

# Reviews

*The Poetics of Early Byzantine Literature*  
(*Poetika Rannevizantiskoi Literatry*)

by S. S. Averintsev.

Published by "Izdatelstvo Nauka" for the Institute of World Literature  
of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR,  
1977, 321 pp., 1 rouble 20 kopeks.

This book shows the learning of the Soviet Union at its very best. S. S. Averintsev is a Byzantinist of world reputation, but he is also a polymath and a brilliant translator of poetry from many languages, including Biblical Hebrew. His work appears in learned volumes with a limited appeal rather than in popular editions, but the present book is printed in an edition of 8,000 and will presumably reach a readership several times larger.

His translations of Greek Christian hymns have already done something to acquaint Russian readers with some great Christian poetry, which has been almost as much neglected in Russia as in the West. He is himself, I understand, of Greek descent from the ancient Greek settlements on the Black Sea, and one of his rare slips leads me to conclude that he knew modern Greek before classical Greek.

One expects a book like this to fall somewhere between Aristotle's *Poetics* and Fr Gervase Mathew's *Byzantine Aesthetics*, and to contain a study of Romanos the Melodist and other early Byzantine hymn writers. But it gives both more and less than one expects. The author's translations of the snatches of Greek Christian poetry which he uses for illustration do, indeed, give tantalizing glimpses of a new world of verbal music and imagery, but one does not get a rounded picture of the poetical works of Romanos or Gregory of Nazianzus. Instead this book gives a picture of the ways of thinking and feeling that lay behind all that they wrote. The first chapter on "Being as Perfection – Beauty and Being" is like something from Gilson's *L'Esprit de la Philosophie Médiévale*. The penultimate chapter points out (apparently for the first time) that the

famous *Akathistos Hymnos* uses rhyme as a formal constituent in metre several centuries before rhyme was used in European poetry. It would take a longish essay rather than a review to do justice to all that lies between these chapters. I will only say that the comparisons between modern, ancient and medieval ways of thought are scrupulously fair and extremely interesting.

The Bible is referred to, in accordance with Soviet usage, under the heading of "the literature of the ancient near east" and the copious references to the Bible and other early religious writings are generally given in Latin. The notes and indexes at the end of the book give an enormous amount of valuable information which is often very hard of access in the Soviet Union, but could be omitted from an English translation.

All in all, the book is perceptive and beautifully written, as well as being very learned. I am not completely convinced by all Mr Averintsev's views, but he is generally right and he is always stimulating.

JOHN LAWRENCE

*The Christian-Marxist Dialogue and Beyond*

by Peter Hebblethwaite, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1977, 122 pp.,  
£2.50.

*Communism and Christianity in Theory and Practice:  
Doctrines/Facts/Conclusions*

by Aid to the Church in Need (United Kingdom), 1978, 136 pp. No price.

Among the tributes which flowed in upon the death of Paul VI, several came from communist sources, including some particularly warm ones from Italian communists. This, many newspapers pointed out, was quite a new development which had happened to no other Pope, at least not on this scale. What did such a response indicate? Did it mean that Marxists were at last recognizing that Christianity provides something necessary for mankind which their own system lacks, or was it, on the contrary, an oblique way of expressing their gratitude for the beginning of what they might hope to be a Christian "sell-out" to their own position?

Pius XI declared that communism was "intrinsically evil" – yet by the 1960s many Christians believed that they were Marxists as well. In the past 15 or so years, Christian-Marxist dialogue has been increasingly pursued in Europe and Latin America. In *The Christian-Marxist Dialogue and Beyond* Peter Hebblethwaite provides an account of this dialogue which is both highly objective and, despite the jargon encrusted nature of the subject, stimulatingly readable. He deals with this dialogue first as