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Coleman's "Russian Baptists & Spiritual Revolution 1905-1929" - Book Review

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BOOK REVIEWS


This book, that started out as a dissertation, argues for the unusual significance of the Russian Baptists in the modernization of Russian society. The evangelical movement constituted a challenge to those seeking to control Russian society at the turn of the last century, namely to the administrators of Tsar Nicholas II’s reactionary rule and also to a major element in the Russian Orthodox Missionary Society focused on fighting sectarianism. In spite of the repressive controls, the evangelical sectarian, or Russian Baptists as Coleman calls them, presented a public image of a more democratic and modern church - an active laity fully participating in group decision making, and demonstrating skills in organizing that were more suited to modernity. Viewed as both an indigenously rooted Slavic spiritual renewal movement and linked from the beginning to similar evangelical bodies in western Europe and America it also presented a religious variant to the visions of the more political intelligentsia often labeled Westernizers and Slavophiles, in that their appropriation, more often adaptation, of western ideas had grass roots attraction. Russian Baptists envisioned a Reformation of Russia.

The Reformation idea has returned numerous times in Russian history, perhaps because it is inherent in Christianity to regularly seek reform. Since, however, the dominant myth remains that Russian Orthodoxy did not experience the 16th century Reformation, some scholars have suggested seeing essential elements of that Reformation appearing in Russia in the early 19th century. Staying with that lag theory, then the story of the Russian Baptists between 1905 and 1929, as Coleman presents it, is like the second phase of the western Reformation. Here I have in mind the post-Westphalian preoccupations with religion and societal formation in response to the break up of Christendom, to the attempts toward religiously driven social reforms such as characterized early Methodism in Britain in response to urbanization and industrialization. Those are broad generalizations for quite complex phenomena. Nevertheless, the central point for taking Coleman’s thesis seriously is, that between the time of the abortive Declaration on Toleration (1905) and the Law on Religious Associations (1929) there was a major revolutionary transformation of Russia. Tracking public perceptions of the ‘Baptist problem’ provides a crucial key for grasping what was really going on, as the old tsarist order ended, and the new revolutionaries were still searching for new forms of social formation. Of course, after 1929 came the Stalinist controls, too often patterned after Tsarist ones, and renewed calls for a spiritual revolution (so Gorbachev in the 1980s) and much talk of building civil society after 1990.

So Coleman needs to be read within the framework of thinking after 1990, including new possibilities for grasping what the Soviet rulers of Russia were thinking, through increased access to archives. The full value of Coleman’s book is its groundedness in the archives, and its weaknesses have more to do with the limitations of archival sources, particularly Soviet ones, and her as yet limited familiarity with the general literature.
Coleman’s main thesis is that early in the 20th century, “Baptists offered Russians new forms of intellectually and organizationally democratic community life, rooted in religious rather than political conversion. They provide an unusual example of a socially mixed, albeit mostly lower-class, group of people making use of greater freedom of organization and of the press - and also of the new railway system - to form an organization linking the country and the city.” (p.29) Later she remarked that outsiders of various stripes were agreed that Baptist organizing techniques were modern, and that evangelical expansion was “symptomatic of an emerging civil society in Russia.” (p.46)

Other sections of the book offer additional food for thought on what it all meant. Her third chapter on conversion narratives and social experience is particularly interesting for evoking the long drawn out process of coming to awareness as individuals, of a spiritual questing with individuals caught between political and religious answers to social problems. Conversion narratives often showed an appreciation of Orthodox spiritual experience, but then a disappointment, where Baptist theology then offered more certain assurance of salvation. Departures from Orthodoxy, especially leaving the Orthodox community for the minority community of Baptists were painful, but the narratives also underlined the stronger bonds of the Baptist communities.

The second part of the book, reflecting her widest use of archival resources, focused on the way in which initial tolerance after 1905 was followed by new attempts to control, yet Baptists began acting as if full religious freedom was theirs if they simply took liberties. Even so, the increased restrictions, exiling and imprisonment of leaders, etc. caused Coleman to describe 1910-1917 as time of “dashed hopes”.

Then came her third section, sub-titled as her main title - ‘spiritual revolution’. This story has been told before, but Coleman presents a good selection of interesting illustrations to show the many creative ways the evangelicals concentrated on mission, and also saw themselves offering a better social vision than the Bolsheviks were capable of. Hence her last two chapters highlight the second dimension of the societal challenge of the Russian Baptists. If tsarist church and state perceived the evangelical sectarians as violating boundaries of control, now the Bolshevik revolutionary state perceived the Russian Baptists as competition for making a better social revolution. On the one hand, Baptists shared the values of liberty, equality, fraternity - social revolutionary verities since 1789 - but they differed on the means to that end. Where the Bolsheviks posited class struggle and violent eradication of exploiting classes, Baptist Christian socialism not only followed a Christian model of sharing with all, but also refused to kill enemies. Styling her last chapter ‘parallel lives’ Coleman described the growing sense of competing methods of reforming civil society, such as the Baptist youth associations in contrast to the Komsomol. Indeed, in its positive rebuilding of society, the Soviets set about fostering the formation of associations of like interest. Then when it became obvious that voluntary associations by evangelicals, even credit unions, were rated better than atheist and Soviet ones, those Soviet voices calling for greater use of force to suppress alternative movements won out. The 1929 Law on Religious Associations essentially also resulted in restrictions on all associations thereafter, not just the crushing of most religious practice by 1930 or 1931. Although Coleman rarely
makes explicit the parallels for today, such contrasting of Russian Baptist voluntary association building with the Soviet one, gives poignancy to the widespread talk in 1990 of the need to rebuild civil society, meaning forms of human interaction not controlled by the state.

There are two types of scholarly myopia to take notice of when attempting to assess Coleman’s work, but which should not detract from the yeoman service of digging up details that she provides. Western scholars during the Soviet era were generally unable to examine official archives, and needed to devise alternative techniques for determining facts. There were the Kremlinologists with a set of notions about power struggles within the Nomenklatura elite; others comparing patterns on the basis of social scientific theories, still others (often in the religious realm) working out of an ideology of communist persecution and suppression of dissidents. From these came story lines of greater or lesser plausibility. Soviet specialists on religion were often publishing the only information available publicly inside the Soviet Union, yet their work included outright fabrications. As a result, one of the rules of thumb followed by respected scholars in the west was to compare sources - official, samizdat, western reports - and to generate the most plausible account, thereby also learning to differentiate more reliable scholarship (much of Klibanov’s later materials on religion, for example) from the outright tendentious. The new scholars of Soviet religion, now including Coleman, seem less familiar with the necessary differentiation of quality. So we fail to get a sense of the established scholarship by 1990, to which she can offer new findings or revised interpretations. Instead, she repeats older statistical claims, for example, fails to indicate which had come to be deemed most reliable, so her own quoting of claims from only partially examined archival sources does not really help.

A second problem of perspective is more relevant to Coleman’s overall thesis about the Russian Baptists. Very important dissertations by Andrew Blane and Paul Steeves from the mid 1960s serve as her primary interpretive frame, Blane’s most relevant to the early legalization of the Baptists after 1905 and Steeves’ as an assessment of the Russian Baptist Union from its first beginnings in 1884 through 1935. What both have in common was a reliance on Russian language materials then available in the West (collections of journals, some memoirs and personal files of emigres) and an English language understanding of Baptist history. The Russian evangelical movement, however, and even renewal movements within Russian Orthodoxy at the beginning and end of the 19th century, were shaped by continental Pietism, most particularly by its German expressions. Even the Russian Baptists were more directly formed by the emerging German Baptist Union. Its leader, Gerhard Oncken, drew much from the British Baptists, often in deliberate contrast to the emphases of nearby German Brethren and Mennonites of Pietist orientation, but key associates of Oncken, with extensive ties to the Russians, were more continental when drawing from the Reformation wells. Thanks to the inundation of American Baptist missionaries (mostly independent Baptists with a strong British linked Calvinist theology) since 1991, the emerging theological leadership of the Russian Baptists has begun to differentiate itself from the Anglo-British Baptist tradition, finding more affinity in the continental Reformation traditions.
Coleman’s main thesis about Russian Baptists as democratizing factor, was a recurring theme already in Friedrich Engels’ writings on the Peasant Wars and on the Anabaptists as he understood them, a theme to which the Marxist revisionist Karl Kautsky returned at the end of the 19th century. By failing to utilize that classic Marxist literature (easily available in English) and not noticing western scholarship on the Anabaptist Reformation (16th century) and Hussite Reformation (15th century) she necessarily overlooked how much the Russian Baptists (at least major wings of it) understood themselves as heirs of those Reformation traditions. The common characteristics (also true for earlier Waldensians in southern France and Italy) were lay reading and interpretation of Scripture, appeals to priests to be renewed by Scripture, a Christological reading of the New Testament centered on the Sermon on the Mount and its radical theology of love (including pacifism in wartime), and an emphasis on seeking fellowship with likeminded disciples of Christ. That is, the radical dissenting Christian traditions have been a “democratizing factor” since early modern history.

One major history of the Evangelical Christian tradition by Wilhelm Kahle (1978), written as a thorough biography of its leader Ivan Prokhanov, would have been a fruitful way to grasp that continental tradition. Kahle’s book, translated for Russian Baptist leaders in private in the early 1980s, is now available on CD disk (in that Russian manuscript version) from the Euroasiatic Accrediting Association (EAAA) in Odessa. Another book by Kahle was a detailed treatment of the German Lutheran and Reformed churches in the Russian Empire, including their demise around 1937, whereas Gerd Stricker’s essays in Glaube in der 2ten Welt journal are a sure way to catch the story of its reemergence. There were many parallels with the Baptists. Although she devotes attention to Russian Baptist enthusiasm for Christian socialism, her sources lead her to think it was mere tactical adaptation toward acceptance under Soviet power, yet the German links indicate familiarity with German Christian socialists. Above all, her presentation of the major test of loyalty of Russian Baptist and Evangelical Christians (chapter 9) when the Bolsheviks forced them to reject pacifism is an important research achievement (in terms of what official archives told her about Tuchkov’s victory over Bonch-Bruevich’s attempts at accommodating sectarians with alternative service options) but she ends up understating the extensive nature of that pacifism on theological grounds. So her conclusions follow Steeves, who had limited himself to the Baptist Union, whereas the Evangelical Christians (who later shaped the post World War II united union), and its charismatic leader Prokhanov, seem less significant than they were.

On the whole matter of scholarship, Coleman introduced her work by stating there was “virtually no published scholarly work on the Russian Baptists in English” (p. 7) A footnote listed Edmund Heier’s book (1970) on Radstockism, and this reviewer’s book on the Soviet Evangelicals Since World War II (1981) as exceptions, claiming that neither deals with the period she focused on. That might be true of the book titles, but she might have checked more carefully; moreover this writer’s subsequent published articles have addressed the early Soviet years and the pre-history. For example, though citing this reviewer’s article on the united council overseeing adjudication of CO applications (where I drew extensively from the Chertkov archive), her comments about Baptist and
Evangelical Christian involvement suggest she has not read it, nor several other articles in that publication of 1997 from the Russian Academy of Sciences, entitled *The Long Road of Russian Pacifism*. Coleman acknowledged the dissertations referred to above (Blane and Steeves) but labeled them “confessional histories” for failing to explore the Baptists in relation to their milieu. This reviewer would differ, particularly when noting how little of the general literature on Soviet religious policy she relied on. Also in the introduction Coleman dismissed two “thoroughly researched” works by evangelicals in post-Soviet Ukraine, as confessional histories. That might be true of S. N. Savinski (now living in Utah and a self-taught historian); but she has failed to notice a number of new scholars doing dissertations (with heavy use of archives), Yury Reshetnikov’s (in Ukrainian) was published by the Ukrainian Academy of Science, and others (notably Konstantin Prokhorov on church-state issues) now publishing in the new scholarly journals of the new theological schools.

These comments are not intended so much as a critique of Coleman’s important work, as to show how her book illustrates the need for some very necessary bridging of communities of discourse. Permit me a side comment on another quite fascinating and yet limited book about the Russian evangelical tradition. Sergei Zhuk published his *Russia’s Lost Reformation* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2004) in English, his subtitle indicating his focus on “Peasants, Millenialism, and Radical Sects in Southern Russia and Ukraine, 1830-1917”. He too makes the claim that the 16th century Radical Reformation in western Europe, which resulted in Mennonites and Quakers (so Zhuk), had its equivalent in south Russia between 1830 and 1917. His *Sitz im Leben* differed from Coleman (who appears not to know of his work) in that he grew up in Ukraine in the 1970s with neighbors known as Stundists, the latter hiring his band to play hymns instead of their usual rock music. Later when researching Quakers and Mennonites in colonial America he discovered the similarities in theology and religious practice to the Stundists. When he started an American PhD at Johns Hopkins, he had intended a comparative study, then ended up focusing on the Stundists (who were later part of Coleman’s Russian Baptists). Zhuk’s book reads like a journey of discovery, starting with realizing how little work on Russia’s dissenting tradition had been done, then utilizing what he could find in archives (also in Petersburg at the main historical archive) and publications by adherents and opponents. This is not the place for a detailed review, except to point out how disconcerting the book is to read. His American dissertation advisers could help with a theory construct (social theory thanks to Geertz and Weber), with some general literature on the peasants in 19th century Russia, but failed to detect the quite idiosyncratic nature of his list of secondary works on Russian religion, such as highly dated German language works on Russian Mennonites, some sekantstvo studies from the Soviet era, and a smattering of recent American studies on Russian religion. Gregory Freeze’s useful book on Orthodox clergy in the 19th century appeared in the bibliography but Freeze’s translation of Igor Smolitsch’s major study of Russian dissent (German original), a more relevant work, does not.

Those still writing confessional histories without attention to milieu clearly need to benefit from the scholarship offered by Coleman and Zhuk. That is more difficult when that scholarship seems insufficiently familiar with the major studies on which said confessional historians rely. Since what
ultimately matters is the impact of understanding gained from scholarship for the sake of building Russia’s future, at least its civil and religious dimensions, and, to take Coleman and Zhuk’s claims seriously, it also matters how such scholarship causes us to rethink modern history more generally, then reading each other’s work with judicious breadth and linguistic diversity remains even more vital as scholarship proliferates. Dissertations are indeed a major resource for entering the discourse, but keeping abreast of further findings and shifting interpretations that mark the good scholar’s stream of articles, seems the elusive ideal. Seldom do the monographs suffice.

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The past fifteen years have seen a myriad of changes in the former Soviet Union (FSU), not the least of which is the mission of the evangelical church. Many Western organizations have claimed huge successes in this period, while the Russian Orthodox Church and many national evangelicals have been extremely critical of Western evangelical missions work. How should the progress of mission be viewed today? What successes can legitimately be claimed, and what needs to be changed? What role should the West play in the future of mission work in the FSU?

This book, based on a conference at the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague in 2003, is an important survey and analysis of mission in the FSU from several different perspectives. This book would be very useful in helping anyone doing ministry in the FSU to gain a better grasp of the historical factors at work, as well as in challenging people to think about new ways to do ministry. The book would also be helpful for anyone seeking to more knowledgeably pray for and give to the work going on in the FSU.

Of the book’s 12 chapters, eight are written by the two editors, Walter Sawatsky and Peter Penner, with additional contributions from Marina Sergeyevna Karetnikova, Johannes Dyck, Mark R. Elliot, and Viktor Artemov. Overall, the book develops several very important themes for analysis, including the many creative ways that mission has been conducted in the FSU in the past, how the West and nationals work together in mission, the importance of inter-church dialogue, and how contextualization of mission has taken place (or needs to take place) in the FSU. I would like to comment on how these four themes are developed by the contributing authors.

First, it is quite encouraging to learn how many different ways mission has been done in the FSU. As Sawatsky argues, mission has always been at the heart of the Slavic evangelical church (chapter 3). From the first days of mission work in the 19th century through the last 15 years, the creativity of nationals is to be applauded. From the ministry of the “book bearers” in the 19th century (p. 65) to Christian camping in the 21st century (chapter 11), many types of creative and effective ministry have been done (of special note are the many interesting examples from Karetnikova in