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Review of Bremer's "Cross and Kremlin: A Brief History of the Orthodox Church in Russia"

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BOOK REVIEWS

Thomas Bremer, *Cross and Kremlin: A Brief History of the Orthodox Church in Russia*. Trans. from German by Eric W. Gritsch. Grand Rapids, MI, Cambridge, UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2013. Paperback, 178 pp. ISBN 978-0-8028-6962-3.

Reviewed by: Paul Mojzes, professor emeritus, Rosemont College, PA

For those with little or no knowledge of the Russian Orthodox Church, this is an ideal concise overview of over a thousand years of Russian Orthodoxy. Even for those who have read many books on Christianity in Russian lands, this is an excellent succinct recapitulation of the major features of one of the most significant churches of Christianity. The author, Thomas Bremer, professor of Eastern Church Studies and Peace Studies at University of Münster in Germany is, in the opinion of this reviewer, the foremost specialist of Christian history and theology in Slavic Orthodox lands, particularly in the northeast of Europe and the Balkans. He is a Roman Catholic whose great understanding and love for his subject matter allows him to write perhaps more objectively than Russian Orthodox scholars might do.

The first three chapters (approximately a third of the book's length) provide a general historical overview from the earliest Christian missions (Byzantine Orthodox and Western Catholic) to the present, focusing predominantly on Russian Orthodoxy but not leaving out Roman and Greek Catholicism, Protestant influences, and Orthodox sects such as the Old Believers. Due to the brevity of his overview, the narrative is not cluttered with details but focuses on the truly major events, turning points, and setbacks of slightly over a thousand years of Christian development. Thus, he manages to include, for example, the impact of reunification attempts between Orthodoxy and Catholicism, the controversies over monastic holdings between the Josephites and the non-possessors, the Petrine reforms, and the impact of Bolshevism.

Then follow seven topical chapters: Ecclesiastical Structures, Church and State, Theology and Religious Thought, Monasticism, Spirituality and Religiosity, Russian Orthodoxy and the West, and

Dissidence. The practical advantage of this section is that those who do not have the time or inclination to read the entire book can focus on those topics that are of interest to them. The slight disadvantage is the inescapable occasional repetitions and overlaps, as for instance in the chapters on monasticism and on spirituality and religiosity (pp. 118 and 122).

The book contains two simple maps of the areas of Kievan Rus' and the Russian Tsardom, a chronological table (pp. 164-66), followed by a three-page select bibliography, as well as an index of places and subjects. In other words, the book is a very compact presentation of this subject matter.

Bremer devotes a fair amount of space to a definition of Orthodoxy in Russia. To a casual reader that may come as a surprise because it would seem to be a simple task—an overview of the Orthodox Church in Russia. But present-day Russia is not the same as its beginnings. Kievan Rus', the area where Byzantine missions brought about the conversion of the grand prince, did not remain the core of the Russian state and continues to be contested to this day in Russia and Ukraine. Bremer points out the fluidity in the way Russia has defined itself historically, geographically, and culturally. Without retracing the complexity, let us simply affirm that Bremer deals with it competently and in an objective manner.

According to Bremer, Russian Orthodoxy has perceived of two great threats, and Islam is not one of them. The West is, whether it was the missionary designs of the Vatican (which Bremer does not minimize), the invasion of the Swedes, the Teutonic Knights, Poland-Lithuania, or Nazi Germany, or, in different form, the Westernization under Peter the Great and some of his successors. While Russian Orthodoxy defined itself over-against the West, Bremer points out that even its defence against Westernization nevertheless caused significant adjustments. The second threat was the radical Bolshevik secularization and persecution that nearly destroyed the Russian Orthodox Church. The book succinctly recognizes and describes the many nuances of oppression during the 70 plus years of Communism, ranging from perhaps the most cruel persecutions in Christian history to manipulations of the Church by the state for its foreign policy purposes. The collapse of Communism brought about a massive “reevaluation” (p. 87) and thoroughgoing support of Orthodoxy by the Russian state, as Orthodoxy

continues to be viewed as the basis of being Russian, even though church attendance does not reflect it. Nevertheless, even irreligious Russians value the role of the ROC as a pillar of their self-identity.

Thomas Bremer deals sensitively with the way in which southwest parts of Rus' (Galicia) gravitated to the West, how the Ukrainian Greek Catholics became a bone of contention and emerged out of illegality, and how under Communism the development of theology was brought practically to a standstill in the USSR while emigres spread Russian Orthodoxy not only to Western Europe but also to North America and Australia, making it a world communion. The appeal of ecumenism and the more recent clearly anti-ecumenical tendencies are also effectively presented.

This short book portrays an astonishing array of developments within Russian Orthodoxy, effectively and accurately. The book reads well due to the expert translation by the late American Lutheran theologian, Erik Gritsch, with only occasional remnants of German terms, such as *Völkerwanderung* for Great Slavic Migration. My very high recommendation of the book is based on its thorough dependability and ability of the author to present very complex developments in a concise form. I regard Thomas Bremer as a worthy successor of another great German expert on Orthodoxy, Ernst Benz, of a previous generation.