11-2011

Nichols' "The Development of Russian Evangelical Spirituality: A Study of Ivan V. Kargel (1849-1937)" - Book Review

Walter Sawatsky

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find both Western evangelical and Russian Orthodox influences. Chapter three examines the work of Radstock’s Russian successor, V. A. Pashkov, who attempted to restore Apostolic piety and the primitive church to Russia. Chapter four covers the work of I. S. Prokhanov from 1905-1910 who was heavily influenced by the proto-fundamentalist Moody Bible Institute. Chapter five deals with Prokhanov’s work from 1910-1939 in which he began to modify the historical narrative of the Gospel Christians to stress their Eastern origins in order to reestablish their Apostolic Christianity which he thought might possibly help save the West from militant atheism. Chapter six covers the developments of the Gospel Christians from 1944-2008 and their changing historical identity due to socio-political forces. It was after 1991 and the fall of the Soviet Union that their identity and theology entered into a crisis stage due to a number of factors including a lack of a strong indigenous research culture and a dramatic increase in the influence of Anglo-American fundamentalism. It is in chapter seven where Puzynin, using the insights of Alastair MacIntyre, John Howard Yoder and others, attempts to offer a solution to the crisis of present day Ukrainian Gospel Christians. Puzynin suggests using an, “evangelical program based on holist (coherentist) realist epistemology provides the necessary intellectual resources for solving the epistemological crisis of the Gospel Christians” xxxix.

Overall I was very pleased with Puzynin’s work and think it will be a valuable resource in placing present day Ukrainian Protestants in an historical context. I also find his desire to alleviate a crisis of identity and theology among the Ukrainian Protestants quite admirable. On the other hand, I think his desire to engage in contemporary issues may be the source of some of my concerns with the text. Puzynin’s main goal sometimes seems to be more focused with the present instead of the past. This may be understandable, however, given his academic training was as a theologian rather than as an historian. In addition, I found some aspects of the book quite frustrating. For one, the footnotes lacked critical details. Instead of giving full bibliographical information at the first citation of a text, there was only the last name, the title and a page number. In order to find the full name of the author, publisher or the date of publication you had to turn to the bibliography. Another issue I had was the arrangement of bibliography in that primary and secondary sources were listed together. I would have liked to have seen them separated to make it easier to identify one from the other. Finally, the biggest shortcoming I noticed was the lack of any type of index. This made it very difficult to find key items in the text. These concerns aside, however, I believe Puzynin has written a fine monograph that will serve scholars well.

Reviewed by Mark McCarthy, Montreat College, Montreat NC


With the virtual invasion from the West of missionaries to the former Soviet Union starting in 1991, there also came theology teachers for staffing the newly established theological schools. One striking feature was the frequency with which such teachers seemed to assume that their particular theology, especially if they represented a Baptist denomination or seminary, was what their presumed counter parts in the Slavic world must also share. Within a few years, one point of debate that surfaced was between adherents of a strict Calvinist predestinarianism, often with the free church code phrase of ‘eternal security’ as short hand, and a Reformed theology associated with the Dutch theologian Arminius, that allowed for a greater role for free will of human beings in response to the divine initiative. New graduates of the schools returned to their home churches
preaching Calvinism, and encountered resistance from long time leaders, not as theologically educated, but who sensed that the theology was foreign to their experience.

Those who struggled with attempting to summarize and articulate Soviet Evangelical theology, as this reviewer did more than three decades ago, will know that a variety of theologies had been part of the free church traditions that emerged in Slavic territories, partly of indigenous origin and also influenced by theologies from the West. They included Darbyite Dispensationalism, whether emerging directly from the ministry of Lord Radstock, who was from that Plymouth Brethren tradition, or from its late 19th century developments in America, also as part of the struggle over ‘Fundamentals’, or as I encountered its manifestation in the personal Bible studies of Konstantin Kriuchkov, who figured out his own dispensational charts. One of the ways in which scholars have tended to discuss the mix of influences was either to follow the English language Baptist teaching from Britain or America (for example in dissertations by de Chalandeau, Paul Steeves or Heather Coleman), or to show the affinity of Slavic evangelical theology to European continental Pietism (writings of Wilhelm Kahle and Hans-Christian Diedrich), which in its north European expressions emphasized personal and social holiness, the latter through organizing ministries to the poor through establishing hospitals for long term care, orphanages in industrial cities, and fostering reading schools so the peasants could read for themselves the new Bible translations produced by the Bible societies. Both influences were significant, and grasping the nature of free church theologizing requires familiarity with those developments.

The new scholars within post-Soviet evangelicalism have been wrestling with articulating a Slavic evangelical theology for the 21st century, that is rooted in that Slavic story. Also reviewed in this issue is the recent dissertation by Andrei Puzynin, also recently published by Wipf & Stock as is the Nichols book under review here. Several such scholars focused on a missiological framework or examined the preaching of Slavic evangelicals to identify crucial themes. Konstantin Prokhorov’s published essays and dissertation project add the strand of the influence of Orthodox piety, mysticism and theology that was long the context for Slavic evangelical development, and had provided printed resources in the decades of near total absence of western resources.

Gregory Nichols’ deep, careful exploration of the developing spirituality and theology of Ivan V Kargel, who was both German and Russian, is an important contribution from an American historian-theologian who has earned the right to be heard. It will help shape thinking and discussion. Presented as a fascinating spiritual biography, Nichols knows the content and style of theologizing that emerged from the evangelical and pietist milieu of renewal movements sweeping across western and eastern Europe during the 19th century, and bearing more fruit in Slavic lands in the times of severe testing under Communism.

Nichols conveys more so than anyone before him a way of seeing how Keswick Holiness played a vital role - which was not merely copied, but Kargel’s role was to adapt it to a context where faith was severely tested. Kargel’s impact came through preaching, teaching, and many published articles of spiritual counsel, that are still being read. Nichols’ book earns him a respected place in ongoing theological conversations among current east European Evangelical theologians. The author’s choice of label is also crucial, since he centered Kargel’s theology in “spirituality”. This is different from constructing a systematic theology, filled with rational and propositional discussion of classic doctrines about God, Christ, Holy Spirit, Scripture, eschatology and ecclesiology. When all of those come together in a life of holy living, in a life of individuals and church communities seeking to be guided by the authority of Scripture as they read it, the word spirituality fits. Indeed, it is a way of pointing to the spiritual and trinitarian style of conveying theology in Orthodoxy.
Kargel turns out to reveal a life of continuous spiritual growth, never quite finished with learning the way of theology. From his early biographical career, Nichols discovered, when Kargel’s preferred language was German, and he lived among German Baptists and Mennonites, before connecting more deeply with the Russian speaking Pashkovite and Evangelical Christian traditions in St. Petersburg, that a focus on holiness was the red thread of concern throughout. Kargel valued both a holiness manifested by good works, and then more self-consciously after 1883, so Nichols (p.294), a “sanctification by faith”, whose meaning he had learned most specifically at the Kewsick Bible conferences. There was a similarity in emphasis in the Blankenburg Bible conferences in Germany. What Nichols manages to show convincingly, by means of careful attention to Kargel’s letter correspondence with the many pietist and holiness teachers/preachers who formed a de facto network, was that Kargel adapted the essentials of Keswick ‘sanctification by faith’, or “experience of Christ” (p298) to a Russian setting.

Kargel’s influence was less through authoritative pronouncements in the form of a doctrinal book, although he wrote a Confession of Faith that Russian Baptists used for decades, but through the many articles, sermons preached, and personal counsel to ministers as he traveled, that kept circulating as his readers quoted him. At first familiar with German Baptist understandings of closed communion for baptized believers only (i.e. adult baptism), Kargel was influenced by his wife Anna Semenova and her Pashkovite circle to appreciate a more inclusive fellowship “in Christ”, also as Kargel was learning to think and pray in Russian. So the inter-denominational spirit of Keswick, and its inter-denominational expressions when Baptists, Evangelical Christians, Mennonites and Pentecostals needed to accommodate to each other in a Russian “Baptist” Union, help account for the fact that Kargel’s theology, its increased focus on “the role of suffering in the sanctification process” (p303) as crucial adaptation to the Soviet setting, make him a necessary theologian for a spirituality to live by in the post-Soviet era that has become increasingly challenging for serious Christians.

Reviewed by Walter Sawatsky, Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

BOOK NOTE:


The reference book provides information on foreign non-government non-profit and religious organizations in the Russian Federation. It studies laws, regulations, programs and spatial location of foreign non-profit organizations. The publication is based on the register of the Ministry of Justice of the Russian Federation. ($54.00, item no. M69598 at www.mippbooks.com.)

[editor’s note: Russian Federation regulations for registering religious NGOs, based on legislation of March 2009, are available from the Ministry of Justice, under the rubric Vera Reglament.]