

Holy Rus': The Rebirth of Orthodoxy in the New Russia. By John P. Burgess. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017. Pp. 264. \$30.00 (cloth). ISBN: 978-0300222241.

In *Holy Rus': The Rebirth of Orthodoxy in the New Russia*, John Burgess surveys the evolution of Orthodox Christianity in Russia after the collapse of communism in 1991. Through a series of vignettes from his extensive travels to Russia, Burgess makes a striking argument: Despite widespread negative media coverage of the Russian Orthodox Church in recent years—not least, for its support of numerous dubious state actions and policies—the idea of Holy Rus' is very much alive among the Russian people.

Burgess's argument challenges the consensus views of scholars and liberal critics who have studied contemporary Russian Orthodoxy. That consensus holds, on the one hand, that the church is "compromised by wealth and [Vladimir] Putin's manipulations"; and, on the other hand, that by consistently choosing the wrong side in political and cultural issues (Pussy Riot, the invasion of Ukraine, and so on), the church has squandered the goodwill it built up in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when it was widely considered the most trusted institution in the former Soviet state. Scholars expressing such positions, whether in English or in Russian, often examine the state of the church itself, as well as church-state relations, since Kirill became patriarch of Moscow and all Rus in 2009. They provide a counter-narrative to Burgess's book, arguing that the political engagement of the Orthodox Church has fundamentally damaged it. Two prime examples of this argument are found in Irina Papkova's *The Orthodox Church and Russian Politics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) and Anastasia V. Mitrofanova's *The Politicization of Russian Orthodoxy: Actors and Ideas* (Stuttgart: ibidem-Verlag, 2005), both of which focus primarily on the church-state political nexus. The closest counterargument that, as does Burgess, examines Russian Orthodoxy at the grassroots level is Sergei Chapnin's recent *Tserkov' v postsovetsoi Rossii: vozrozhdenie, kachestvo very, dialog s obshchestvom* (The church in post-Soviet Russia: Rebirth, quality of faith, dialogue with society) (Moscow: Arefa, 2013). Chapnin warns against not only the uncritical embrace of power by the church hierarchy—Patriarch Kirill first and foremost—but also the radical right wing of contemporary Russian Orthodox who, through political eschatology, glorification of power, and magical thinking, dominate the attention of the hierarchy and public perceptions of the church. The book-length collection of articles edited by Aleksei Malashenko and Sergei Filatov, *The Orthodox Church under the New Patriarch* (Moscow: Carnegie, 2012), is even more scathing. These and other titles offer an established and articulate counter-narrative to the one Burgess provides here.

To be sure, there is plenty to criticize in the cozy church-state relationship in Russia. In 2014, the Oscar-nominated film *Leviathan*, directed by Andrey Zvyagintsev, sardonically depicted the closeness of this relationship with devastating detail. But the church-state relation is one of the only aspects of Russian Orthodoxy that is widely covered in both academic publications and mass media. Burgess, however, takes on a different task that is both difficult and ambitious: to show his readers that there is more to a religion than its relation to the state. He explores how Orthodox Christianity in Russia works at the grassroots level, and what are the sources of its appeal. At the same time, Burgess tries to avoid being an apologist for either Russia or the Orthodox Church.

This balance is not easy. Outside of academia, there is a large and illiberal international audience that views modern Russia as a sociopolitical model to emulate in their own societies. Many

conservatives around the globe support Patriarch Kirill's pronouncements against homosexuality, for example. If Burgess fit into in this category, there would be little remarkable in what he was saying. But this book seeks to do something different. It is not the panegyric of an illiberal or reactionary Russophile.

Burgess very clearly sees the problems with the political church-state nexus in Russia, and makes clear that it is *not* his subject. Instead, he focuses on an aspect of Russian Orthodox Christianity that rarely is written about in the news media but which remains extremely powerful: the genuine appeal that the Orthodox Church continues to hold for many Russians, and the work that the Russian Orthodox Church is doing *in spite of*, not *because of*, its connection to the state. Burgess sees what the problems of the church leadership are, absolutely. But he also notes what the church as a whole is doing *right*, such as initiatives in education, historical memory and memorialization (here, some of the church's alternative history of the twentieth century stands in sharp contrast to the alarming revival of respect for Stalin), social ministries, and providing an alternative vision to the materialism and brute power that characterizes so much of Russian life.

Burgess structures his book into seven chapters which deal with various aspects of church life. Chapter 1, "Envisioning Holy Rus'," gives an outline of the religious dimensions of Russia's present and past, including the ambiguous posture of Russian Orthodoxy towards "the West." Chapter 2, "The Rebirth of Orthodoxy," recounts what happened after the end of communism, and how the church responded, with an accent on its missionary activities. Subsequent chapters are dedicated to religious education (at the level of both the parish and the academy); the social services offered by the church; the church's veneration of the New Martyrs (saints recently as victims of Communist persecution); and parish life. Taken together, these chapters offer the interested nonspecialist an excellent introduction to contemporary Russian Orthodoxy and its appeal to ordinary Russians.

Many readers will already be aware that Russia has the world's largest, most powerful Orthodox Church and is the largest, most powerful Orthodox realm. But they may wonder: 'Surely there must be something to that church more than nice singing, old women in headscarves, or bearded men in black. What is that something?'

That is what Burgess tries to give us here. He has done the work (and it is work) of living in Russia—not on an expense account or in first-class hotels. In two long stays in the field, and many shorter trips between 2004 and 2016, he trudged on back roads and visited parishes in remote parts of the country. He traveled the country widely, including the Crimea and the celebrated monastery of Solovki. He experienced the metropolises and the provinces, parishes, and monasteries. He spoke to bishops, normal parishioners, and nonbelievers. Burgess understands the real emotive and aesthetic power of Russian Orthodoxy without idealizing it—and that is a very, very hard balance to strike. He examines Russia minutely, without averting his gaze from the awkward bits. Still, his fundamental position is one of profound, abiding respect.

This personal touch and this respect are the strength of the book, but in one respect they are also its weakness. It is very telling, for example, that Burgess introduces his methodology by saying,

I put away the books and began instead to visit parishes and monasteries. By the end of the year, I had attended dozens of Orthodox liturgies, youth clubs, and academic conferences . . . joined ordinary believers in making pilgrimage to Russian Orthodoxy's most holy sites; venerated miracle-working icons and relics; and observed the Church calendar, including the eight-week Great Lent in which believers remove all animal products—meat, cheese, eggs, and fish—from their diets. Little by little Russia's religious vision drew me in until suddenly I, too, an exhausted American Protestant in a foreign land, arrived at Easter morning and stood on what seemed to me a mountain of transfiguration from which I could glimpse Holy Rus' (4).

This passage sums up much of the book. *Holy Rus'* contains many vivid, sincere depictions of how believers live in today's Russia. At times it is as much a personal testament as a description. Academics, however, may wish for more of a conceptual framework for the return of religion after the end of communism. Burgess proposes several paradigms: "Holy Rus'," "re-Christianization," "in-churching," symphonia, theosis, and civil religion. Of these, the most important to him is the first. But what does *Holy Rus'* as an idea actually mean? Burgess alternately describes it as "that elusive ideal of a people and place transformed by the holy" (2), "a unity of purpose to make Russian society truly better and freer" (6), "that wondrous space in which people not only know something about the divine but also experience mysterious bonds of friendship that transcend time and space" (90). This is quite beautiful, and I wish it were so. But aspirations—and Burgess is clear that he is speaking of an ideal—are not the same as reality. Alternatively, Burgess describes the contemporary Russian tendency towards orthodoxy as a kind of "civil religion," using the term coined by American sociologist Robert Bellah. One may ask, however, whether a concept created for the context of the United States can legitimately be applied to Putin's Russia.

On some occasions, Burgess does push his material in fruitful ways. He is particularly good, for example, in suggesting five kinds of contemporary Russian Orthodoxy: "an 'official' Orthodoxy represented by the patriarch and the institutional Church, with its exclusive claims to administering the sacraments and ordaining clergy; a moderate Orthodoxy, which supports modest Church reform for the sake of securing the institutional Church; a liberal Orthodoxy loyal to the institutional Church while calling for democratic reform; a conservative Orthodoxy, also within the institutional Church but critical of its accommodations to a liberal culture; and a 'popular' or 'unofficial' Orthodoxy that thrives outside of the institutional Church yet draw on its key symbols, narrative, and rituals" (195).

But, ultimately, this conscientiously thought-out, deeply felt, and profoundly generous book is not a critical one. In 1852, "On the Nature of European Culture and Its Relation to the Culture of Russia," the Slavophile Ivan Kireevsky wrote that if only some German or Frenchman were to comment on something favorable in Russia, Russians themselves might notice what they had. In contemporary Russian Orthodoxy, Burgess "discern[s] a unity of purpose to make Russian society truly better and freer." I do not know how many Russians would agree with him. But I suspect that they would be both surprised and moved to see how kindly an American Protestant sees them.

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