

BOOK REVIEW. *ORTHODOX REVIVALISM IN RUSSIA:
DRIVING FORCES AND MORAL QUESTS*

Benovska, Milena. 2021. *Orthodox Revivalism in Russia: Driving Forces and Moral Quests. Religion, Society and Government in Eastern Europe and the Former Soviet States Series.* London, New York, NY: Routledge. 220 pages.

The focus of this book is the phenomena of post-Soviet religious revivalism, based on the anthropological work carried by the author in the Kaluga region in Russia in 2007. Considering the literature on Russia's Orthodoxy by folklorists, sociologists, and anthropologists, Benovska proposes using the emic concept *votserkovleniye* in an etic sense, arguing that it is a broader category than *pritserkovnyy krug* (church circle). The book focuses on groups of *votserkovleniye*, Orthodox Christians who are "regular churchgoers who have an autonomous professional and family life" and "who are able to convey religious messages to society and to mediate between society and the church institutions" (p. 48).

Applying Grace Davie's concept of vicarious religion (p. 24), Benovska suggests in the first chapter that *votserkovleniye* represent the basis of vicarious religion. All in all, the revivalism (which she uses distinctly from revival) is 'genuine', especially because vicarious religion makes it possible. The second chapter focuses on the ethical aspects of Orthodox revivalism, approaching the negative moralising and disciplinary practices in Orthodox communities through the prism of anthropology of good and multiple moralities. The author interprets the notion of obedience (*poslushaniye*) as a transfer of monastic practice into the non-monastic context. She also addresses the seeming contradiction between the insistence on the traditional submissive roles of women and the apparent active roles of lay women in

parish life. The presence of archaisms and anti-modernism in the Orthodox church are explained through the prism of nationalism.

The third chapter is dedicated to conversion narratives, which are analysed through concepts of moral torment, semiotic ideology and 'moral lazarets'. The interviews provide striking examples of believers' own accounts of turning to church through experiments with the occult, often due to illness or addiction. Benovska does not bury her material under the mountains of theory but frames it in a compelling way, also providing the Russian transcripts of interview extracts in the footnotes. The final chapter deals with the commemoration of the dead and the politics of memory. The statues to saints, reburial of the Second World War soldiers and canonisations of new martyrs are discussed as the practices characterising the attempts to reconcile conflicting versions of the past. The conflict is more seeming than real since both soldiers of the war and victims of Stalinist repression represent 'the special dead' for Orthodox believers.

For this book Benovska also interviewed local historians (*krayeved*, a person involved in *krayevedeniye*, local studies that are not too different from *Heimatkunde*) who are active in both the Church and secular commission dealing with commemoration, thus showing the overlap between the two. She emphasises the role of the lay people in the practical implementation of the memory work, in creation of the sacred 'places of memory', thus naming them 'religious entrepreneurs'. The

notion of church as entrepreneur matches her employment of the term in the rest of the book, for instance in the chapter focused on morality. Thus, the actors of Orthodox revivalism appear not as some obscure bearded archaists, resisters of change, but as agile moral and memory entrepreneurs, actively engaging in the transformation of Russia's moral and memory landscapes. These findings are in a conversation with the work of other experts on religious memory, some of whom she cites in her work. The focus on provincial entrepreneurs of memory is productive since most of the work in this field has focused on Moscow, especially Butovo. Benovska does not impose an unequivocal conclusion, suggesting that there is a multiple array of strategies within Orthodox revivalism. It is a valuable observation that Orthodoxy is often in contradiction with its own canons, such as in the case of the monuments of saints in urban space (since three dimensional images are normally against church canon). She writes that "Orthodoxy is being rediscovered and reinvented [... rather than] 'dug out of the ashes'" (p. 68). The book confirms other authors' findings in respect of the close alliances between Orthodoxy and politics, and in the observation that the Russian Orthodox Church fashions itself as a leader of world Christian moral crusades.

I have only some concerns. The first is about the way the author uses the term religious revivalism, since to my mind a certain terminological slippage is taking place. "Is Russian religious revivalism genuine or spurious?" the author asks. Yet she does not deal with religious revivalism that includes a variety of religions and esoteric beliefs, rather she focuses primarily on Russian Orthodoxy. A disclaimer would be useful here. Secondly, the reader gets an impression from the book that conversion narratives in Russia are saturated with the miraculous and uncanny. One might wonder whether the author unwittingly favours specific forms of narrative over others.

Thirdly, the use of the fieldwork material from 2007 raises questions about the relevance of some arguments and conclusions for understanding of today's Orthodoxy in Russia, for instance after Crimea. However, these should not mar the achievements of the book. This book is a solid contribution to the study of Russian Orthodox revivalism, giving a voice to believers who share their experiences of conversion or their social life within the church. Reading this material through the prism of non-Russian social theory and the anthropology of Christianity provides readers, especially those not familiar with the Russian case, with a useful guidebook on how to navigate through the paradoxes and puzzles of Russian Orthodox revivalism.

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