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Steinberg & Coleman, eds. "Sacred Stories: Religion and Spirituality in Modern Russia" - Book Review

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Western culture and historical experience; if so, perhaps it should not surprise us that not all Russians view them as being universal and absolute values as we do.

In short, *Russian Society and the Orthodox Church* is an important book that highlights the significance of religion and the Orthodox Church in post-Soviet Russian politics and society. It argues persuasively that the Church can both contribute to and obstruct the development of civil society at the same time, because the Church itself is a diverse body. However, the argument suffers from oversimplifying this diversity into a binary opposition between the Church hierarchy and church activists. The book is also daring in addressing the influence of religious and cultural attitudes on political dynamics, though certainly more work remains to be done in order to understand modern Orthodox cultures.

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Scholarship on religion in late imperial Russia has often been governed by certain assumptions: the presumed rift between the sacred and the secular; a causal relationship between urbanization and secularization; the decline of the Russian Orthodox Church; and perhaps most significantly, the seeming incompatibility of religiosity with modernity. This collection of essays, the result of a 2002 conference at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, questions these and other assumptions, focusing less on religious institutions and more on the experience of religion and “the sacred,” including transcendental emotion and expression independent from organized religion. Contrary to assumptions about modernity, these authors find in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Russia rapid growth in religious pilgrimage, religious conflict, and nonconformity among the masses, as well as growth in non-traditional spirituality, such as philosophy, mysticism, and emotion, often expressed in the arts. Underpinning these essays is a questioning of the definition of religion itself. The church, these authors demonstrate, was “only one of many locations of religious practice and discourse.” (p. 5) “Religion,” “belief,” “spirituality,” and “sacred” are neither synonymous nor self-evident categories. Nor are the concepts “secular” and “profane” necessarily antonyms. This blurring of boundaries is not new, yet its application to the
history of religion in Russia is innovative and challenging. While many of the contributors to this volume have applied a similar approach in their own recent monographs, the juxtaposition of essays by various authors on diverse topics powerfully demonstrates the value of interdisciplinary cooperation and the need to rethink traditional assumptions. By treating religion (including spirituality and the sacred) not as separate category of analysis, but as "fully inhabiting social and political life," (p. 9) these essays enlighten our understanding of categories such as the public sphere, the construction of community and identity (including class and gender), and the porous boundaries between the sacred and the profane.

The first six chapters of the book focus specifically on Christianity, albeit not always in its traditional forms. Christine D. Worobec’s study of miraculous healing asserts that Russian Orthodoxy remained relevant to people’s lives during the final decades of the Empire, regardless of gender or class, and that the Orthodox Church embraced elements of modernity to support its seemingly anti-modern belief in miracles. Likewise, Roy R. Robson demonstrates the rise in pilgrimage and the embrace of modernity by monks and pilgrims alike at the Solovetskii monastery, while Vera Shevzov examines the life of the Kazan icon of the Mother of God, as it connected Russian history—secular and sacred—with Russian modernity, and Orthodox theology with popular belief. Gender is a unifying theme in the next three essays in the volume. Nadieszda Kizenko, examining written confessions submitted to Fr. Ioann of Kronstadt, discusses both commonalities and differences along gender and class lines, concluding that confession, “far from being an externally imposed form of control... could also be a way for people to rethink both their lives and their life stories.” (p. 113) Discussing the changing roles of women in the Russian Orthodox Church, William G. Wagner concludes that rather than confining them, religion gave meaning to the lives of many women, as the image of womanhood in Orthodoxy grew increasingly complex. Yet the institutional church was losing its power, Gregory L. Freeze argues, as the proliferation of appeals for divorce indicate both misunderstanding of and disregard for the Church’s teaching and authority.

Five essays in the volume focus on religious minorities in the Russian Empire, including (so-called) sectarians and Jews. Paul W. Werth demonstrates the struggles faced by the modern Russian state, which sought to implement freedom of conscience while for practical purposes retaining ultimate control over religious affairs. In an essay on religious
violence, Heather J. Coleman examines how discourses of persecution were interpreted and utilized in multiple ways, demonstrating the interweaving of practical and ideological motives by Baptist villagers, Orthodox peasants, and the modern Russian state. Similarly, Nicholas B. Breyfogle examines the rise in Molokan church building as viewed by civil authorities as well as by Molokans themselves, indicating a “symbiotic relationship between state and society” (p. 246) in which Molokans both depended upon and resisted the tsarist government. Sarah Abrevaya Stein demonstrates a similar symbiosis between secular and religious Jewish culture, finding that in the Yiddish popular press such a distinction was in fact unclear, as each group depended on and influenced each other, failing to conform to categories of religious and secular, sacred and profane. Likewise, Gabriella Safran finds in the writings of Jewish writer and Socialist Revolutionary S. An-sky a dialog between traditional Judaism, Russian culture, and modernity, in which the bilingual and bicultural author willingly contradicted himself.

The final four chapters turn away from organized religion to focus on interrelationships between the sacred and philosophy and the arts. Mark D. Steinberg demonstrates that revolutionary worker-poets, many of whom were atheists, nonetheless used religious language and imagery to give meaning to the pain and turmoil of modern times. Perhaps more than other contributors, Steinberg focuses on the force of sacred emotion, which remained strong despite separation from religious belief or practice. Alexei Kurbanovsky discusses the sacred content in the art of Kazimir Malevich, who, he argues, rejected old forms of social and artistic authority to express a “new theology,” which emphasized the power of the “trans-rational” [zaumnýj] and the impossibility of representing—or even comprehending—supreme reality (hence his famous Black Square.) Finally, Bernice Glatzer Rosenthal and Paul Valliere examine the confluence of traditional Orthodox theology and modern philosophy among the Russian intelligentsia. Rosenthal examines affinities between Friedrich Nietzsche and Orthodoxy (including a common emphasis on, among others, anti-rationalism, beauty, organic wholeness, transfiguration, deification, and apocalypticism), demonstrating how the religious thought of Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Viacheslav Ivanov and Pavel Florensky combined the two. Valliere, likewise, focuses on the “dialogic” aspect of early-twentieth-century Orthodox theology, forced by the modern times to respond to human experience, creativity, and culture.
While deficiencies exist in any scholarship, the most noticeable "problem" in this work is likely also its greatest strength. The breadth of the topic—from religion (Orthodoxy, Judaism, and sectarianism) to spirituality and the sacred, seen through lenses such as personal piety, the arts, the press, community, nation, theology, and mysticism—makes conclusions or even valid comparisons and contrasts difficult (although the editors' introduction is extremely helpful). Yet it is the diversity of topics, placed in conversation with each other, that differentiates this book from the plethora of recent works on Russian religions by theologians, sociologists, anthropologists, cultural historians, and church historians. Likewise, scholars in more traditional fields such as church history or theology may find the unfamiliar methods and sources difficult, and undergraduates would likely struggle with the lack of a single cohesive conclusion in many of the essays. Yet again, it is this transcending of traditional disciplinary boundaries and the recognition of ambiguity and paradox that make the book stand out. Scholars of medieval and early modern Europe have long recognized the significance of religion and the spiritual in all aspects of life, yet scholarship of the modern period has often treated religion as a separate category, irrelevant to the supposedly larger questions of history. Steinberg and Coleman are to be commended for demonstrating that, far from irrelevant, "sacred stories" played an integral role in many aspects of the modern experience in late imperial Russia.

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The Centre for Intercultural Theology of the University of Utrecht and the Leeds University Centre for Russian, Eurasian and Central European Studies organized in 2001 an international conference in Leeds, England, on Orthodox Christianity in today's Europe. Three years later the second conference in a series was held – this time at the University of Utrecht and devoted to religious aesthetics. The Institute of Eastern Christian Studies in Nijmegen (NL) has published the proceedings of this conference in its series "Eastern Christian Studies."