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# Book Review: Orthodox Revivalism in Russia: Driving Forces and Moral Quests

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# B O O K  R E V I E W S

**Milana Benovska, *Orthodox Revivalism in Russia. Driving Forces and Moral Quests*, Routledge, 2021. 240pp. ISBN 9780367474201. Ebook $128.00**

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Orthodox Revivalism in Russia today seemed at first glance like an anomaly, more like a dream than reality. After following the ethnographic study relying on fieldwork in two parishes in Ladoga (120+ miles southwest of Moscow, population 327,500) this reviewer began to perk up, taking more than 40 pages of notes, because the information, the theoretical approaches, and the paradoxes to ponder, were so fascinating, there was so much new learning to savor. It is not irrelevant that the famous Optina Pustyn monastery is near Ladoga within its Eparchy (diocese). Milena Benovska was part of a research group on Orthodox Christianity and morality, in her case managing an initial pilot study in 2006, including recording 3 long interviews, followed by three months in the summer of 2007, interviewing another 29 persons from the 2 parish churches available, then also writing reflective reports. Yet the main writing was completed a decade later, by which time much had changed, which Benovska tracked through extensive library research, heavy use of the Internet to access materials from the Russian Orthodox Church websites, as well as many others.

Most knowledgeable people tracking the late impact of *Perestroika* on religion, then the first post-Soviet decade, will have remembered the massive transformations, the turn to religion, the opening of thousands of churches. Less studied has been the attitudinal shifts of an entire society, or societies if including the 14 new independent countries, no longer part of Russia but sharing its legacy. Benovska includes a lengthy historiography of scholars (Russian, East European, and Western) who produced new findings by means of ethnographic studies, the "new anthropology" of Christianity, plus sociology, philosophy, theology, and even history. The literature includes Russian, German, and English publications, many unknown to this reviewer, and presumably to the majority of OPREE readers. Benovska, a Bulgarian anthropologist, writes fluently, and systematically. Questions the reader begins to wonder about, become the focus of the following chapters, until a much richer grasp of the challenges of what she calls "revivalism,"

"multiple moralities," and "vicarious religion" forms.

Switching off Soviet societal controls, could not happen overnight, since alternative morality codes, or ways of living Christianly were not readily available. Benovska rather late in her book remarks on the new problem after 1990, the "intrusion of predatory capitalism without rules" (p. 95), indeed even later, Benovska when having compared typical Protestant and Catholic conversion stories with Orthodox, noted how the latter are more varied, a broad spectrum from non-belief to religiosity. In that context the author remarks: "the seven decades of atheism determine the character of today's conversions through the concept of "interrupted community." That is a poignant insight to signal how complicated conversions currently are, hence Benovska's repeated stress on the reality that in the 21st century Russian Orthodoxy for its believers is being "rediscovered" and/or "reinvented" (p. 68).

A primary intent for Benovska's research was to make sense of the reality that Russia has become Orthodox culturally, given the material evidence to see the increase in clergy, in open monasteries or convents, and above all the renovated or rebuilt churches; over against the reality that perhaps only 2% to possibly 10% are regular worship participants. The contrasts are captured vividly in the couplet "built with gold" versus "built with tears" (p. 9). To speak of "revivalism," the author's term instead of 'revival,' is to probe the content of the church activists, the "little flock" that such persons see themselves as, who are also applying the notion of "vicarious belief," seeing it as their calling to convey blessings where possible. Further the author proposes to think of Orthodoxy, following the new ethnology examining social practice in current Orthodox society.

There are only four chapters, each with sub-headings: chapter 1 "how to explain the inconsistency between low participation yet mass identification with Orthodoxy;" revivalism as social movement; how little is the 'little flock;' "vicarious religion"-- a portrait of the little flock; symphony between Russian Orthodox Church (ROC) and the state. On the mass identification several interviewees claimed that "Orthodoxy is in the soul of every Russian person" (pp. 29, 31). This long first chapter establishes five-fold criteria for joining the 'little flock;' attending worship, receiving communion, reading the Bible, praying, and fasting. This rigorous commitment accounts for many newly baptized unable to take that much time, given work and family tasks. To complete the "portrait" Benovska relied heavily on the "*pritserkovnyi*" and "v*otserkovnyi*" circles (those with background church knowledge, and the enchurched who maintain autonomous professional roles) and the church people, not so much institutional as spiritual, adopting the ideals of ascetic

monasticism, and are known by their attire, beard, body control. The church people or little flock plus the enchurched are doing the legwork for revivalism, such as regular volunteer service in charity work, and playing a mediating role in society.

That leads to Chapter 2 "Multiple Moralities and Religious Power." One meaning refers to the public role of the ROC as "mentor and moral entrepreneur" (p. 63). In addition, the dissolution of the USSR resulted in "a total shift of social status ... degradation of personal and collective status ... loss of collective political identity" (p. 64). What emerged were a "variety of systems of values," hence the term "multiple moralities." Orthodox Christianity is presented as "a corrective of the morally disoriented Russian society" (p. 64). A sub-heading on participation in public policy, surprisingly begins with marriage and family efforts, stressing love and fidelity. After 2005 a secular annual "parade of the brides" began spreading, even Svetlana Medvedeva (wife of then President Medvedev) fostered an annual day of family love, with solemn liturgies and venerating the saints, specifically Petr and Fevronia (Murom) who were canonized in 1547, with sculptures of them placed in public places. To illustrate the importance of ethical reasoning, Benovska cited a person in Kaluga (2007) telling her, "somehow we have to act towards the restoration of family values in Russia" (p. 69). One interviewee's conversion story began with slowly seeking cultural knowledge of Orthodoxy, connecting this to her personal moral quest, whereby she mentioned that the Young Pioneers had been taught a morality code that was rooted in the Gospels, but not so acknowledged. She also spoke of Tolstoy's moral utopian project, his stress on nonresistance to evil, and the recovery of human dignity, plus the influence of the "socialist humanist project" and linking it with the Communist moral code. Her conversion story also included having listened to the lectures of Professor Alexei Osipov (p. 72). Given Benovska's access to two parishes in Ladoga, it turned out that the majority of them had university training. So, revivalism was deeply moral, drawing on a variety of resources.

So much of the "religious power" shaping the new converts was due to the charismatic power of their spiritual teachers, a young priest easily approached, where the Sunday School had evolved into a youth scout group of over 300, others sought out Elders (*startsy*) at Optina or elsewhere, as well as through readings. The search for learning about medieval Orthodoxy had the impact that most little flock circles were actively anti-modern, some familiar with the early 20th century Renovationist movement, dissociated themselves from "renovationists" as undesirable modernism (p. 80). Yet during the Soviet era many women had gained self-confidence in

professional spheres. The enchurched circles Benovska encountered, were overwhelmingly female, now leading as teachers, social workers and nursing in seniors' institutions. The chapter ended with conclusions, showing the problems in restoring pre-Soviet institutions, and concluding that the activism of women in social services "is changing traditional status positions" (p. 82). Practices of charity were deeply rooted in historical Russian Orthodoxy, for example between 1808-1908, 5 hospitals were built in Ladoga, thanks to major donors. Even though the practice of charity was virtually abandoned in the Soviet era, nevertheless there remained a "general ethos of compassion, mercy, and the search for the good" (p. 86). Given the secularism of the Russian public milieu, the search for the good serves as bridge to "principles of shared morality" (p. 88).

The author then turned in her third chapter to deeper analysis of the conversion narratives, that involved a drawn-out process (rarely the drama of St. Paul on the road to Damascus, Benovska noted), noting the frequency of "moral torment" and the role of miracles. This began with establishing a theoretical framework of difference, from the extensive literature on western Christian conversion narratives. Two key points were that for Orthodox "continuity has an incomparably greater symbolic importance" (p. 95) yet a major part of religious knowledge was lost during the Soviet era. Hence secondly, this made personal interviews "practically indispensable"; more so, it required an empathetic participant observer. Because Orthodox narratives lacked a standard form, the interviews were "socially contingent" on where and with whom the interviewees told their stories. The basic steps the author noted, were the process of changing one's world view, baptism as identity change, and the process of '*votserkovlenie*' (enchurching). A lengthy quote from an educated 'little flock' convert, whom she 'named' Larissa, who linked sin, redemption, and moral suffering to physical pain. She had attended worship, but could not endure the whole liturgy, became nauseous. But then she vowed next time to stick it out, then held on to a neighbor when feeling faint. The woman responded by urging her to lift her hand, cross herself, and say "let God arise." There was inner resistance, the neighbor woman got some holy water for her to drink, then sprinkled it over her face. Larissa still could not breathe but felt something falling down from the root of her hair, then further down past her heart, and regained her breath. Still not exhaling until something dropped down through her legs, then she felt lightened, and started smiling. Then Larissa thanked the woman, asked her to pray for her because she felt she would be tempted to sin, so was advised to read the *Akathistos* of the Mother of God (Kaluga). She then read it for 40 days, began repeating it so "Mother of God" helped her. (pp. 100-

101). For other narratives, there were also references to miracles playing a role, most of which Benovska labeled "miracles of everyday life," something unexpected and beneficial happening (p. 112f).

Finally, the fourth chapter included striking contrasts on "Politics of memory and religious nationalism" (p. 131). To show how the politics of memory applied to revivalism in contemporary Russia, she described the project of "*Kraevedenie*" (local knowledge). Some of this was nationally driven, promoted by Putin since 2000, but the widespread honoring of the dead spread spontaneously. This involved teachers, librarians, local writers, museum staff seeking data for recovery of memory. Benovska focused on church related *Kraevedenie*, namely locating abolished churches, biographies of clergy martyred since 1917. This was where a "synergy" between church and state happened. The ROC canonized new martyrs, already by 2000 1,097 had been canonized, including three monks from Optina Pustyn, by 2018 the total had reached 1,776 (p. 142). The names were published through the church presses, crosses were mounted with the names of the repressed. Benovska pointed to the spread of local history research and publication including by raising up markers in cemeteries. Yet "now" (i. e. 2018) the ROC avoids addressing the responsibility of previous tormenters and executioners "due to the recently growing loyalty to the Soviet legacy..." (p. 147), Politically the leaders foster "complete oblivion" since the anonymous dead "are a source of disorder" (p. 149). Therefore, the Orthodox community "avoids dividing Russian society into 'victims' and 'tormenters'" (p. 152). Benovska concludes with the remark "the action politics of memory is a strategy for reconciling irreconcilable legacies that are specific for Russia" (p. 153).

Sociologist Agadjanian in 2000 had already spoken of a new pluralism in Russia. When Benovska broached the phrase religious pluralism in Ladoga in 2006, she discovered that her research might be stopped at the outset, because of the frozen reaction of the priest in Ladoga. She realized that religious pluralism was antithetical to the struggle of the ROC--an interest in other confessions in Ladoga (of which there were many) were impossible; attempts privately to contact Lutherans, Baptists, Catholics, and others failed. As a practicing Christian within the Bulgarian Orthodox still rendered her a stranger, the necessary trust from her interlocutors came, after Bulgaria in 2007 joined the European Union, the resultant raised eyebrows in Ladoga were deflected by her answer to an interviewee who had maintained ties to fellow engineers in Bulgaria, that Bulgaria had not destroyed the monuments to the Soviet army, as had other post-socialist

countries. Her book may be a mere "ethnographic snapshot" (p. 24), as Benovska put it, but this reviewer warmly recommends reading its careful depiction of deeply emotional and highly intellectual religious journeys from a non-religious starting point. Interview data may be very local, but it is set in a broad context of scholarship. To grasp the immense complexity of an entire society in drastic transformation since 1990, and certainly still in progress, Benovska provides a helpful way in.