

Patrick Lally Michelson, *Beyond the Monastery Walls: The Ascetic Revolution in Russian Orthodox Thought, 1814-1914*. Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2017. Pp. xii + 308. \$69.95.

This impressive, carefully-argued book is more than a survey of Russian Orthodox thought in the nineteenth century; it is also an interpretation of Russian intellectual history in the period. Liberal perspectives on the century following the Napoleonic wars emphasize challenges to autocracy, signs of pluralism and the growth of ideas about freedom. Left-wing approaches touch on similar themes, but from the perspective of the emergence of the popular voice, urban and rural. This book comes at the period from a different angle altogether, through linking a spiritual-ethical debate (about asceticism) to ongoing discussions about Russian identity. A fascinating and unexpected picture emerges, even if many of the most familiar names in Russian thought remain in evidence. Michelson acknowledges that in focussing on asceticism he is essentially adopting an agenda created by Russian Orthodox thinkers themselves. But, given that there are no entirely value-free narratives, this is forgivable.

To understand the ‘ascetic revolution’, it is necessary to go back to the reforms of Peter and Catherine the Great. The utilitarian ethos of the 18th century created an inherent suspicion of monasticism. Peter’s *Spiritual Regulation* (1721)—which Michelson calls the ‘signature event’ of Russian church history (29)—set the framework for this by declaring that the principal goal of monastic life was service of church and state. A further marginalisation of monasticism took place under Catherine, as monastic properties were secularised. But soon a counter-movement emerged, sometimes associated with the publication of Paisii Velichkovskii’s abridged translation of *The Philokalia* (1793), and the influence of Tikhon of Zadonsk and Serafim of Sarov. The reign of Alexander I reinforced this tendency. Beginning in 1810 and continuing over several decades, thousands of patristic texts were translated into Russian and published in periodicals connected with the clerical academies. Through this, the ideas of men like Basil the Great and Isaac the Syrian came to underpin a rediscovery of monastic ideas that greatly influenced Russian Orthodox thought. This revolution quickly acquired a ‘national’ colouring, mainly because it took place in the context of ongoing debates about Russia’s relationship with the West; Orthodox asceticism was presented as a defence against unhealthy ideas coming from abroad. In this sense, the rediscovery of the Church Fathers was also a ‘reconfiguration’ (63). Over time a narrative emerged that conflated Orthodox authenticity with the essential nature of the Russian people itself.

As Michelson observes, the new monasticism was paradoxical. For while its moral teachings were traditional, its focus on the individual soul was an implicit challenge to ecclesiastical authority. There was always the potential here for the emergence of a narrative contrasting the potential purity of the soul with corruption in the church. This was evident in the publication history of one of Russia’s enduring spiritual classics, *Candid Tales of a Pilgrim to His Spiritual Father*—which taught the value of the Jesus Prayer. Some of the early editions of this work were critical of representatives of the institutional church. In this context, it was not surprising that in the fourth, 1884 edition of the book, Feofan the Recluse—a key figure in popularising *The Philokalia*—arranged for the removal of several passages critical of the clergy (153). It is revealing that all editions of the book were published under the direction of

monks, rather than the Synodal Church. In the search for an authentic Orthodoxy, there was bound to emerge that thorny question of who would have the final authority: the theological academies or the Synodal church, or indeed the individual believer. If the ascetic revolution contained within it much suspicion of the West, it is impossible not to notice here potentially Reformationist tendencies.

Mickelson rightly notes that debates about asceticism were present in the origins of the Russian revolutionary movement. Belinskii—in his famous critique of Gogol—claimed that asceticism was one of the main obstacles to social progress in Russia; and Chernyshevskii and Dobroliubov saw asceticism as intrinsic to religion—which they saw as a barrier to human progress. Mickelson points to the importance of debates about asceticism for interpreting Dostoevskii's *The Brothers Karamazov*; Dostoevskii's juxtaposition of the moderate asceticism of Father Zosima with the world-denying philosophy of Father Ferapont involved the promotion of a moderate ethic of self-restraint capable of withstanding materialist onslaughts. Dostoevskii, Mickelson notes, belonged to a conservative, national but not necessarily Synodal Christianity (132). These debates also involved differences over what it meant to be Russian. For example, Chernyshevskii associated asceticism with the most negative aspects of the Russian character. But for the conservative theologian P.D.Iurkevich—an important influence on Dostoevskii—authentic asceticism pointed the way to a Russia that was 'native, conservative, ecclesial, monarchical, orderly, and theocentric' (124). For some churchmen, like the influential Metropolitan Filaret of Moscow, it was important to ground asceticism in an Orthodox, rather than a Kantian worldview. But, ironically—Mickelson argues—the very idea that Russia was a distinct civilization was largely a foreign import (44).

Some important religious thinkers were cautious about the Russian monastic tradition. The philosopher Vladimir Solov'ev—also influenced by Iurkevich—was cool about monasticism, but nevertheless stressed the importance of self-renunciation as part of mankind's vocation to *theosis*. Konstantin Leont'ev welcomed Orthodox asceticism as offering an alternative to progressive humanism, but thought asceticism as practiced in Russia was too much focussed on personal salvation. But he saw it as a component of the 'Imperial Byzantine ethos' distinguishing the Orthodox world from European civilisation (157). Comparable ideas later informed certain Russian interpretations of the First World War.

It is beyond the remit of this book, but it is worth noting that debates about asceticism re-emerged in different ways in the Soviet era. Stalinist ethics contained a strong emphasis on moral discipline, in a de-Christianized context. Later, in the post-Stalin period, Solzhenitsyn's essay 'Repentance and Self-Limitation in the Life of Nations' in *From Under the Rubble* (1973), reflected a form of liberal nationalism; whereas some of the conservative critics of Gorbachev—defenders of a kind of Soviet-Russian nationalism—warned of the corrupting influence of the West.

Mickelson is alert to the fact that asceticism was not an exclusively Russian preoccupation. Indeed, the ethical debates of 19th century Russian Orthodoxy can be seen as a variant of the broader discussion taking place within Christianity over how to accommodate modernity. It is because of the potential for broader comparisons that this book will be of interest not only to specialists on Russia, but more generally to historians of religion in the modern world.

PHILIP BOOBYER

SCHOOL OF HISTORY, UNIVERSITY OF KENT