Wynot's "Keeping the Faith: Russian Orthodox Monasticism in the Soviet Union, 1917-1939" - Book Review

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Monasticism is the vanguard of the Eastern Christian people. Despite efforts over the centuries to domesticate it and subject it to institutional control, both governmental and ecclesiastical, Eastern Christian monasticism has managed to retain at least some of its original character as a spontaneous movement of Christians seeking to live a radical commitment to the Gospel. Throughout its history it has remained largely a lay movement and close to the laity, a source of inspiration, guidance and spiritual power. Lenin and Stalin understood this and the power of vanguards, and in their desire to eradicate religion in their Soviet state sought to destroy Russian monasticism. They failed. Jennifer Jean Wynot gives us a kind of tactical history of the Bolsheviki war on monasticism, from Lenin’s 1917 decree on land nationalization through Stalin’s purges, chronicling the Soviet attacks and monastic responses.

Wynot sets the stage in chapter one with a succinct overview of the history of monasticism in its Eastern, particularly Russian, form up to the eve of the Bolshevik revolution, focusing on the various reforming movements of the preceding two centuries. Understanding these reform movements is necessary for understanding the resilience of Russian monasticism in the trials that would follow. Especially important was the spiritual revival begun in the late 18th century with the translation into Slavonic by Paisios Velichkovsky of the Philokalia, an anthology of patristic writings on prayer of the heart. This work inspired a monastic revival epitomized in the famous startsy (elders) of the Optina Pustin’ monastery who served as spiritual directors to common folk and intellectuals alike, including Gogol, Dostoevsky and Tolstoy. Figures cited by Wynot show the extent of this monastic revival. From the time of Catherine the Great (1762-1796), whose expropriation of Church lands had halved the number of monasteries in Russia, to the eve of the revolution, the number of monasteries (both men’s and women’s) increased from 385 to 1242. This revival in monasticism was accompanied by a revival in the church as a whole culminating in the All Russian Church Council of 1917, which restored the Patriarchate, suppressed in 1721 by Peter the Great.

Wynot divides the main part of her study into four periods, each of which gets a chapter: the Bolshevik revolution, civil war and the subsequent famine (1917-1922); the New Economic Policy (NEP) period (1921-1928); collectivization and its famine, which Wynot titles “The Good Friday of Russian Monasticism,” a reference to the mass arrests of monastics on February 18, 1932 (1928-1934); and what Wynot calls “The Descent into Hell,” a period that begins with relative calm and descends into Stalin’s purges (1934-1939). The last division, though often made in scholarship, is, as Wynot acknowledges, perhaps more illusory than real. The calm following collectivization represented more a pause in the persecution than a change in policy. The NEP years do stand out as a distinct period characterized by a clear change in tactics in the war with religion in general. For monasticism, however, the situation worsened during this period. Monastery closures continued apace; all monasteries on Soviet territory were closed by 1930. Monasteries lost even the breathing space they had managed to make for themselves in the previous period by getting themselves declared kolkhozy (collective farms) or sovkhozy (state-owned farms).

In line with a number of other recent studies, Wynot finds that in the immediate post-revolution period the approach to monasticism was neither monolithic nor universal. While
the Bolsheviks shared an antipathy toward religion, they were not united in their approach to its eradication. An active conversation was taking place within the party. “Soft-liners” such as Lunacharski preferred cooption and education, the approach that would be taken during NEP, while “hard-liners” like Lenin favored more drastic measures. Wynot makes a significant contribution by documenting these sometimes public disagreements from the archives of the Russian Federation and two regions, Moscow and Smolensk. While the party quickly pushed through decrees on land nationalization (Nov. 8, 1917) and separation of church and state (Jan. 23, 1918), both of which adversely affected the monasteries, their implementation was far from uniform, especially in areas far away from the center of power. Village soviets would sometimes protect their churches and monasteries. Still, we should not overstate the ineffectiveness of the Bolsheviks. In their first two years in power they managed to close 673 monasteries, over half of the monasteries in existence on the eve of the revolution, even while fighting a civil war.

The archival documentation that enriches the first part of Wynot’s study dries up after NEP. There is a lack of information, for example, about the process that led to the mass arrests, imprisonments and executions of monastics that began on February 18, 1932, the “Good Friday of Russian Monasticism.” An absence of discussion within the Party is understandable as power became concentrated in the hands of Stalin. But there must have been orders, reports and other records of the execution of the tyrant’s designs. If they still exist, they are to be found in the archives of the state security apparatus, the OGPU and its successor, the KGB. Wynot cannot be faulted with this lack of documentation, since these archives are not yet open to general research. But her efforts to fill the gap are not convincing. To attribute this comprehensive attempt to wipe out Russian monasticism to the 1932 five-year plan of the League of the Militant Godless or the famine caused by Stalin’s dekulakization is woefully inadequate. The monastics swept up in these arrests were not convenient scapegoats, but victims of a renewed, systematic attack on monasticism that began as early as 1928 with Stalin’s consolidation of power. Nor should this attack be seen as simply ancillary to collectivization any more than the intensified persecution at the end of the 1930s should be seen as ancillary to the purges. To be fair, Wynot’s focus is not Soviet decision-making but the response of monastics to the climate created by Soviet decisions. Nevertheless, a more fulsome account of that climate of threat and fear would help the reader better appreciate the enormity of what the monastics were facing.

Wynot’s principle goal, she says, is “to examine ways in which monks and nuns were able to preserve their way of life despite hardship” (x). In this she has succeeded admirably, for each period cataloging the range of tactics employed by monastics in response to Soviet power. In the early periods this is accomplished partly through a mirror reading of the archived Party documents showing the authorities’ responses to monastic moves. Particularly interesting were the attempts by monastics to accommodate themselves to Soviet power by turning themselves into Soviet collective farms. Wynot is right to defend these monasteries from charges of collaboration. They were, after all, trying to maintain their own identity within the system in a way which seemed natural; a communal way of life is part of the definition of monasticism. In their appeals to have this way of life recognized as manifesting the Communist ideal they were only acting like the Christian woman described by Solzhenitsyn in his *Gulag Archipelago*, who when being interrogated by the NKVD (another predecessor to the KGB), protested that Christians are the best citizens, always seeking to obey the law and praying for the well-being of the rulers. This is nothing more or less than the second-century apologists did at another moment of persecution. Any gains the
monasteries made in this direction, however, were wiped out during NEP and especially during Stalin’s collectivization.

Once all the monasteries were closed and monastics were being rounded up, imprisoned and executed, the only response was to go underground. Secret monasteries were formed in forests or cities, or in the Gulag. Many monks and nuns lived as hermits or lived double lives as secret monastics “in the world,” whether officially tonsured or not. One such nun interviewed by the author, Mother Serafima, a medical doctor and, from 1922, a nun, was directed by her spiritual father, a bishop, never to tell anyone about her monastic life. She kept the secret to herself, calling it “her deepest happiness” (133). A number of memoirs of such monastics have appeared since the fall of the Soviet Union. Wynot has done the non-Russian speaking reader a great favor by bringing many of their stories to us. This evidence can only be anecdotal, of course, and we will probably never know the breadth of Russian monasticism during this period. Nevertheless, the number of stories that have appeared give a sense of monasticism’s continued importance for the Russian Church.

Wynot has provided us with a concise, highly readable overview of an important period in the history of Russian monasticism. The catalogue she presents of monastic responses to Soviet pressure should be a starting point for further research. From her account it becomes clear that the Bolsheviks could not win their war with monasticism and with Orthodoxy. Persecution brought monasticism closer to the ordinary faithful and strengthened the traditional bonds between them. The exercise of starchestvo, monastic spiritual direction, continued to play a significant role in the Church. As Wynot reports, there were several important elders, particularly women elders, such as Mother Agna, a former abbess, who lived in a forest in central Russia. “Though she lived in hiding, those Orthodox who were searching for spiritual guidance knew where to find her” (159). Under pressure, monasticism returned to its roots where it is not an institution but a charismatic movement that defies all establishments. The tradition of monasticism provided a way of living a radical Christian commitment that could subvert the reality the Bolsheviks were trying to create.

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