Michels & Nichols' "Russia's Dissident Old Believer 1650-1950. A Modern Greek Studies Yearbook" - Book Review

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BOOK REVIEW

This remarkable publication is worth at least a short review in REE even if most of the material concerns Old Belief before 1905. In Russian Christian history, the persistence of this expression of Orthodoxy, treated since 1667 as heretical, dissident, or sectarian (depending on interpretive perspectives) makes it “an enduring tradition that is vitally important for Russia’s current situation.” That quotation came from the concluding paragraph of an essay by Edward Kasinec (NY Public Library) and Irina V. Posdeeva (Moscow State University) that surveyed the system and structure of archival sources, bibliography and historiography of Old Belief during the 19th and 20th centuries. Those sources convey a very different picture from long established stereotypes of them as frozen old ritualists, instead they stress Old Belief’s “dual complexity”, a dialectical relationship between traditional culture and modern culture.

When compared to the many strands of a flourishing sectarian tradition that are treated by modern Russia as ‘non-traditional’ religions, Old Belief is really by far the largest ‘non-traditional’ and renders that form of distinction rather ludicrous. The editors draw attention to a long tradition by both Russian state and official Orthodox Church spokesperson (including scholars) of understating Old Belief’s statistical importance by a factor of at least 10, in some regions by much more. At the minimum Old Belief numbered 10 million at the beginning of the 20th century, and its reputation attested by observant scholars at the time, including such voices for Orthodoxy as Pavel Miliukov, Kliuchevskii, Nicholas Berdeiev was of a faith tradition providing the most significant families of the emerging business class, as expressing the life style of the best of the peasantry (whom even Lenin noticed as positive model) and as advocates for a reformed and renewed church role in society that included much more lay participation, emphasis on education for all, than official Orthodoxy was supporting.

This collection of essays from a conference held at St. Olaf College, Minnesota, in 1994 represents a significant review of scholarly knowledge of Old Belief, precisely at a time when there was a renewed interest in the study of religion. That interest in ethnographic studies, focusing on minority religious communities, as this writer’s review of an encyclopedia of Germans in Siberia also noted (see May issue of REE 2010), has continued to grow. So the 15 year delay in publication serves to underline that the renewed interest in minority cultures began well before the communist era ended in 1991, and appears to have a promising future, since there remain many more archival and private library treasure troves to discover.

The book is divided into four parts, following an introductory essay by Michels and Nichols that sets the tone with extensive footnoting, especially of Russian sources. The fourteen chapters that follow constitute the seasoned interpretations of scholars, 8 from the west, 6 from the former Soviet Union, available in English yet with a very extensive source citation. Those sources can be cited thanks to archives that are open, to extensive field research by such scholars as Pozdeeva (Moscow), Pokrovskii and Gur’ianova (Novosibirsk), or also the extensive materials collected in many locations where Old Believers have lived in the diaspora, often the starting point for research by western scholars like Robert Crummey, Donald Treadgold, Eugene Clay, Roy Robson, plus editors Michels and Nichols. Some here survey what has been learned about Old Believer culture, others about Old Belief’s relations with the Orthodox church and the state, and on its role in social and economic history.
Particularly fascinating in that regard for this reader, was an essay by Aleksandr Klibanov, published posthumously since he had died early in 1994, on “the work ethic of Russian Old Believers and Spiritual Christians”. Klibanov had been the successor to V. D. Bonch-Bruevich, the respected scholar of religious sects from the time of the revolution, who then organized the museum of atheism in Leningrad in the 1930s, only to foster a more scholarly approach to religion during the Khrushchev years. Klibanov himself had started with a master’s thesis on the German colonists, specifically the Mennonites, then between 1960 and 1980 became the authority on sectarianism in general. In this essay, no longer strait jacketed by official ideology, but clearly a secular humanist and Russian patriot, he ruminated on the persistent reality that those Russian believers treated as sects, such as Old Believers and Spiritual Christians (where he named Doukhobory, Molokany and their evangelical successors) manifested a personal and communal morality most noted by outside observers through their work ethic. When so often deported to inhospitable territories, in surprisingly short order they managed to make the barren soil fruitful, while others of them created industries that provided higher standards of living for the entire community. That work ethic, and its rootedness in a religious way of life were still qualities needed for building a good civil society today.

Publication in the Modern Greek Studies Yearbook is not accidental, at least 7 of the 19 monographs are on themes of interest to REE readers. The Yearbook is edited by Theofanis G. Stavrou, historian of modern Russia who with his doctoral students began fostering study of religion in the eastern part of Europe in the mid 1960s, when it was still a rarity and gaining access to archival sources was invariably an adventure.

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