of humanity's fall from grace (Wilson 2018, 565–73).

The most important biblical text for the Skoptsy, however, was the passage from the Gospel of Matthew: "For there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven" (Matthew 19:12). The passage was particularly significant because it is one of the few New Testament texts to refer explicitly to individuals who renounce sexual relations for the sake of the Kingdom of God. According to Walter Koch, a German physician and pathologist who conducted medical research and observations among the Skoptsy in Romania during the First World War, one member of the community interpreted Christ's three categories of eunuchs as referring, respectively, to persons born with congenital abnormalities of the sexual organs, those castrated by others, and the Skoptsy themselves, who had voluntarily undergone castration (Frick 1978, 454).

Other sayings of Jesus were also significant, and the Skoptsy tended to interpret them in a literal manner. Particular attention was paid to the words recorded in the Gospel of Matthew: "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away" and "if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away" (Matthew 5:29–30). In their interpretation, these statements supported the conviction that anything of the body that might lead a person into sin should be physically removed (Lane 1978, 94–95). The Skoptsy thus understood what is generally read as metaphorical language in the Gospel as indicating the possibility, and potentially even the necessity, of physically removing the source of temptation. On this basis, they reportedly came to believe that Jesus himself and his apostles must also have undergone castration in order to attain complete purity and free themselves from sexuality.

Christian history likewise provided the Skoptsy with precedents for their understanding of bodily transformation. More educated members of the community referred in particular to the example of Origen (Engelstein 1999, 15). According to Eusebius of Caesarea, the young Origen reportedly interpreted the words of Matthew 19:12 literally and subjected himself to castration, motivated both by a desire to fulfil Christ's teaching and by a wish to avoid suspicion arising from his instruction of women. Eusebius further reports that Demetrius, Bishop of Alexandria, initially regarded the act as evidence of Origen's exceptional religious zeal, although he subsequently came to criticise it (Eusebius 1989, 186). For the Skoptsy, the historical accuracy of this episode was less important than the image preserved within Christian tradition, that of a learned Christian who had interpreted Christ's words literally and, as a consequence, undergone castration.

Historical sources indicate that the Christian Church addressed the question of voluntary castration from its earliest centuries and adopted measures intended to prevent those who had deliberately castrated themselves from entering or remaining in the clergy. The first canon of the First Council of Nicaea, for example, distinguished between men who had become eunuchs as a result of illness or the actions of others and those who had deliberately castrated themselves. While the former could remain in or be admitted to the clergy if otherwise deemed worthy, a man who had voluntarily castrated himself was to be removed from the clergy and was not to be promoted to clerical office (Smelova 2016). These provisions

demonstrate that, by the fourth century, the Church had already established a clear canonical distinction between involuntary eunuch status and deliberate self-castration, at least in relation to eligibility for clerical service. They did not, however, settle the broader question of the religious or social status of eunuchs, nor did they prevent later Christian thinkers from approaching the subject in different ways. Late antique and medieval sources provide further evidence of religious and ascetic approaches to castration, as well as sustained discussions of the place of eunuchs within Christian society (Ringrose 2003).

This became particularly significant in Byzantium, where eunuchs occupied important positions within social, administrative, and ecclesiastical structures. Some attained high office in the imperial administration and the ecclesiastical hierarchy while others were present in monastic communities and played an important role in Byzantine musical culture. From the tenth century onwards, Byzantine sources increasingly portrayed eunuchs in more positive terms, and their status could acquire particular religious and symbolic meanings. Of particular significance for the Christian understanding of eunuchs in Byzantium was the treatise *In Defence of Eunuchs* by Theophylact of Ohrid (c. 1050–c. 1108), a Byzantine theologian, exegete, and Archbishop of Ohrid. The hierarch challenged the assumption that physical castration in itself indicated a person's moral or spiritual inferiority. In his view, a person's worth should be assessed primarily on the basis of conduct, virtue, and relationship with God rather than physical condition. In developing his argument, he drew upon scripture and Christian tradition, as well as legal and social considerations (Mullett 2002, 177–98). Moreover, Byzantine texts also contain comparisons between the eunuchs surrounding the imperial court and the heavenly choir of angels. Both could be portrayed as beings existing outside the ordinary structures of human sexuality and social reproduction (Moran 2002, 104). A comparable idea can be found in the religious anthropology of the Skoptsy, albeit in a considerably more radical form. In their view, a person who underwent castration approached an angelic state and became further removed from the ordinary, reproductive order of human existence (Сепразина 2023, 272).

The Skoptsy could therefore find precedents for certain elements of their religious practice within the broader Christian tradition, although they combined these elements in an unprecedented and radical manner. They did not create an entirely new religious system; rather, they constructed one from existing elements of the Christian religious imagination, including biblical texts, ascetic ideals, monastic traditions, concepts of purity, and eschatological expectations. By interpreting these elements with an exceptional degree of literalism and combining them with the practice of ritual castration, however, they arrived at a form of religious practice that stood in profound tension with Orthodox doctrine. Within this system, castration ceased to be merely an ascetic practice and became a soteriological act: a process of “whitening” through which the believer was understood to remove from the body the material consequences of Original Sin and prepare for the coming of the Kingdom of God.

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Article information

Damian Cyrocki. 2026. "The Skoptsy." In James Crossley and Alastair Lockhart (eds.) Critical Dictionary of Apocalyptic and Millenarian Movements. 7 September 2026. Retrieved from www.cdamm.org/articles/the-skoptsy.

Downloaded: 2026-09-04

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