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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.”
As one reads in the preface to the proceedings, the conference was dedicated to "a discussion of the role of aesthetics in the presentation and expression of Christian faith in Catholic and Orthodox tradition [and it stressed] an approach to religious art from a theological and religious-philosophical perspective, not from an art-critical perspective." (p. ix) In addition to the general importance of art in Christian history and tradition the "relation between aesthetics and religious beliefs[ according to the organizers] has acquired new relevance in our contemporary secularized world [since] the visible products of Catholic and Orthodox aesthetics are for many people the main means through which they come into contact with Christianity." (p. ix)

The book consists of twenty seven of the forty-two papers delivered at the conference, and it is divided into four sections: 'Comparative Aspects of Christian Aesthetics', 'Religious Aesthetics in Russian Literary Context', 'Applied Aesthetics in Church Art', and 'Art – Theoretical, Ideological and Religious-Philosophical Aspects'. As a representative sample of the international scholarly forum these papers cover a wide range of historical periods, cultural themes, individual thinkers and artists, and theoretical concepts.

Several key features make this collection especially beneficial to the reader. First, the comparative approach, announced in the composition of the book and explicitly emphasized in some of the papers, is beneficial. The keynote address by Aidan Nichols, for example, makes a comparison between Hans Urs von Baltasar and Sergii Bulgakov’s views on holy images. Wil van den Berken’s paper reflects on Catholic and Orthodox religious art. Roman Lunkin’s article discusses Orthodox and Protestant theatre in Russia.

Second, the reader interested in Orthodox Christianity and Russian religious philosophy will find papers not only on such famous 19th and 20th century thinkers and artists as Vladimir Soloviev, Lev Shestov, Dmitry Merezhkovsky, Sergii Bulgakov, Wassily Kandinsky and so on, but also on the less known contemporary Russian artists. A good example of that is Petra Couvée’s article “Aspects of Sublime and Istinnost’ in Contemporary Russian Poetry. The Mystic Sublime in the Poetry of Leonid Aronzon and Olga Sedakova.”

Finally, the spectrum of the arts discussed in the book is wide, covering not only the visual arts and literature, but also music and theater. Thus, in addition to many papers on such traditional topics as Orthodox icons (J. D. Kornblatt, “Visions of Icons and Reading Rooms in the Poetry and Prose of Vladimir Solov’ev;” Elizeth Roberts, “‘A True Theologian’ – The Icon-Painter Sister Joanna (Julia Nikolaevna Reitlinger) 1898-1988;” Ann Shukman, “What’s...

Overall, the papers that are collected in the book reflect a healthy variety of different religious, theological, philosophical and aesthetic viewpoints, while their authors seem to agree on expressing their love for the arts, especially religious art, which they study and discuss with high scholarly standards and a great deal of enthusiasm.

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